2012-10-14 Reflections On Action

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SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

Good morning. Good. So there are probably you know, there are five seats in here, people from so far away out there. Do you want to come and come in? There's no, there's, you can come in. We make space here on the floor for you too, if you'd like. The so after the talk today at 11:15, we're going to have this community meeting to talk about our new Retreat Center. It's a you know, it's a momentous occasion for us to be opening this retreat center. We spent years actually probably about seven years, probably more. Chris Clifford and I probably first started planning for this about nine years ago. But nine years ago and Karma is catching up to her. And me and, and so, you know, it's we're quite lucky to have this come to fruition now. And we are putting together creating a retreat center that's very different than the retreat centers that our tradition mostly knows about. Different way different model for how to have retreat practice how to have a community around a retreat practice place. And so I think many of us are quite inspired and excited by what we have and what we're creating. And if you're interested in learning more about what this is about, and what we're making up what we're creating, this is what the meeting is at 1115 it's kind of a unique thing that you know, we're starting from scratch we you know, we've have a blank slate in terms of how to put on retreats, how to or Retreat Center. And so I felt very important for me not to kind of unconsciously here kind of to go along with the models we've already have, you know, just this is how it has to be. So, a lot of thought and care has gone into the model that we're going to have. So anyway.

So for this morning it's a little bit of a follow up from last Sunday morning's talk, where I talked about one aspect of the Buddha's teachings on action. And how the Buddha felt that you know, how a person is measured is by their action, how they behave, what they do. In particular, he was concerned for in his path for the action Or the qualities of mental action that involves a purified mind, a mind or heart, which is not caught up in greed, hate or delusion. So following that there's a discourse in the same collection, discourse 61 in the middle length discourse, which is quite touching, I think, because it's the, one of the earliest accounts or one of the, of how the Buddha was teaching his own son. And many people don't know that the Buddha was a father. And, and from the time, you know, he kind of left his family kind of he did leave his family in order to pursue his training that he took, not unlike many people who sometimes have important things they need to do in their lives and end up leaving. And then when after he had finished his training as a became became enlightened, he went back to his home country to home. And that point from then that period on he became the primary parent of his child of his son who's seven at the time. And, and this story here, it's about the very simple teachings the Buddha gave to his son. The tradition holds that this sign is about seven years old at this point. So his son would be you know, so you can imagine, you know, it'll be a young child who is being taught by his father. And, and it's about action, about how to look at your actions consider your action, what kind of actions you act on. So it was evening. This set the set the scene. It was evening and Rahula, the son of the Buddha son, was staying with his father at this Grove, this park like setting that was kind of his monastery. And

the evening the Buddha got up for meditation and went to find his son. And when his son saw his father coming in the distance, he prepared a seat for him, which was the custom back then, you know, they, they were sitting outdoors, under trees, they would sometimes make a look like make a clearing or bunch up some grass, maybe put out a, you know, sitting cloth, I don't know exactly what they did, but they would prepare a seat. And he also got out a bowl of water, which To this day, in some places in the world, like I think, I don't know if in India, but I experienced this when I was a monk in Burma, that you'd walk through the streets as a monk, barefoot, dusty, dirty streets and you go to someone's home, and they would have a bowl of water ready for you at the entryway and you would walk Your feet, so you wouldn't be tracking in all this. So Rahula prepared a seat for his father and prepare to bowl the ball of water for him. And the Buddha came and he washed his feet. And then he sat down. And then when he'd washed his feet, he left a little bit of water in that bowl. You know, so there was he'd washed his feet probably rinsed them out, but he left a little water left in there. And the first thing he said to Rahula, Rahula do you see this little water left in the bowl? Yes, venerable sir. probably didn't call your father that.

