

Vesak for Children

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdaal on May 6, 2012

Welcome, everyone, to our Buddha's birthday celebration. And a particular welcome to all you kids who have come. And welcome to all you kids who have come with flowers to help celebrate this wonderful day, and also to help decorate the pagoda that holds the baby Buddha. We are very lucky here at IMC to have a baby Buddha.

This is a very important day in our tradition because it celebrates the birth of the Buddha, and his awakening, and his passing away. It's all combined. There is a wonderful story that children were told – a myth about the birth of the Buddha. As soon as the Buddha was born, being somewhat precocious, he took seven steps. Then, while standing, he pointed one finger up to the sky and one finger down to the earth, and said something like, "Heaven above, earth below, I am the world honored one" – meaning I am the most special one ever.

That's a nice myth. But as a myth, each of us is supposed to be able to say that for ourselves. And each of us is supposed to be able to recognize that in everyone else we see. Each of us is special. Each of us is the world honored one. Each of us is very important. So for each one of you children here, each one of you is extremely special and wonderful – the world honored one.

Of course it doesn't make logical sense that each one of you could be the most special person in the world, but it is somehow true. And the flowers we have represent the beautiful flower that each of us is, the beautiful flower that resides in each heart. Many of us have these beautiful qualities that are like buds ready to open. With practice and time, as we begin feeding and watering the plants of lovingkindness, compassion, joy, equanimity – as we begin feeding the plants of generosity, wisdom, and peace – those flowers inside of us can grow and develop. All of us can become beautiful flowers for this world. That makes us all quite happy to see.

I see that these flowers are all different colors. It's part of the amazing beauty of the pagoda to have all of these different colors. Each of us is a flower of a different color. There are brown flowers, yellow flowers, red flowers, purple flowers, white flowers, and rainbow flowers. There are so many different colors, and each is quite beautiful. It's a reminder that each of us is unique and special in our own way. Each of us is our own flower. Each of us can let our flower blossom and grow. IMC, Buddhism, and the practice of mindfulness are all meant to support the beautiful flower inside of *you*, so that it can grow, blossom, and develop.

To help with this, I am going to invite all of the children here to teach the adults, who may be a little slow in learning how to chant the beautiful chant you chanted. So what's the first word? *Lovingkindness*. What's the second word? *Compassion*. And the third word? *Joy*. And how many times do you say it? *Three times*. And then the last word? And what does equanimity mean? *Equal*. What else does it mean? *Calm*. Anything else? *Yin and yang*? *Everything in balance*. Beautiful! So let's all sing it once, and the grownups can listen. Then the second time, they can join in:

Lovingkindness and compassion, joy, joy, joy, equanimity, equanimity [Gil and children chanting]

Lovingkindness and compassion, joy, joy, joy, equanimity, equanimity [everyone chanting].

The custom for this celebration is that first, the baby is cleaned. If you have been around a clean newborn baby, that is one of the purest, most beautiful things in this world. It's amazing! The smell and everything – it's quite something.

What we would like to do is have the kids, maybe the two closest, each take a ladle, and dip it into the bowl of water, then three times pour the water over the baby. Then, as everyone watches this, we hope that everyone will be cleaned at the same time. Clean yourself of all that keeps your beauty from shining through to the world. Beautiful, thank you.

Now the last thing. Sometimes these adults here forget how beautiful they are. I'd like to ask the second-to-last row in the back to scoot your chairs forward so there is a row behind you. So all of you kids walk all the way around the room and do the bow, holding your hands in front of your hearts as a way of celebrating in a peaceful way, or respecting that which is beautiful in each person. You kids hold your hands like this and walk around so that all of these adults can remember that they are beautiful. Put your hands together and bow, reminding these

grownups of all the beauty inside if they just give it half a chance to come out. Then come back. There is an ancient story of a man who wouldn't stop bowing to people [laughter].

Now we are going to do something a little different. We have at IMC a variety of programs for youth. We have the Dharma Sprouts, the Dharma Rocks (third to sixth graders), then the Dharma Bhodis, and then the Dharma Teens. At a certain age they graduate from the teen program. So we are going to invite them to come up here and sit on the edge of the stage.

One thing about this group is that Cora has been part of all of the children's programs from the very beginning. She has been coming for at least thirteen years, since she was four. She has been through it all, and has helped advise us on how to do the youth programs here.

Part of the graduation from the teen program is to welcome you into the adult community at IMC and into the world, taking responsibility for your own mindfulness, wisdom, practice, and life. My hope is that, having been through the IMC program, this place will always feel like a home for you where you are always welcome. It's a place that can be yours. And also our retreat center. If not here, then I hope that the wider world of practice places will feel welcoming to you. I would like to give each of you something. Then maybe you would introduce yourselves to the group and perhaps say something as part of this celebration.

So the two teen teachers will come up here. I have here white blessing scarves. The white represents purity – the purity of your hearts, which will always be there, though it may be forgotten. These are reminders. And we have these meditation bells for you to use, if you like. One symbolism of the bell is that the beautiful sound of the bell is not something you can grab onto. You can't grab the sound. The beautiful qualities of heart – your generosity, your wisdom, your love, kindness, compassion, and peace – cannot make sense if we cling to it or grab onto it. They are there like the sound of the bell, but you can't touch it in the usual way of things. When you ring the bell, maybe the sound can be a reminder of this, if you happen to forget.

My name is Anna, and I have been with Dharma Teens for about four years. I began when I was a freshman in high school, and I have been coming regularly since. It is a fantastic program that has helped me a ton with the stress of high school, because high school is stressful. It's really been there as a place to destress. I have also met a bunch of amazing people here [names]. I have to stay in contact with them and continue meditating because it is really helpful. It's amazing.

Hello, I am John, my mom's son [laughter]. [His mom leads the Dharma Teens.] I have been attending since the inception of the program. For me, I don't really get stressed about school, but I get stressed about music, so it helps deal with my musical frustrations. It's kind of an escape from life. Slow down. The wheels are constantly in motion. I recommend it to your sprouts. Thank you.

My name is Cora, and I have been with this program from when the kids' program started, thirteen years ago before we were even in this building. It's incredible to see how the program has grown, and to see how I have grown. I feel like I'm on the forefront because each time I've grown older, a new program has been created. It's been an incredible experience to grow up in this community. I can't even really tell you how helpful and grounding it has been. The level of acceptance here and care here is something I can always rely on and be comforted by. It's a place where I feel I can truly be myself, regardless of whether I am happy or sad. That is an incredible experience I've never had anywhere else.

My name is Zach. I'm embarrassed for being underdressed, but I still came anyway. I started coming in December. This place has really helped me a lot to destress from high school. I'm always worried about my grades and test scores. I needed a place to breathe and relax. The Dharma Teens is definitely a good place to be.

Thank you very much for being part of our program and our community. I hope you will always feel welcome here. Not just welcome, but that it's your own place.