

2012-07-22 Responding To Tragic Events

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SPEAKERS

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Good morning, everyone. And so one of the things on my mind this morning, I'd like to summarize with the idea that well known idea that there's a difference between our reactions and our responses. And the thing I'd like to add to this idea is that in probably if you know, my one take a Buddhist teachings is that it's more useful to identify or focus on your responses than it is on your reactions. reactions are important, but if we're, if we want to be somebody we'd be, we'd be our responses, not how happened to react. And so I say that as an introduction to saying some words about the shooting in Aurora, Colorado, because I couldn't really think about saying anything else talk, but that but also besides what I just said, you know, I'm kind of not sure what to say Say, I don't know if anybody else wants to say I really some of the people who are saying things I wish they wouldn't.

So maybe I shouldn't the, you know, it's kind of stunning, you know, stuns Wriston, many people are stunned by such a thing. And I think the interesting to reflect you know why it's more stunning to read something where it's concentrated so many people get wounded in shot, because probably at any given day in the United States as many people get shot and wounded, but just spread out and more people do it. And, but something something about that kind of event and in a movie theater, I mean, people are now willing to kind of somewhat defenseless in movie theater, but They're a little bit in altered state and and, you know, it's kind of a bizarre kind of or frightening situation to be in. And it kind of touches on kind of a nerve I think in our society movie theaters are kind of special considered safe places to go usually and I imagine there's a lot of people now who are going to go to movies they're looking to go to movie theaters or who will feel a little bit frightened. Can you trouble hearing some of you? Yes, a little bit louder please. So it's a little bit better so the so what are the nice things I think I've seen come out of this is many number of nice things and the response has been bad. But why don't I miss that call for a vigil vigils? And you know, moments of silence in Things like that. And I think it's something very wise about this idea of stopping. And in that statement is kind of one of the key things about Buddhism. Buddhism emphasizes that stopping for a while, and not reacting, you know, instinctively. But in that stopping and the pause, some people talk about a sacred pause, or you know, important pause, where many things can happen in that pause. And that gives a chance for things to happen. that couldn't happen if we react to situations like this or other situations. And one of the things that can we can do in a pause, is we could spend time being mindful, take in what's going on here, take it in more deeply and not just take it in terms of, you know, replaying and register and our emotional body, but to turn towards these things, if they have a big impact on us and try to understand or what's going on, are there any kind of investigate more deeply? Maybe you don't understand exactly why something like That happened not yet. But, you know, there's a variety of there's more information to be had about the event. And already mean there's people in the press, for example, who rushed make statements that later they had to apologize for, because, you know, they didn't pause long enough to attend and get all the information. And so this idea of pausing and stopping, and it's in terms of mass

murder. There's a one of the fairytales probably a fairy tale, maybe not too part of it. That goes back to it. Time with the Buddha, is a story of mass murder and in Angulimala, who the Buddha went to confront in the woods in the forest where he lived. And the answer the Buddha was walking through the trail down the path in the forest, and Angulimala saw him and thought, Oh, great. You know, the victim, I can't wait. And so set off after the Buddha. And then the Buddha calm, they kept walking down the path. And uncle the mala started running after him. And the more he was running, the less he could catch up to the Buddha who was walking calmly. So, finally Angulimala called out to the Buddha and said, Stop. And the Buddha said to him Angulimala I have already stopped, why don't you stop? So, you know, it was not meant wasn't meant to be taken literally the statement it was the Buddha, you know, was reinterpreting like we would often did we interpret what people are saying. And so he was reinterpreting and saying when when Angulimala was saying, stop, literally stop, stop walking. The Buddha interpreted as being your tendency towards violence, your busy mind, your active mind, your crazy mind doesn't stop I've stopped mine, why don't you stop? And so that statement, God dangled the molars attention. And so then he was willing to listen to the Buddha and eventually became a disciple of the Buddha and, and developed, you know, quite high level of spiritual attainment.