Know your kid. You that? Yes, venerable sir. So here comes you know, the first and have strong statement. Even so, even so little Rahula is the monkhood of those who are not ashamed to tell a deliberate lie. So what happened? Your father sets you down evening and, and says, you know, the you know because Rahula is kind of a novice monk by then that monk could have someone who tells a deliberate lie is not worth is worth as little as less than just a little bit of water in this bowl of water. So it doesn't seem that the Father is angry. You know, particularly it's not like he's coming in chiding his son, but he sits down and says this to him. And the assumption of the tradition ever since, is Rahula at total headset ally and so his father was going to About that, and probably some of you, as children might have almost told a lie. And, and perhaps there was an occasion for your parents to sit you down and talk to you about this. Some of you probably have uncomfortable memories of how that went. Some of you perhaps, it was maybe meaningful, maybe a very important how that went. I had an occasion where I didn't lie, but I took the keys to the car. And when I was 14, and crushed the car into a bulldozer I didn't know how to lie, I didn't mean I didn't know how to lie, but I didn't know how to drive. So I called up my father and said, at work and come You know, you know your car. And, and so he very matter of factly said, what happened to it? And I said, Well, you know, the We crashed into the right the right side of the car crashed into the bulldozer. And we only went about four feet. You know, we didn't have to drive. So we were kind of both park there and, and so he's we're like I said, well now we can't open the right hand door. And so the CIO, he said to me, welcome home this evening, see what you can do about it? And that's the last I heard of it. And that made a big impression on me. I think maybe hopefully, I don't know. I never asked him about it. But I assume that he heard my voice, you know that I felt pretty bad about what had happened. And I think for him probably about headed less than enough. I wasn't going to do that again. And there was never any anger or anything. I think. I don't think there was no looking back. I don't think it was a need for it. So different ways of approaching a child you done something so here the Buddha sits down and says Even so little is the monkhood of those who are not ashamed to tell the deliberate lie. Then the blessing one threw away the little water that was left and asked Venerable Rahula Rahula do you see that little water that was thrown away? Yes, venerable sir. Even sober hula, those who are not ashamed to tell the deliberate lie, have thrown away their monk could. Then the Blessed One, turn the water vessel the bowl upside down and ask Rahula Rahula do you see this water vessel turned upside down? Yes, venerable sir. Even so Rahula those who are not ashamed to tell the deliberate lie, have turned the reckless ship upside down. I think he had to tell the lie to have gotten this kind of repeated admonition. Then the Buddha turn the water vessel right up again. asked, Do you see this hollow empty water vessel? Yes, venerable sir. By this time probably he's, yes. Go to kinky. Even so hollow and empty is the monkhood of those who are not ashamed to tell the deliberate lie. So he's really kind of, you know driving the point home but he doesn't stop there.

And he says suppose Rahula there were a royal tusker elephant with tusks as long as chariot polls, full grown in stature, hybrid and accustomed to battle. In battle, he would perform his task with his four feet and his hind feet with his four quarters and his hindquarters with his head and his ears with his tusks and his tail. Yet he would keep back as yet he would keep back his trunk, then his writer would think this world tusker elephant with tusks as long as chariot pose, performs his task in battle with his four feet and his hind feet. It he keeps back his trunk. He has not yet given up his life. Then with royal tusker elephant performs his task in battle with his four feet and his hind feet with his four quarters and his hindquarters with his head and his ears with his tusks and his tail, and also with his trunk, then this writer would think this royal tusker elephant with tusks as long as chariot poles performs this task in battle with his four feet and his hind feet he has given up his life so I guess you know you're willing to fight give you everything you have in the battle, willing to give up your life. Now there is nothing this world tusker elephant would not do. So this is a brave or foolish elephants are just willing to give everything over to the battle nothing that the elephant would not do. So to Rahula, when one is not ashamed to tell a deliberate lie, there is no evil, I say that one would not do. Therefore Rahula you should train yourself, I will not utter falsehood even as a joke. So this particular quote is kind of a famous quote in Buddhism, that when one is not ashamed to tell a deliberate lie, there is no evil I say that one would not do. So, it's a powerful statement. I don't know if it's true, but it's it's certainly a powerful statement to make. And the tremendous importance that the Buddha offered a sign about the importance of being honest. It's one of the very touching things of my life, many that day, retreats and what happens on retreats are so profound and beautiful to people. And there's many things like a list of all the wonderful things that happen. As a teacher, one of the wonderful things is The heightened sense of honesty that people have on retreat, and it's not tapped into time to time that someone comes to interview with me, then, you know, we have a discussion about their practice. And they say something about their practice. And then I get a note or they have to say, I can't leave it, I have to come see you cannot please come and see you or something. And I don't know what it's about. I think I see them. And they come to apologize, because they didn't say something was off what they said. They just sometimes just a little bit deliberate. They want to make a better impression than they were they don't want to be as honest or sometimes just kind of inadvertent. But they feel so bad about it, that they feel like they need to in order to continue and retreat in order to keep opening the heart and mind the way that happens on retreat. They have to come and make amends and tell me and apologize. Generally, the things they have to tell me are pretty minor. You know with what they have, you know what they have kind of missed it. or something. But it's, you know, I suppose sometimes it's a minor, I don't really feel there was a need. But it's so beautiful that someone wants to do that someone has a sensitivity and concern and this kind of sense of integrity. And, and the call for that integrity is much higher on retreat than often it isn't daily life, because there's heightened sensitivity that people have about themselves and their hearts and what goes on there. And the Buddha continues and listen to teachings about action. What do you think? Rahula What is the purpose of a mirror?

