

2012-12-17 Response To Tragedy

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SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

So it's hard not to speak something about the shootings in Connecticut today. The you know, I have a fifth grader who went to elementary school this morning. And I was very aware that there I think there's something like 50 million schoolchildren, United States. A lot of kids, and it's not clear how many of them know what happened on Friday, like, some of the younger kids don't really know so well. But their parents do. Most of those parents do. And I think for all those parents, it was a pretty tender time to leave their kids being there. kids to school this morning. And there were various discussions I had with my wife about bringing our son to school and what that would be like. And then this evening my my wife met one of the teachers and school teacher my son had last year and they talked a little bit my wife asked about what we do, how was it for the teachers and they talked about that they had met me I guess before school and her met and talked about what they were they do for the kids. The local school here just a couple blocks away and they decided not to do anything or each each each pair each teacher was had their own choice what to do. And so I picked up my son from school this afternoon and you know, kind of my antenna was up. What was that like for him today? What what happened at school? What are the kids talk about? And, but it was, you know, I wasn't going to ask any leading questions. So, you know, a tender time for many people in this country. And for some of us more than tender. I was teaching retreat last week. And so I wasn't. And I saw the news on Friday and then Saturday afternoon, I saw the news again, and was kind of reading about it in the notebook that's photographs. of the mostly most of the photographs were photographs of afterwards of parents coming picking up their children. And suddenly, to my surprise, I started sobbing. You know, something so far away. So I don't know how you guys were impacted by these shootings. But it One of these events that opened up a wound in American society for many people. And so such a big one that the president united states went to give a talk. And in that capacity as the president coming to represent the whole nation because this in a way happened to the whole country, what happened to everyone? And I think that something to consider this I mean, I consider it's important for me is that as tragic as this event is, the fact that it touched hearts, so many hearts in such a big way that there was so much tenderness, so much care, so much concern. So much so many hearts moved by this. I think it speaks really well for the human heart. Imagine if we didn't care. Magic, we all just shut down as well, who cares about that. But there's a lot of caring about it. And I think that caring that we have carries the day. You know, a year and a half ago, we had a shooting in Norway, which touched me because I'm the region I was born in Norway. And but what moves me the most there was not the shooting, but rather the response of the new agents who the common response I read about in the paper was they were not going to let the shooting destroy the nation or destroy their soul. They really come back with love and come back with the values of that society. And so here we have a chance as well our our hearts are moved.

And, and rather than be weighed down by this event, can we be void by it? Can we be encouraged? by it, can you feel that fuel the best that's in our hearts? Can we recognize what's really good in our hearts

and give voice to it or have it move us, I think would be the Buddhist response to this kind of event. I think one of the advantages of Buddhist practice is, is the ability to turn the mirror around and learn to sit still. Or to sit with our feelings, sit with what's our impact, sit with the situation of the world, be a witness to what goes on, and not to not to not to succumb to some of the difficult emotions, we have not to succumb to her being horrified or anguished, not to succumb to you know, the burden of grief, but rather certainly to feel those things, but not to succumb to them, but rather to learn how to sit Still have them there and be able to still stay open and still move forward and still respond from the best parts of who we are. And I think the you know, day after day or month after month, year after year of sitting in meditation is not the training in being coming calm or being blissed out. But most important is a training to stay present, above all else in the midst of what's going on for us, and keep coming back to being present but present, meaning the present that allows us to be independent are free from what goes on in our inside of us And the world around us. And not free so that we're aloof or indifferent, but free so that we can take what comes to take our experience of life and be changed by it for the better and respond from the best that we have and make a difference in the world. When 911 happened. It, it seemed to me that it was kind of a violence that should maybe speak just in personal terms. But I felt that way to sort of kind of a violence to myself if I didn't allow that event to change me, because I could see how easy it was to be horrified and upset and, and talk about all kinds of things in the week or weeks immediately afterwards. But I could see how that could fade away over time. And it didn't seem right to let it fade away. That didn't seem to be the right given what happened. It seemed like this situation required to be to be changed myself. And so I allowed myself to change I made choices in my life and in turn the directions in my life in certain ways, in new ways, that I'm still I still live with those choices I made because 911 So here for this event, you know it, the bigger the impact it has on us and our hearts, the bigger impact it has and the people we know and around us. Is it a time for us to look to allow it to impact us for the better? How would we what choices we make differently? And because if we just continue and say, that's their problem out there, someone should fix the problem. And we just about our opinions about how terrible things are. You know, then that's, you know, we're not changed. How do we change so we come forward with the best in ourselves come forward for the better. So one of the approaches of Buddhism to many problems are called problems in life. personal problems, ethical problems, we've had ways we've met mistakes we've made situations around us is to stay present for them. Let them register, be honest and truthful or whatever it might be. Inside or outside, but not to be weighed down by anything, not to be weighed down by the past, but to look at the past and learn from it, and then be forward looking. And to see how can I do better in the future? What can I contribute in the future? And so rather than being weighed down and feel like a victim, the idea is to be to look forward and say, What can I do to be empowered to feel like an agent of change that they say, have to feel the place of strength, the field pace of the values that we carry, and the willingness to act on them? As if each person's actions and each person's values count for a lot? So one of the things that struck me is this weekend as I was reflecting on all this and living with it was