The so I don't know about, you know, the fairy tale, this idea of stopping, you know, it's kind of epitomized in this famous Buddhist story. What does it mean to stop? What are we stopping? And what can we stop internally that's useful to stop. And I think for many people, it's to stop their, their automatic reactivity. Some of their activity maybe as wise but some of it maybe isn't, isn't so wise. And we even have the ability to stop we have the ability to not get caught in our reactivity in our views or opinions, or feelings. And this I think, is really a crucial and important issue in in anybody including home nation, respond. to any kind of tragedy or violence is for us to be very mindful and careful about what our reactions are in responses. And a Buddhist scene like ours in mindfulness practice, the idea is to stop for reactions and be very respectful of them. respectful doesn't mean that we condone them, every single one of them and you know that great, but rather to respect them is to, to have some confidence or some willingness or some belief that it's useful to go in and be present for what's going on inside of us. That what's going on inside of us maybe shouldn't be seen as a mistake or a problem, but rather something to touch. Be informed, learn about, work through process, dissolve resolve, be a vehicle a doorway into touching something deeper inside of ourselves. And you can't do that if you dismiss it. You can't do it. If you ignore or what our reactions our emotions are. You can't do it. If you act on them to quickly. If anything affecting them, unhealthy emotions can just make them stronger. So this ability to stop and turn and look at is extremely important. And it's hopefully something that protects ourselves and protects others. This is one of their also one of the teachings of Buddhism, that the practice of mindfulness is a practice that protects others, I suppose for yourself. And, and if we can cultivate it, you know, Society of people have the ability to be mindful, then it becomes a protection for all of us. But also just stop and take in what's really going on in a fuller way around us. Sometimes it's too painful to do that. We have to kind of monitor ourselves and know what we can take in. But I find it really informative, very interesting to kind of read the news and all the different opinions, but also to read what what happened there in Aurora. I felt I felt like it's immortal. situation like this because it's such a big scar in the psyche of nation. And because the nature of it is so powerful to linger with it, stay with it. And so I read the names of all the victims and read something about them and it's kind of touching to, to read about them and read about the people who threw their own bodies on top of others, they died, but they saved the others, and the meaning of it for a six year old child who's sitting there, watching it, movie and then get shot. But then, you know, it's then the event itself, you know, the movie and what's that about? My 14 year old son loves this, you know, The Dark Knight movie. He's, I guess he saw one in two. And he saw it too many times. And so eventually he got me to see it with him. And just the movie itself. made me uncomfortable. And in the amount of violence and the amount of horror and the amount of kind of demented mentality in relationship to people that the movie depicts. I did not enjoy watching,

it was actually quite disturbing. I wouldn't say it's as a serving as reading the news about Aurora, but it was quite disturbing that someone would make a kind of move like this and then presented. But you know, maybe I'm an odd guy, you're right. And there seems to be a lot of people who not only enjoy, I think, in rush to the opening, but they bring their six year old child to it. And you know, it's kind of unbelievable to me that that's what you bring a child to. But you know, I'm an odd guy, you know, So what's that about? So? Oh, but me Sure. What's that about me? But what about what about, you know, what does it say about, you know, I know I don't want to rush to saying words to say about but I think it's useful to kind of be mindful of this and to and to just kind of look more carefully And take it in and try very hard not to judge it.

I think it's really important not to rush to judgment, because one of the things I see is when people rush to judgment in all spectrums, all sides of whatever judgments they have increases divisiveness in our society, and an idea of divisiveness in our society. When people there are so many people in our society to see me, Eric and Eric concealable and their views and very powerful views. So it was I mean, already, there's already a discussion about gun control, right. And people are rushing into the idea that, but it seems like it's hopeless in this country to kind of take positions around gun control. Maybe Maybe it's maybe it's possible to do something, but it seems like there are there are parties that are Eric, Eric and styleable, but different sides of gun control. So to take positions and quickly judge you know, this is this is what should happen. Where the other doesn't, maybe there's no meeting ground. There's no commonality it increases divisiveness in our society. And this is a time for divisiveness. So there's a time to somehow come together or see each other as a, you know, in our families at home.

