

# 2013-04-01 The Path of Non Violence

Wed, 9/2 3:00PM • 43:29

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

people, birmingham, protest, direct action, community, purification, buddhism, letter, felt, tension, offer, long, sit, read, clergymen, negotiation, injustice, non violent, segregation, south

## SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

For me to sit here with you this evening, I hope it was nice for you to come together and community to sit in silence. It's a little bit unusual thing to prepare to do. And it was nice to hear the people coming and they're bustling and getting settled in the first little bit. And then it was nice to hear, to get quiet and peaceful and for me it felt really peaceful in here to have a room full of some 80 people or so sitting quiet things still. And I appreciated the stillness and the peace that I felt here. And I was little bit reflecting about how this kind of this level of peace maybe not dramatic, but this level of peace is something which is in short supply. For many people in the world. There is plenty of people who don't have the experience of coming in and sitting with a remote Many of you may be with strangers even, and feeling safe to close your eyes and sit still and to have to get quiet and still this way. And I wish that you know, wouldn't it be nice if we could make this kind of piece portable and take it with us and kind of go around and you know, offer it to other people in other communities. The when the Buddha taught, he conveyed to mess two messages. The first message was, what he was what he taught, the particular teachings he offered, and the second message is often overlooked. And the second message is that he taught it, what he taught and the fact that he taught and if you look only at what he taught It's very easy to look at it primarily as individual personal practice, a lot of the teachings are psychological. A lot of them are meditation, tracking your own heart, purifying your heart, bring your heart to peace. And it's one of the teachings of the Buddha and down through the ages one of the great strengths of Buddhism has been this personal aspect of the practice that it offers. And, but then, in because of the kind of sometimes because of this kind of very personal way and individualistic way, sometimes at the practice can be easily be interpreted. It blinds us to the idea that he did something else that besides of what he taught, he taught, he was in a certain kind of way he was in society he was engaged with the world of his time. And in giving engaged he offered himself he offered his teachings he kind of you know, he was portable. He walked around northern India and offered what he had to offer. And this idea of that part of what the Buddha's message is, is to offer ourselves to the world, to offer ourselves our peace, our well being our wisdom, our compassion, for the welfare of others, is a very important part of much of the Buddhist tradition. And so here we are portable, you know, can we take our piece and bring it elsewhere to places in the world where they need it? Some places needing more than we do, maybe? The I was very inspired many years ago, when I was a relatively new Zen student. And my Zen teacher said that in this little, little catchy phrase, he said, The Buddha taught the importance of sitting, sitting in meditation guide He said it was important where you sit. So the idea that, you know, you can go sit in the privacy of your room or a comfortable neighborhood. And that's one thing, certainly beneficial, hopefully. But it's another thing if you go sit in communities where it you know, it makes a different message to sit and sit. You said that you know, so we had sit ins in United States long ago, maybe part of sit ins, incidents. Yeah. So there are these demonstrated way of demonstrating and matter where you sat. So, right around now, depending how you count the years is the 50th anniversary of a very famous letter that was written in United States. It's called the letter from a Birmingham jail and it's kind