you know, this is certainly the issue of gun control. And that's many people, especially the kind of people that I spend time with. You know, they Immediately well voice Well, we need to have control. And, and so I don't know much about gun control. You know, I kind of think it's a great idea. I didn't want any guns myself happy to live in a society without any guns. But I don't know much about this issue of gun control. So I started, I did some research reading about it. And, and one of the surprises when reading about it was how there is so much research that's been done on gun control. And it seems like there's no conclusive decisions. I mean, if you read 111 study, they have conclusive conclusion. But if you read a whole bunch of them, they contradict each other. And so the different sides of gun control, they bring forth, you know, this study or in this study, and, and you know, and it's complicated the whole issue. But what struck me in reading it was is Tuesday in a number of things. One was the polarity, quickly these things have polarized and conflict arises and how the same event can get radically

different responses from good people that some people say, Well, we need to control guns. And then I think there's good people who out there who say, well now No, we have to give guns to the principles. To me, I'm kind of horrified by the idea, but I think I think these are good people, probably some of them and so what so So, so, the Buddhist approach is not to get involved in these polarities or in these conflicts directly unless they unless we have to, but rather is to look for the common ground and see if there's a common ground or higher ground for the common good of everyone. And I think there's no more important than going Control is that there's people who have a need for safety. And I think that the people, you know, I like to believe that everyone is everyone is concerned about safety. The people who want to have guns are looking to be safe. The people who are looking to be sighted got guns are looking to be safe. And so the question is, you know, so we should we share, this is something we share in common is a desire for safety. And we look for safety in different ways. And so but if we understand the issue of safety, rather than the issue of guns, do we have a different conversation? And, and, and can we approach the problem in a different way? Maybe looking for different solutions? The question is what helps us all to be safer? Not the question of, you know, that's the question and maybe there are different solutions and different approaches. Maybe I mean, it's certainly a times guns don't make us any safer. One of the leading causes of gunshot deaths is called crimes of passion. People, family members and spouses who know each other and to get angry in the gun is close by. I had a friend who a friend or one of my n teacher, I know who ended up in jail because in the heat of the moment, he went and pulled out a gun that he had in his garage. And it was didn't have any bullets in it, but he behaved in such a way that he got arrested. And he was provoked because he he was held up at knifepoint and so that you know, it's a pretty powerful thing adrenaline runs and so he's held up and, and his response to it was to get this gun and go look for the guy And then the police picked him up rather than rather than the Robert Pickton police picked him up. So that you know, the crime, you know, you people do things impulsively. The but are there other ways of being safe? And so there was I don't know if it's so popular anymore now, but I know 15 years ago, in the Bay Area, it was quite popular for people to take self defense classes and to learn the skills of defending themselves without using a gun. Now, are they as effective as a gun? I don't know. But they are effective to some degree. And there are there are a series of variety of things we can do to become a safer society that answers the questions of safety without the question of guns.

And if we talk about safety as an issue, then we talk about fear. How do we relate to fear What's our understanding of fear? What's the Practice of fear. And I think this is where something like mindfulness and Buddhism I hope can offer help to our society is it offers practices and understandings that helps us to look and address fear and question fear, rather than live in fear or be pushed around by fear, to be able to turn around and actually learn to work with fear, and not to give it so much authority. One of the powerful things that mindfulness does, or Buddhism in general is to question the authority that we give to some of our emotions. The authority we give to our anger. Some people give tremendous authority, some people give their authority over to their anger and they act on it. Some people give a lot of authority to their fear. And it's inconceivable to them that they wouldn't because fear is so compelling but in fact, it's unnecessary to give fear any authority. It's possible to be afraid and to be able to stay. Stay, keep authority with yourself see the fear and be able to choose responsibly and clearly what to do. And the question of important things to do because fear should be questioned. The issue of safety the question, what makes us really safe? Where safety found is a very powerful issue that I think I think Buddhist practice asks us to look at the question the so how is our society? Do we help each other feel safer? Our society do we help each other deal with fear? how society do we help each other to deal with anger? I think are important issues. And is that society's job to do that? Do we teach our children in school? How to work with and be wise about fear and anger and grief and sadness? Or is that not the job of schools? Do we allow expected parents to do it? So the parents need to learn about this? How do we learn how to how do we train society? But who would who would who's allowed to tell us to do this? Who's allowed to have that opinion? That is a good for us to do. I mean, I can't tell that to people,