One of the comments I've heard from people is, you know, there are people who are shocked, can't believe that these things happen, how could this happen, you know, things must be getting worse. But, you know, when we know when to read the news, I was horrified by it, stunned by it, but I wasn't surprised by it. And, you know, to me, the idea that these kinds of things happen is built into the, the nature of what our society and people are about I, you know, kind of, in being a Buddhist teacher, I tried to dedicate myself to make a difference and improve these things, and not to make these Part of our life, but I kind of expect them you know, and, you know, in some ways, I feel very blessed that most of my adult life and they've been peace and peaceful situations, and I think it's relatively peaceful. My parents generation, with my parents and who grew up in Europe and my parents in law, who grew up in Europe, they grew up through World War Two. And, you know, when I tried to imagine what they went through, you know, that many of them, many of people I knew, who spent time in variety of prison camps during World War Two. And I was like, you know, to grew up in that kind of environment and, and the war and the violence and the devastation that people I know saw that time, you know, day after day, year after year. So I feel pretty blessed. And then we say we must be getting worse, but you know, and then the Buddha there was a mass murderer, right? And his time there's a story of it's all again, is a fairy tale or whether to happen. But I can imagine this one more likely then the mass murder story of the Buddha started to get popular in the local parts of India where he was at and there were other religious sects. And some of them were jealous of the Buddha getting popular. And so they asked a, one of their nuns in that particular sector of religion to ask her, Oh, go ahead, go visit the Buddha and hear what he has to teach and go regularly hang out there for a while. So she would go and hang out there. And then so people got to see this woman was hanging out with Ron the, you know, on the Buddha, and then they murdered her and, and put her body kind of in the Buddhist camp, you know, where he was living. So that should be found there. That of course, would be found there. And then they spread the tumor. Look what happens, you know, it's the Buddha, Buddha, Mr. Kilda. So the Buddha had to do With this, you know, false charges and what to do about this. And so, you know, it's not a pretty, pretty story, the time of the Buddha, you know, you know, my vision of the Buddha, when I was kind of growing up into Buddhism was kind of a sky who was kind of serene, Mr. Natural, you

know, living peacefully and living in the forest under a nice tree. And, you know, it was never any Thunder lightning around him, you know, and storms and you know, he just kind of manage everything beautifully. And, but NASA as I read more deeply into the history and the suttas of the Buddhist time, it was a time of tremendous strife, and war and fighting and kings, you know, countries, you know, conquering each other and, and it wasn't it wasn't just simply that he was like, you know, staying in the forest watching from a distance. But these involve people that he knew. He knew some of the, he knew the Kings he knew the people. He was very closely connected to many people who are influenced by the affected by But by all this so I say this because you're not here we are having, you know, we live in our situation. And I think sometimes I suspect that the piece that some of us experience like me, you know, I'm been in the middle of war and anytime in my life perhaps creates a false impression or, or kind of a quick ability to forget or overlook these things are. And how many of you remember there was a similar shooting, just a few months ago in Oakland, or last year, there was a similar shooting down in Sunnyvale, it was at the cement factory. And then a year ago now there was a shooting in Norway. So you know, these things go on and on. And so, these are part of our life and how do we take it in how are we informed by it? How are we? How do we take it in how do we stop and take it And so that we become better people for it. I think that's one of the key really important issues, you know, how are we going to Best Buy this thing of how do we respond?

And as some people have said, and I feel this is a really wise approach is when when someone dies, especially if they're murdered or like this tragedy, but what but what's the consequence of their death? is the consequence of their death that now people are living lives of greater fear, greater anger, greater hate, greater divisiveness? Is that the consequences? I mean, would you know if you were murdered? Would you like to know later that this is a consequence of your dying that society as a world as a worse place? Or is the consequences of someone dying? that people are motive Did to try to be better people to make a bit world a better place to be inspired to respond to the world more with love and compassion and generosity than they were before. And sometimes sometimes you see people protest this kind of idea, because it seems like the only thing that's on what's justified only thing that honors in someone's death is if there is punishment and anger and strong things, and it's somehow it's, it's almost condoning the violence if we, if the consequences were more loving or caring or something. But I, you know, I hope that these kinds of things we could just kind of, I certainly hope we could stop these kinds of things will never happen again. When they happen that they prompt us to reach out to the best of us to come forward and out of it, and not the divisive one. So here's a interesting story or event that I want to recount to you that talks about an event that was pretty similar here in in the United States 40 about 40 years ago in 1963. And there was a shooting in the University of Texas some men went up the tower with a gun and shot something like 1213 people in you know, down from the shot to the tower. And 1966 men in Charles Whitman 25 year old first woman is shocked was pregnant. The others around to help her he shot them as well. He shot the ambulance drivers who came to rescue them. Eventually the police were able to climb the tower and shoot him and they found a suicide note to add his home and he wrote, I do not really understand myself. These days, I was supposed to be an average responsible and intelligent young man. However lately, I cannot recall when it started. I have been a victim of many unusual and irrational thoughts.