For the purpose of reflection, venerable sir, so to Rahula an action with a body should not be done after repeated right. So to an action with the body. physical action should be done after repeated reflection. action by speech should be done after repeated reflection. And action by minds should be done by repeated reflection. So here the Buddha refers to activity of the mind as an action. And some people don't don't have the same ethical sensitivity to what goes on their mind as compared to compare it to what goes on in their body, where they do physically what they do verbally. For in the teachings of Buddha, the what you do with your mind is actually consequential. And yeah, and part of the mindfulness function of mindfulness practice is to be a custodian of what goes on in your own mind. If you're filled filled with hatred in your mind, that activity that action of is not you know, it's not a kind of good doesn't go into kind of avoid you know, stuff like a non event. It creates a conditioning creates a

habit that creates momentum in the mind to be Kind of acting, you know, having this mental activity of hate. There's a whole series of you know, mental actions we do, both healthy and unhealthy, that have affected us. And so for the Buddha, it's very important to be the custodian and caretaker of this wonderful thing we have the mind heart that we have. So that's why pink. So the Buddha says you have to reflect. And here the Buddha's say to the mirror is something to you. So the mirror here is your actions. You look at the actions that you're going to do, and you study them to see just something about them. This is a little bit different than what I've seen in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, where they also use the simile of a mirror. But they're, they use the simile of the mirror as the innate pure, luminous quality of the mind. That if you somehow remove all the clouds or all the dust from the mind, that there's the essential Buddha nature there that you can discover, and that you can rest in this mirror like quality of the mind. In this early tradition, they don't have they don't pause it the idea that there's some innate innate Buddha nature, innate purity of mind, that you have to kind of discover, but rather what they what the focus here is rather, look at your actions, study them, and take responsibility for them. And if you do that, then good results will happen, as opposed to ignore what you do. Just focus on the innate quality of who you are. And that goes along a little bit with last week's talk where the Buddha kept emphasizing not you know who you are, how you're born and what's innate, but the actions the activities, mind, body and speech that that a person has so Rahula when you wish to Do an action with the body, you should reflect upon the same bodily action thus, would this action that I wish to do with a body lead to my own affliction, or to the affliction of others, or to the affliction of both? Is it an unwholesome bodily action with painful consequences with painful results? When you reflect, if you know this action that I wish to do with the body would lead to my own affliction, or to the affliction of others or the affliction of both. It is an unwholesome bodily action with painful consequences with painful results, then you should definitely then definitely you should not do such an action with a body. But when you reflect, if you know, this action that I wish to do with my body, would not lead to my own affliction, or to the affliction of others or the affliction of both. It is a wholesome bodily action with pleasant consequences with pleasant results. Then you may do such an action with the body. So the, the assumption here is that we are, it's possible for us to look at what we're planning to do, the actions we're going to take and reflect on it, consider the consequences. Consider what the impact is going to be. And if we feel that's going to harm someone, and interesting, it's harm others harm ourselves, or harm both self and others, which I take to be the kind of wider context that we're all in together to consider that to be conscientious about that. Now to do things without some reflection and concerned one of the consequences of what I'm going to do.