of nice to Remember, you know, 50 year anniversary so long ago? Seems like long ago, perhaps 50 years. If you're young, it's really, really a long time ago. You know, even if someone told me 50 years from when I was 3050 years before I would have kind of like gone to sleep, because you just seem like so far. I, but it's not so far either. My father in law is 85 years old. And seems like maybe almost because maybe he's coming to the end of his life. I don't know exactly what the reasons are. He's talking more about his youth. So I spent the weekend with him and he wants to spend a lot of time talking to me. And one of the things he's want to tell tell me about was when he was a teenager, and but he was a teenager in the same concentration camp as Ana Frank, same camp that she died in and he survived it and I was Long ago. And he's a very it's a very present for him very alive for him where he went through. So 50 years ago in our country, there was a quite a dramatic civil rights movement that many of us are still kind of benefiting from this happened. And my own introduction to Buddhism. My interest in Buddhism was in the wake of the civil rights movement, the United States and also the Vietnam War. I'm kind of of that generation. And there was so much violence I remember. You know, I came, I came to move here, Europe and early 60s into Los Angeles and I remember the ash from the riots and watts landing on our, our home where I lived. It's kind of dramatic thing to see and the Vietnam And so this was a kind of formative parts of my life growing up. And so when my first interest in Buddhism was trying to as a young man trying to find a way to be part of this world, and try to find a way to respond to this world of violence and war, that was such a big part of this world of mine. The the, you know, is one of the one of the important kind of catalysts for looking at Buddhism The first time was that I was an extreme pacifist in the college dorms. And we were all in draft age, and the back then we still have the draft. And so, it was possible that any one of us young men that 18 year old men in college, but enter the We got this letter saying you are drafted, go to Vietnam shoot people. So this was not what I wasn't going to do, because I was a pacifist. And so we would have these very intense arguments and discussions in the dorms late way into the night about what our relationship was to the Vietnam War Two was going on in United States. And, and because I was extreme pacifist, I had to kind of really work out my, my understanding my relationship to this and for me, being a pacifist was not someone who was you know, a passive, you know, person but rather someone who was willing to put their life on the line and demonstration for something they believed in for injustice. And I was afraid of doing that. Like, I felt like I was not able to do it so well or at all, and so I was looking for something that would help me work through my whatever fear I had. Anxiety had that would prevent me from living my ideals. So I looked around, looked around and, and, and somehow I can't tell you why. But my intuition was that Buddhist practice, what the Buddha taught, the inner technology and our practices of Buddhism offered a way to sit with oneself, to look at oneself, and to clarify and work out the fear that I that I felt, so that I could engage in the world in a way that I thought would be meaningful. So, you know, there's so that's the background that I came to Buddhism from initially was as I attempt to try to be in the world not to go away from the world, the in the world better. So now we come to the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King's famous letter. And Martin Luther King is one of my great heroes.

Because partly because of his non violent stand for social justice, fighting injustice, equality, Buddha, Gandhi and Martin Luther King were a great company for heroes. And in 1963, he was invited to Birmingham, where there already started a series of non violent protests, the segregation of that town. And according to him and others, it was the most segregated city in the country. And they were bombings of homes of African Americans, people people died. The local sheriff was one of the most notoriously anti mentors racist in the country at that time. And the governor of that state was also, you know, at war with not only African America But also with a white house because he wanted to protest that desegregation of the country back then. And it was a pretty challenging time. And it's good to remember these things for us. Because, you know, we've come a long way in 50 years, landscape has changed a lot here, for most of us, but it's not the same rest of the world. And so, Martha King was invited to come in and try to figure out what to do how to respond. And there was an injunction that if

they went, if they protested that they would be arrested. And so they decided they would protest anyway, knowing they'd be arrested. So he left the church and Good Friday, and to march down the street, and they were going to go and do sit ins in front of the churches and the places of business bringing them to a place of their places that were segregated. African Americans couldn't go into churches, and that's something and then the To me that the churches are closed. And so they didn't go very far down the road apparently, until they get arrested. They said they were gonna arrest him. And so they did. And they put him in jail, and apparently solitary confinement. And apparently there was a newspaper there. And so he was able to write this amazing letter on the margins of the newspaper. And then his lawyer started coming to see him and, and slowly, I guess the tore the edges of the newspaper or something and was able to smuggle the pieces of the newspaper out. And then some assistant of lawyer and lawyer law firm, took the puzzle and pieced it all back together again. And we have this wonderful letter and the letter was written to a group of clergymen 1213 clergyman in Birmingham, who had written a letter protesting his protesting as saying was not a proper from someone from the Outside outside community coming to Birmingham to do this was a you know, a local matter and was not right to come from outside to come from outside to come in and mess you know get nosy get involved in local problems and that according to be patient and then negotiate and be part of conversations and there was no other way of doing this not this kind of extremist approach of sitting down in front of churches and your suit and tie. My dear fellow clergymen well confined here in the Birmingham City jail. I came across your recent statement calling my present activities unwise and untimely. seldom do I pause to answer criticism of my work and ideas. But since I feel that you are a man of genuine good will, and as your criticisms are sincerely set forth, I want to try to answer your statements and what I hope will be patient In reasonable terms, isn't a great way to begin a letter, you know, he's kind of reaching out and mean goodwill and praising them and kind of creating a kind of a sense of, you know, goodwill before, you know, you're gonna counter them. Somehow the image of him sitting in I don't know if he sat in jail and his suit and tie but somehow the image of him sitting in his jail, a suit and tie and writing distance, expressing of goodwill to the people who were upset with him. I think I think I should indicate why I'm here in Birmingham, since you've been influenced by the view which argues against, quote, outsiders coming in. I along with several members of my staff, and here because I was invited here. I'm here because I have organizational ties here. More but more basically, I am in Birmingham, because injustice is here.