So anyway, he shot these people and eventually they shot the police shot him. They went to his home or somewhere and he found out that he'd also murdered his mother and his wife beforehand. In his note, suicide notice. It was after much thought that I decided to kill my wife tonight. I love her dearly and she has been a fine wife to me as any man could ever hope to have. I cannot rationally pinpoint any specific reason for doing this. He had a high IQ he was in you know volunteered as a Scoutmaster. He's a good person, you know conventionally from the outside. He wrote in a suicide note. So it says he is persons or he requested in a suicide note that an autistic autopsy to be performed to determine if something had changed in his brain because he suspected it had. Few months before the shooting he

wrote in his diary, I talked to a doctor once for about two hours and tried to convey to him my fears that I felt overcome by overwhelming violent impulses. After one session, I never saw the doctor again. And since then, I've been fighting my mental turmoil alone and seemingly to no avail. So they took his a did not stop see on him after he was he was killed. And what they found was he had a tumor in his brain And the tumor was pushing against the michelia. And apparently they've known for a long, long time, that when the muglia is being damaged, that people have irrational tendencies, strong emotional responses and reactions that are can be quite difficult. The amygdala is involved in emotional regulation, especially in regards fear and aggression. So, does that paint a different perspective? on you know, certainly the guy and I think 66 do we relate to it differently, knowing that he has a tumor than if he just out for a good time? And the book this book that I'm having to read, he argues with the chapter is called something like why blameworthiness is the wrong question. Asking who's to blame? What is the wrong question? And what he ends the chapter by saying is rather than asking who's to blame? It's probably more useful to ask the question. How do we respond to this? How do we how do we look into the future and try to, you know, have the best response for everyone involved? And the question their blame sometimes closes the door to too tightly to try to understand how could we do better? How can we change? What kind of help is needed? So you know, if it's just blame, let's electrocute this person be finished with it. Then, as it decided, do we not learn about mental illness? And we don't learn about mental illness then perhaps there's no effort to try to do something on mental illness and, and, you know, I'd spend the kind of kind of amazing to me and the profession that I'm in where I meet a lot of people and, and talking about people, you know, people's minds are kind of like My, you know, one of my concerns, right? And so I hear a lot I hear a lot and see a lot. And, and it's just, you know, it's one of the shocks to me, one of the great tragedies is how little help our society now gifts that people have mailto mental illness. And it's not just simply the problem for the person has mental illness, but it's also a problem for the people who are affected by the mental illness. You know, the problem is ripple out and all kinds of ways.

So, you know, maybe we can't afford it. So that's the way it is. Or is that all it is? And so you know, this issue of this guy in 1966 with a tumor? Do we then look at these situations if they didn't? Do we mindful in different way be mindful of the different situation in different way do we look in different ways? Do we look at it look at we look at these kinds of tragedies in ways that just close the door. Blame, or, you know, it's, you know, there's all kinds of ways to close the door and all sides of this political spectrum or emotional spectrum. How do we stay open? How do we stay open and explore and, and what values do we try to emphasize? Are the values that are not divisive? I'd rather bring people together and find common ground. I would help you know, maybe gun control, you can't find common ground enough to make us change in this country. But could we find common ground the different sides of that political divide around trying to find better medical care, medical care, this guy did this guy here 66 he went to the doctor right, he tried to find help, but maybe there wasn't much known back then. So each of you, I suppose, who impacted in some way by this. Now this is another thing that if I may say that, you know, I meet a lot of people and because you know, a lot of people come here and I meet a lot of you in different situations, it's happened so many times now that I read something in the newspaper. And then sometime later A month later, sometime later, someone comes to me to talk to me who has been touched by that event. It's kind of a, you know, they, you know, then you know, how many steps away I was in nine degrees of difference, or whatever it is, or otherwise forget what's called six, six degrees of separation, you know, so, if people in my role, it seems like a lot less, you know, so now sometimes I look at newspapers even and, and I read the articles more carefully, because maybe I need to remember this. Someone's gonna come. So here we are. And so each of you maybe has been affected in some way, then maybe personally, maybe, you know, not so directly, but still by reading it or seeing in the news. And do you stop? Do you have your vigil do you stop and allow yourself Respect how you're feeling, make room for hire, feeling the whole range of it what it is, because to live a life world where we