And, and the guideline for the consequences is whether it causes harm. Or if it doesn't cause harm if it's for the benefit of others, if it are for yourself. And what's beautiful about this is that it's a it's a relatively broad category. Ethics ethical evaluation. It's not laying down strict rules that you have to follow all these many of you can come up with thousands, thousands of rules laid down, this is what you should do. And you would think, also monastic life, that that's what you do lay down all these rules, but he offers something very broadly principle by which he uses principles principle to look at your behavior. What are the what are the consequences of your behavior, and to the best of your ability, if you think that it's going to cause harm, don't do it. So the assumption here is that telling a lie is causing harm to oneself and to others tend to vote and so he shouldn't have done that.

And then he says the same thing with so then he says, also, so that was before you do it, if you're going to do before you do it, reflect on what you're doing. And then he says wild You're doing an action with your body, you should reflect upon that same bodily action, thus, does this action that I'm doing with the body lead to my own affliction, or the affliction of others, or the affliction of both? Is it unwholesome bodily action with painful consequences with painful results? And then he goes on the same way. So here are the same instructions, but rather than before you do it while you're doing it. The good to have this mindful reflection of care and concern, what are the consequences? And so this is

using mindfulness to something more than just being present in the moment for what's going on. It requires some imagination, some thinking ahead, the larger picture of what we're in the context for which we're in and the context we're in as things develop, where is this leading? And it while you're doing it, if it leads to harm, then stop doing it. If while you're flecked reflect, and you see that it's not going to cause harm if it's going to be beneficial. Then the Buddha says you can continue doing it. So then there's, in the sequence of three, there's one more thing left. After you have done an action with the body, you should reflect upon the same bodily action does, did this action that I did with a body lead to my own affliction, or to the affliction of others, or to the flexion of both? Was it an unwholesome bodily action with painful consequences with painful results? When you reflect this way, if you know that this action I did with a body led to my own affliction, or to the affliction of others, or the affliction of both, it was an unwholesome bodily action with painful consequences and painful results. Then, you should confess such a bodily action, reveal it and lay it open to a teacher or to a wise companion in the holy life. So if you if you look back and see I did something and it caused harm, then you need to do something. And even if you are only harmed yourself, and I like this, because I think that over and over again, you see the Buddha, what he, you know, his approach to human being to each of us as each of us is important or valuable. And that kind of self respect that comes around being concerned about not harming oneself. So, very important kind of self respect. And so, if you've harmed yourself, the respectful thing to do is not to say, well, no one noticed. You know, no one noticed that, you know, it doesn't really matter. It only affected me and it doesn't matter that affected you. You're important. And so you want to do something you want, something's required. And so here with a suggestion is to go and confess, I'm not sure that the word could confess here in the English translation is the best Voice of an English word because some people coming out of some religious traditions have rather powerful associations with the word confession. That may be not what the Buddha had in mind. But go talk to someone, go tell someone. So it says reveal it laid open to someone else, something that's very significant to go and share with someone. Behavior you've done that you feel was off. When you've done you've caused harm. For one thing, then it really relieves some of the pressure you have the guilt or the shame that might be there. But also, by speaking it, it's a way of more fully acknowledging what you've done. There's something about giving voice to what you've said in front of someone else who's a witness for it. That makes it real in your own mind. So you might feel yeah I realized this was wrong, I shouldn't do this again. And that those thought has some value. But to actually say it to someone else, it's almost like a ritual of commitments, like, you know, something, I did this, I don't feel good about it, it kind of sinks in deeper, you're probably less likely to do it again, in the future, if you've actually gone to tell someone else. Also, you tell someone you respect. It's a it's a wonderful thing. Because if you have such a person who you can talk to, because then you're, you kind of become little bit accountable to them. Not that you ask them to be accountable for the fact that, you know, they're keeping, keeping an eye on you, they run into you, they'll see you and, and it's a little bit you know, to go back a second time and say, you know, you know what kind of protection from, you know, being more careful in the future.