right? I mean, I'm a Buddhist teacher. I mean, that would be that would be you know, I wouldn't get very far in America as a Buddhist teacher standing on a pulpit and say, you know, let's teach mindfulness in the schools. So the kids can learn to be wiser about their fear and their I don't think that's going to go very far. So you know how to how does this change happen?

So I don't know about society. And maybe you don't know about society the same way. But maybe you know about your hearts. Maybe you know about how you want to live. And so for me, the question of the weekend this week coming out of Friday and these shootings is if you take this event seriously, if it was important for you, then to be encouraged, maybe I'm maybe I shouldn't use the word inspired in the context of these kinds of tragedies, but encouraged or boring or propelled or SP Maybe aspire to have your heart changed for the better through this? How can you make a difference in the world? What do you do with your fear? What do you do with your anger? What do you do with your love? What do you do with your care for the community and the people around you? Are there ways that you can live so that you can make a difference to the people around you? The issue of violence is broken going on since a time with the Buddha. And way before that, even and there's a for me, there's a very powerful poem that is attributed to the Buddha in some of the oldest texts survive from Buddhism. So it qualifies maybe that goes back to the time with the Buddha and why it's kind of significant is that He talks about what propelled him to his quest for awakening for freedom. And it has to do with violence. It goes and begins, violence gives birth to fear. Just look at people and their quarrels. I will speak of my dismay, and the way that I was shaken. Seeing people thrashing about like fish and little water, and seeing them in conflict with each other, I became afraid. The world is completely without a core. Everywhere things are changing, wanting a place of my own, I saw nothing not already taken. I felt discontent and seeing only only conflict to the very end. So that's quite something There's you know, his in his world and he saw so much conflict, not a new thing that we feel violence and conflict. I felt discontent that seeing only conflict at the very end. So these words, his dismay and shaken and being afraid and feeling discontent, you know speaks to someone who was deeply moved and troubled by what he saw in the world. I felt discontent at seeing on the conflict to the very end. Then, I saw an arrow here. Hard to see embedded in the heart, pierced by this arrow, people dash about in all directions. When the arrows pulled out, they do not run and they do not sink. So this describes The Buddha's way he was agitated or troubled by what he saw in the world.

And then in his search for something, somehow he was able to see something in his own heart. And he has the word his ears translate, this arrow could be translated as a BB. So something painful that's embedded in the heart. It doesn't belong there. And, and then he pulled it out. And when that arrow is pulled out, people don't run and they don't sink. People don't are not agitated and they don't succumb to what goes on. So that's what he did for himself. He discovered how to pull the arrow out. And then for 45 years, he went around India teaching and helping other people to do the same. So is there is there What is this foreign body that's lodged in people's hearts? Is it You if you're afraid, if you have a tendency to succumb to anger sometimes, if you have issues with addiction and desires, if you have behaviors and distress, discouragement, if you have depression, there's many issues that can be if you pay attention carefully, you can find there's something lodged, there's a, there's a, another language used in Buddhism, I root for it. There's a source for this irritation in the heart, there's a troublesome trouble in the heart. And part of what we do for this mindfulness practice meditation is to sit still enough, so we can discover what that is, and pull it out. So that when we see the violence of the world, we are not then a violent person. When we live in a world of fear, we learn not to be afraid ourselves. We really see a world of greed. We don't we're not greedy or We see a world with anger. We're not angry ourselves, but rather, where we can maybe come from the heart's generosity, the hearts capacity for love and for care. And most important, I think the only things I see so important for living in society is that, to always be asking the question, where's the common good here? Where's the common ground?

How do we live in a society where we don't look for the divisions and perpetuate the divisions? But can we look for the place where we, we can meet and find each other and find a way together? That works for everybody? If it's if everyone's afraid, and we start there as looking for the solution. When we come to it, it will become two different answers than if we start with questions like gun control.