don't divide up the world and divisive way, we don't want to do that with ourselves either and be divisive with ourselves and feel like your response somehow is wrong or bad or is you know, whatever way you judge it, but make space for it. That's what mindfulness is make space, make space, open up, become whole. And then once we see how we react to it, then there's a more intentional part where we choose what are the values that we want to live by? What our responses to it. And what I think about really what's significant are the significant things about Buddhist practice is that as we practice and cultivate for yourselves develop ourselves in practice, the goal is that to bring the difference between our reaction and a response, make it smaller and smaller. So that eventually our the way that we want to react, respond to the world with wisdom and care and compassion that That also becomes a reaction, the two don't become so separate from each other. And that's part of the practice is to narrow that divide within ourselves between reaction and response. And I think that it's quite wonderful. Those people who have a practice in some kind of as many practices, not just Buddhist practices, but have a practice that is trying to cultivate themselves develop themselves. So the most important and beautiful sides of the human heart, human mind has a chance to flower and grow within us. So those are those you know, that's what came out of me. I tried to give some thought to this talk. Before coming I thought it was important to say something I felt there was somehow a felt it was really important to speak about this big brothers say something important, or valuable, useful or something. But I also didn't know what To say, so I felt kind of torn. So I spoke these words. I hope they're meaningful for you. If we have a few minutes if some of you would like to say something, you're welcome to speak to me in a few minutes with your response or comments.

Is it on? Okay.

In hearing you talk about how you were reading the paper about the different stories. Okay, my reaction, I don't read the stories and I don't watch. Like there. There were specials all of a sudden on on TV about what happened in Aurora. And I don't watch them or read them because I feel very often that it's offered as entertainment. People suffering is being offered as entertainment and a way to get the numbers up for purchase papers or The Nielsen ratings and stuff like that. But you were talking about reading the stories. And I wonder if I'm making a mistake in not reading the stories because my reason thus far for not reading the stories, I can get stuck in the stories, instead of what I did last night was I set aside some time to do kind of like a meta for all the people that are suffering from this not just the dead, but, you know, the people, all the people that were in the theater than the town of Aurora than the state of Denver, I mean, state of Colorado, like that. And then every I don't know if that's an if I'm doing the wrong kind of response. Because I'm not reading the stories. I'm not getting involved. I don't know.

They You know, this sensationalistic aspect of journalism is a very important one take into account and so to be wise about that thing to not be pulled into that I think is so useful thing. And I don't watch television. I don't have a television to watch. And you know, I don't watch it. But but I think it's other other other ways of learning maybe even just, you know, newspaper writing sometimes since sensationalistic, but I, you know, hopefully we have the wisdom to see through that. And that's why this pause, sometimes the pauses need to be a long time. Because maybe in the first days, you get a certain kind of article, and then it fades away, and you get some more thoughtful reactions later. And so you want to take your time and take it in and not get hooked by what you read automatically. But, you know, some things are, don't really involve my story. So like, many females, you know, they're out of the house or something like this ripples out into the wider society. You know, my cut, my heart kind of broke, you know, and when my I took in all those people in those people and one of the times it broke when I don't know if maybe was incisionless sensationalistic but There was a quote, I guess, I guess ABC called up this alleged shooters, mother, and they're quoting the mother before that, you know her what she had to say and, and just just just to be reminded, there's a mother of this guy. And you know,

what a tragedy for her, you know, she missed the point, you know, my heart broke there for her thinking about that. So I think it's possible to beat wisely. Doing metta for everyone, I think is a wise thing. It's possible to do a metta, do loving kindness meditation situation like this, it's possible to do it as a way to, to hold it all at a distance, or to sugarcoat it or do something. And, but it's also possible to do it as a tremendous form of generosity and a clear kind of taking in understanding what the situation is and offering something that hopefully, you know, could change the overall direction that our wider society is going Right behind you.