So, then the Buddha goes through the same thing with same three steps before, during and after four things that you start verbal actions. And then he goes through the same three steps with mental actions. And I've known people who have gone to find someone else and say, I want to confess I want to apologize. Because I had these thoughts about you. You know, that's quite something, you know, that Be careful how you do it. Of course, he could cause more harm than good. Saying that, but it's also it can be quite a beautiful thing, very profound thing to say, this is what I was thinking. And I realized now that I was wrong, and I feel bad about and I apologize for any way in which it might have spilled out or come out. So these are teachings to a seven year old, ethical teachings. Did you know that you know this is probably someone at seven years old people maybe not ready to learn to meditate, not ready to learn some of the great sophisticated teachings of not self and whatever Just a very basic idea. It's very simple, basic idea. And the simple basic idea might seem like you know, yes, it's good for

a seven year old, you know, I know this, you know. But this principle of reflecting and looking at your actions of body speech in mind, and the consequences of it is a very, very important movement, activity practice, for doing Buddhist spiritual practice, right up to enlightenment. Because what you want to learn to do is to look and see, even when the mind is really peaceful and calm. Are there subtle ways that the mind is operating still, that are not really for your betterment? Not really, a little bit kind of keeps a little bit of drag. So for example, you could be sitting in deep meditation, and things are you blissed out, the mind is completely pure and wonderful. This is the best. That's good. And then you can feel There's this little movement of clinging to it, I want this and if you're paying attention to your action, your mental actions and the consequences of it, you see, oh, this is a mental action. And that clinging to it is a kind of an affliction a little bit, you know, stressful, a little bit painful to have that. And so because of the training to pay attention to this, you know, okay, this is your let go. or there might be a little bit like, look at me, I'm hot stuff. You know, this is pretty cool, you know, finally. And so there's a little bit of conceit involved. Or some people will have strong, you know, wonderful experiences of meditation. And they'll have fear come up, because it kind of changes their, the changes their understanding of what's possible, and it's, that can disrupt the status quo. And that fear then it can be very subtle, it's fear, gets noticed and gets worked in, and each of these very subtle movement into the mind and to pay attention notice it is a guide for finding our way forward into greater freedom. So this, this ability to use our actions or activities and body speech in mind as a mirror, so we can become our own teachers is true in the gross ethical level. And it's also true in a very subtle level. And I believe that this is one of the hallmarks of this Buddhist tradition is that we're trying to become our own teachers. We're trying to learn how to pay attention in such a way that we can find our own way we can find the path for ourselves. We don't need a book to tell us what the path is. We don't need a teacher to tell us what the path is. What the books the teachers, the teachings of Buddhism offer are the principles by which we can find that path. And one of the and then one of the fundamental principles has to do with what causes suffering and what alleviates it What causes happiness? And what are the conditions for the happiness it's a quite a profound guide for finding a path those two things. And it's good from the beginning of the path to the middle path to the end of the path.

So, to complete this text, the Buddha then ends Rahula whatever rec looses kind of spiritual seekers and Brahmins in the past, purified their body, see, whatever rec looses in Romans in the past purified their bodily action, the verbal action and their mental action, all did so, by repeatedly reflecting this, whatever recluses and Brahmins in the future will purify their bodily action, the verbal action, the mental action, all will do so, by repeatedly reflecting this, whatever recluses and Brahmins in the present Who are purifying their bodily action, the verbal action and their mental action all are doing so, by repeatedly reflecting thus, therefore, Rahula you should train thus we will purify our bodily action or verbal action or mental action by repeatedly reflecting upon them. So, in this text when the Buddha begins this kind of admonition about lying I imagine that Rahula gulped and then when I said it again in different way. hoops, he's, you know, oops. Oh, at the end of the sutra it says, that is what the Blessed One said. Rahula was satisfied and delighted in the Buddha's words. Isn't that a good ending? So, you wish that you were As a child that were maybe that adult were admonished in such a way, at the end of the admonishment you were delighted and satisfied. And for a parent, a parent also, this is not just a kid is supposed to do this right? I've known parents who kind of expected high standards for their kids, but in demanding the high standards for the kids, they had lowered their own standards, you should not you should not raise your voice. And the so for parents also to reflect what are the consequences? What are the of this action? Is it for my own is for the benefit of others and for oneself? And can you if you have to admonish your child, can you do it in such a way, by the time you're done, the child is delighted and satisfied.

So fortunately, takes my punchline away. He said it's a formulaic ending to most of the suit says that the audience is delighted and satisfied. Maybe Maybe it is, but it's still a good story. So that's what I have. Do you have any good time maybe for one or two comments or questions? Over here, Mike over there.