So the last thing I'll say is that the fact the fact that the president United States would go to Newtown, Connecticut speaks to how a whole nation has been moved. And I would like to live in a society where we take care of each other. And so how do we best take care of each other? How do we support each other? how we care for each other? the common good? How do we break down the walls of individualism that keeps us separate from each other? So that it's not just about me, and myself and my own. I think I think that's one of the most important tasks of this society, if we're going to go forward into the future in a healthy way is to learn how to overcome the arrows in the heart, that keep us living me myself in mind, and rather live in a society where we come forward With us, and how do we live together in one heart? Or we live together in one community? How do we live together for the common good? And how can we support that and contribute to it?

So I hope that in saying these words, I could say something that was meaningful for you in this context. I never really quite know what to say, in these kinds of events when these things happen, but it feels like it's important to somehow speak to it. And if for some reason that what I said didn't work for you, or I'm sorry, to tender time for all of us when any of you like to speak, anything you'd like to say, at this point, so I think that I like to keep it open. But I think that If you want to speak, I have a request. And that you be careful not to come with a really strong opinion about what should happen. I think sometimes it's easy to say come with opinions of what should happen or an explanation of something. But sometimes it becomes more divisive than it is helpful. So is there some way of you know, to speak your heart speak how you are speak something about what you feel your share? I think that would help us all feel together. It'd be nice.

I just about your talk. And I said to a friend of mine last night, his wife is an elementary school teacher. I said, how's your wife doing and he said that she told him, she said After this has happened, I don't think I could ever retire. So

I thought that was really inspiring. Yeah.

Well, one of the things that really appeals to me and the idea of working with mindfulness in the schools is that is that children would be able to grow up more comfortable with their feelings and that this is it seems to me the essence of mental health as opposed to mental illness. mental illness is really coming up in me after this tragedy.

For one thing, because of, apparently this person's isolation, I don't know a lot about it. Yeah, that it seems to me If we could do this, if we could share our feelings more with each other, and just set the model of it being a healthy thing to do to carefully, sensitively just invite exploring, what we do when when, when anger arises and fear arises and and generally just try to create more of an atmosphere of permission to seek help when when there is need for help.

Yeah, that that speaks to speak to how do we support each other in our society. Thank you. find you there.

I want to take a picture.

My wife is A grade school principal. And when this happened, I texted her right away because I knew she wasn't going to know about it. I happen to be home in flipped on the computer, it's out on the internet. And shortly after it happened, the police came to her school to try to make sure everything was okay because a lot of times you have these copycat type crimes that occur. And

I will say that

it affected her very deeply. She cried a lot, because she has all sorts of young kids that she's responsible for. And I will add that I will honor Gil's request and not express any of my opinions. But I wrote the white house yesterday and you can write the White House, there's a website you can go to, and you can express your opinions there. And so I did

If anyone is interested in learning more about mindfulness in the schools, we have some fliers in the back.

Right next to the Mahapajapati statue on the left side.

Matter Hall, who's Mike over here on the side, go.

You know, one of the things I remember, Gil that you said, after the tragedy in Norway was that the community went to the, I think it was a young man's mother's home and welcomed her and, you know, basically forgave her and didn't isolate her. And, you know, the parents of children who do these things are really suffering and that was such a touch. story I just love that. And it's it's a reminder to me that you know the people who do things like this, they live in a community, there are neighbors, and how important it is to know your neighbors and to welcome them and to bring them little gifts and, you know, it's usually the people you just can't stand who need it the most the people who isolate themselves and who argue and are really difficult people to, to express understanding to it yet. They're the most important people to do this with and they're our neighbors. We all know

them.

Two things. I don't think that there's a contradiction. The research is very clear that societies such as England and Australia who have strict gun laws, the violence is much, much lower. So I don't think that's there's contradictory information about that. It's not up for grabs. The other thing is, if I look at things Historically, the idea of Common Ground intellectually sounds great. But if I look at things historically, that's not the way I see things move forward. You know, they haven't certainly it doesn't work. It certainly doesn't. It wasn't a way in with the civil rights that I was involved in the 60s. It wasn't with my parents trying to get a decent wage in the 20s. It wasn't just a matter of common ground, you had to really fight for what you wanted to because there were a lot of people that didn't want to contain a common gun agreement. So I just need Make the clear.