I have two things to say.

The first is that in terms of the mental of Charles Whitman, and seeking help it's become increasingly more difficult year after year to get help to force people to take medication to come back for therapy to detain them. I mean, you can imagine what it was like for that psychiatrist to have that disturbed young man come into his office and there than the law. I don't know what the laws in Texas in California it is very difficult to detain someone who may really need to be contained until they can be treated.

But my

my major point is to not forget about the first responders who have to go into a scene like that. They don't know where the shooter is. They don't know what the level of danger They are there with viewing the tragic, the grotesque. I just some of you know I do retreats with first responders and I just came back from one on Friday. And the general public simply doesn't understand what these people have to see. I mean, the stories are totally unrepeatable. They are in some ways, so grotesque and so tragic. And they gotta get back up and go back to work again. And they have to stay in control of themselves and their emotions and try to help other people. So while we're thinking of everybody, I would ask you all please not to forget the first responders.

Yeah, I felt for them. When I read the police chief in Aurora. Police Chief Oates talked about I thought he thought he talked, you know, to the reporters about his anger. And it made sense. It makes you know, I don't know. Maybe Maybe that's possible to have other responses in anger, but, but I sort of quiet my thoughts. My heart broke there. And, of course, you know, of course he would have such strong feelings you know, and hope hopefully he helped households anger wisely, but it's one more in the other room.

I guess my main thought

about it I watched one of those dateline things last night. And the profile of the shooter is like many others, he was felt totally disenfranchised. He was completely alone. He had no friends. I don't know the story with his mother, but it makes me think that you know, there's so many people out there who just feel alone, or you know, they have mental illness and they feel depressed. That is something that we need to reach out. We see people in our lives, sometimes we're it's very young attractive, you know, somebody who's alone, but maybe we need to reach out more and make sure that people are okay or, you know, people in our lives are not doing well, with a mental health issue, being proactive about reaching out to that person,

maybe. So the idea, the idea that we're, you know, what was one of the things one of the ideas that's important for me is that we're all in the boat together. And, you know, set in some way we're all each other's brothers and sisters. And so that that point of view, you know, it's a point of view. I find that

meaningful point of view that I think will help create a better society. So, how do we relate to we are there some people who are not we don't see is our brothers and sisters, some people who don't hold the distance, and, and what's our role, you know, as citizens in relationship to the wider society, and what are the myths what are the stories beliefs that operate. So I'll give you one interesting one that was I thought it was kind of eye opening for me many years ago. So, you know, back in the early 70s, I was a hippie, and, and interested in living and lived on communes, rural communes, were here in America, my ideal and the ideal of many of my hippie comrades was to be self sufficient to grow our own food and get off the step off of the kind of military industrial complex was expression back then, and not be part of it and grow your own food and just not add to the difficulties and problems on society. And, and so that's fine. So I'm originally from Norway. So in 1974, I went back to Norway, and 75 I think, and, and I was you know, still happy living like commune so I went to live in a commune rural commune in Norway. And I told them my American views about living in a commune, the philosophy behind it about self sufficiency and, and the Norwegian hippies were horrified. Because the Norwegian worldview was, yes, you can be live in a coffee farm and farm, but you don't do it you don't separate yourself from society be self sufficient. You, you contribute to society. And, and so this idea of you know, so there's two different stories that we had back then. So what stories do we live under? And do we live under stories that are divisive and separating? Or do we live under stories that bring us together? And that's a choice we have. And to say which one is right or wrong is the wrong question, wrong issue. The question is, which will which will help create a better society? And are you interested in a better society? Are you interested only in yourself and if you interesting better society, what's what's the view? What's the approach that brings us together. So and my hope is that in my belief is that practice like spices like mindfulness, inevitably, as a practice develops in people. It brings us together because it's not possible to remain divisive when the heart is open so now all of us keep our hearts open. Thank you