When we find a situation where we're unable to predict the outcome of our actions with any accuracy, where should we go for guidance and how to decide how to act? I think We should err on the side of caution. So, but where can we go for guidance? I suppose you could go to people who know, who are wise who have experience with it. You could also go to the people who are going to be affected. And, you know, ask them, you know, I need to do something, it's gonna affect you. And I don't know the consequences. What do you think? And they might have some ideas. The and if there's no one to talk to, or ask for support help, then it's and it seems like it's important to do, then I think the second part is very important. You continue to reflect while you're doing it. Because there are times you know, even even when we think the consequences are pretty clear that consequences and good, the situation can change in the middle of doing something. And so we have to kind of stay awake to the context and the change, shifting, changing what's going on, And then briefly Then, And then occasionally, you don't realize until after the fact, it seems like was a good idea. In the beginning, it seemed like it was a good idea while you did it. But then, lo and behold, in ways that you'd never could have known it caused harm for someone maybe has to do with their particular situation. They have a unique background that made them particularly sensitive to something. And so, you know, there was no intention on your part, no thought that it was going to cause harm and but someone was hurt anyway. And so then maybe it's it's good to reflect and maybe to make some amends for it. Do something. Not necessarily feel quilty but to so this constant reflection, not as a burden to reflect but rather something that's freeing and lightens up so lightens of serving the process. That's that's my thoughts. Yes, here they are in the front.

Zero.

In mentioned honesty, getting a little higher during a retreat, and I felt that as well and the relief and pleasure that are felt on a retreat. And that feeling of honesty has been very profound. And it makes me realize that when honesty is not uppermost, there's a great deal of strain and stress involved and to get to let that stress go is a delight.

Great, that's great. So the lesson of is something like a retreat. Hopefully there's other examples of this in people's lives. Something that shows us a certain kind of purity, a certain kind of ease and kind of freedom. That's you know, is really felt in the heart in a powerful way, heightened sensitivity that feels really meaningful. And to have that experience on retreat or some other places, and then have that as a reference point is a very useful reference point because then you can understand sometimes what goes on in daily life that sometimes it's invisible without that kind of reference point to highlight it. And, and so what Steven says is that he's discovered that he doesn't have the same heightened sensitivity, always in daily life. But the retreat has been very important because it shows him that when he's going to, I can't imagine you lying, but when your other people

when he gets kind of, you know, you know, a mile away from telling a lie, that he can notice that there's, you know, the strain and stress in the system then, and this is also very interesting to know is the degree to which they're suffering, pain. stress in you know, present when we're going to do some kind of do something which is going to break it ethical precept or cause harm for someone. And then if that's the if that's their strange stress for troubled in some way, can we care and tend for that and settle that away before we go and, you know, and then then we might feel less motivated to do the thing that we were about to do. So this is a bit of Buddhist ethics. Some people don't like ethics, because you can find it cumbersome, but I think this is very important part of the tradition that this is part of it. There's a

trilogy. There's two other discourses in this collection, where the Buddha gives teachings to two more teachings to his son. The next one is when his son was a teenager. And, and that's when he does some teachings to start Around identity issues. I've heard that some teenagers have some issues around the entity. And, and what's interesting here is that rather than, you know, do some teaching or identity, but he offers him something and what he offers him is meditation. And one of the really important roles of meditation practice is to provide a person with a sense of well being, that is more important or feels better than any identity you can have. And so, that puts to the whole issue of identity in different contexts, if you know something better to rest in. And then the last of these discourses is when the Rahula was about 20 years old, 21 years old, something like that young adult. And, and the Buddha felt that his son was kind of ripe, mature in his spiritual life, and he took his son for a walk deep into the woods. I find a very touching beautiful place in in this integral of trees called the coconut tree it's called the salt trees which my understanding is are the it kind of the Indian equivalent and majesty as the red redwood trees here. So, we took in this Grove with these great trees and they said at the root of these trees and he gave him this teachings on itself and kind of a kind of almost like a guided meditation and how all these things which are not self, your body is not to self, your mind is not to self, your feelings not to self, your thoughts, not yourself. And as he gave him this teachings, his son's mind was liberated, was set free. So it kind of like three stages and in this suns practice through this. So, okay, well thank you very much and in the world wouldn't probably we'll have tea now, out there for those hang out and we can talk and then we'll set up I think, well, we'll set up in here for that community meeting we'll have about the retreat center. And when it's all set up and ready, we'll come in here and we'll have our meeting. Thank you