I think that the two aren't, don't exclude each other. I think that the civil rights movements, some of the people that are founded it like Martin Luther King was trying to be which were common ground and reach out to people's common goodness. But he realized he in doing that he had to be willing to put himself in harm's harm's way. But I think that's what he was trying to speak to. But it took time, so don't don't exclude each other. I think Common Ground doesn't mean that you don't put your life on the line for something. You appeal to people in a different way. The Great story I told us many times here, I was so moved when the woman told me I was teaching a retreat this woman occasion on retreat to tell me a story when she went to the south during the Civil Rights times, white woman who went from the north to

the south, right the time She was doing a a, she said, we had we had a demonstration. And we were standing on the street corner with signs and whatever, promoting civil rights. And these white guys showed up in a pickup truck. And they jumped out and started beating them up. So the next day they went back and stood in the same place. And the same people came over, came along and beat them up. And the next day, they went back and stood at the same place. And the same people came, she said, jumped out of there, caught their truck. And the guy was standing over her with his fist. She showed me, you know, to kind of do graphic standing over about the hitter again. And their eyes met. And the guy said, What in the world are you Doing because it's crazy right? And then they had a conversation there was no more fighting. So I like to believe that there is a common ground we can look for. But sometimes we have to risk a lot to touch it. Yeah.

I, I respect what you said about the opinions and

but there is the question in my mind whether those of us

who are touched

are the ones who were open to be touched If the ones who are close to be touched, were they really touched?

So are there people who are open and people who are closed? Yeah, so are people, maybe some people cannot be touched. But, you know, the story of the pickup truck in the civil rights workers in the in the south. it you know, it took three days for the person to be touched by the humanity of the person they were hitting. So it takes a while sometimes when people are touched in different ways and some of the differences people have our, you know, what one person thinks is being open and being moved in a good way and other person sees as being closed and they see it, you know, they accuse each other of this. But I think we stay present and strive to understand the other person. I think if we don't try to understand the other, I think it's lost. So how do we understand In the positions of the other, we try to put ourselves in their shoes and try to understand what they're trying to do. And if we do that, then maybe we can start having a conversation with them and try to understand. And sometimes we have to be willing to be changed in the conversation.

And on the personal level, I would also like to share, because this goes back to your book, issue at hand, it was dealing with anger. And I kept reading your passagen anger a couple of times, and it really affected me looking inside myself and what is causing that hurt, in my case, it was hurt. And instead of continuing to be angry with this person, II think at the personal level, I generated that common ground and sit down and wrote four paragraphs and not expository But more open to reconciliation. And the person understood and responded positively. So one I would like to thank you for writing. Thank you and till I think, at least on the person on the ground, this personal level, this common ground thing is really exists and strong. Yeah.

Yeah, I don't know if it's all yours. Thank you very much, you know, and I don't know if it's possible in all situations to find a common ground. But I think it's so wonderful that we, we begin by trying and that's, you know, our first instinct that the Buddha defined a wise person as a person who benefits themselves, benefits others and benefits both self and others. And I think it's such a beautiful definition of wisdom or wise person. I can't think of a better one Because I think the caring for each other, for ourselves and for others is important things we can do. Yes.

On the subject of communication, I read some research about some research of they took two groups of people who held opposite views, but had different power levels. So they had people in Arizona and immigrants, and then some other group, I can't remember what they were. And they were assessing how where where did the most change and the most actual listening to each other occur. And it happened when the person who was in the position of power was listening more than they were speaking and when the person who was in the underdog position was doing most of the talking, and that even the person who was like the immigrant, understood more of the position of the person in power, even though they were the one doing most of the talking. I thought that was really interesting and worthwhile keeping in mind,

lift things people is so important. I mean, I'm

I'm the chair of conflict, conflict, to call it a conflict resolution group and helps people with conflict and, and what I've seen over and over again is when people feel listened to that that's takes 90% of the conflict goes away. Even if we don't solve the conflict, the tension, the problems go away when they people really are listened to and when the people are in conflict, and even the people in the conflict resolution committee Some of them are haven't been so skilled. And when they don't listen to other people when they're nothing but help support listening, it puts fuel on the on the flames. And but when you really stop and listen, the problem with listening, that is a problem with people as people. The problem is it takes a lot of time. And so you have to be willing to spend a lot of time listening and processing. And you know, not everyone has the time not everyone wants to spend the time. But I hope we have time for each other. And people have meditate. Hopefully it'll at least have discovered the importance is to give time to themselves. And hopefully in the giving a time for themselves to meditate. They bring that to have more time for the world. It's my really my sincere hope that we are live a life that we leave this world a better place than we found it some small way that released that's our dedication was trying to try to live, to be supportive and help each other whatever we May all beings be happy. Thank you