Moreover, I'm cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. Never again. Can we afford to live in the narrow, provincial, outside agitator idea? Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds. You deplore the demonstrations taking place in Birmingham. But your statement I'm sorry to say fails to express a similar concern for the conditions that brought about The demonstrations, I'm sure that none of you would want to rest content with a superficial kind of social analysis that deals merely with the effects and does not grapple with the underlying causes. It is unfortunate that demonstrations are taking place in Birmingham, but is even more unfortunate that the city's white power structure left the Negro community with no alternative. In any nonviolent campaign there are four basic steps. I read this and wondered if I could fit it into the Four Noble Truths. But it was only a half successful. In any non violent campaign, there are four basic steps collection of the facts to determine whether injustice exist. That's the first noble truth negotiation. Self purification, that's a third noble truth and then direct action. They So, anyway, I thought this was a great list. In any nonviolent campaign, there are four basic steps, collection of the facts, negotiation, self purification and direct action, this idea of self purification. This seems really, really, really important. You'll see more why we have gone through. We have gone through these steps. There can be no

gainsaying the fact that racial injustice and gulfs this community, bring and make Birmingham is probably the most thoroughly segregated city in the United States. Its ugly record of brutality is widely known niggers have experienced grossly unjust treatment in the courts. There have been more unsolved bombings of Negro homes and churches in Birmingham than any other city in the nation. These are hard, brutal facts of the case. On the basis of these conditions and they grow leaders sought to negotiate with the city fathers but the latter consistent refused to engage in good faith negotiation. Then last September came the opportunity to talk with leaders of the Birmingham script. As in so many past experiences, our hopes have been blasted. And the shadow of deep, deep disappointment settled upon us. We had no alternative except to prepare for direct action, whereby we would present our very bodies as a means of laying our case before the conscience of the local and national community, that something to present our very bodies as a means of laying our case. So he knew that there was no physical danger, maybe to his life. mindful of the difficulties involved, we decided to undertake a process of self purification. We began a series of workshops on non violence, and we repeatedly asked ourselves, are you able to accept blows without retaliating? Are you able to endure the ordeal jail. That's something to prepare for that. You know, it's one thing to say that you can kind of, you know, let's go out and be nonviolent protest. And, and but really know that there's going to be violence against you expected and then prepare is how do you prepare yourself for that? Have you ever wondered what they did? It's quite something people want to do that they have that kind of motivation, it's a lot easier to want to fight, it's a lot easier to get a gun and you know, feel like you can just, you know, shoot, but to do this kind of preparation and that kind of strength of character that comes to then show up and be willing to take clothes and not react to retaliate. That's a quite an amazing thing, not only in terms of courage and self purification, but also the kind of wisdom that sees that how important it is to do it.

I'll tell you a story. I told someone today. And hopefully it's a story which doesn't belittle the magnitude of what happen in Birmingham, but it's the choices we make about how we respond to things. So we're not the so with my, you know, I'm, you know, I was kind of a bumbling parent with my first kid. And so sometimes, you know, that I felt was necessary to use my strong voice. It basically had no, you know, strong voice to get his attention. And so it seemed to be successful I got you know, I would use it and behavior with stuff that was great. Very good. Good parenting. I want to use in extreme situations. Until the day I heard my son used that same tone of voice on his younger brother. And then I went, Oh my god, what have I done? What do we do so to Paris If you're self purification, you may well ask why direct action? Why since marches and so forth, is in negotiation a better path. You are quite right in calling for negotiation. Indeed, this is the very purpose of direct action. nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such attention that a community which has consistently constantly refused to negotiate, is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue, that it can no longer be ignored. My citing the creation of tension as part of the work of the nonviolent resistor may sound rather shocking. But I must confess that I'm not afraid of the word tension. I am earnestly opposed. I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there's a type of constructive non violent, non violent tension Which is necessary for growth. Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the minds that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, we must see the need for non violent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men raise rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood. This is a good good thing for Buddhists to reflect on because Buddhist cultures not all of them by any means, but enough of them that I've seen tend to be conflict avoidant. And, you know, I think that it's a problem. Certainly there's value and not get you know, having easy conflict and, but to be to avoid conflict, creative conflict, to avoid the challenges we have between each other because we're trying To be polite or kind does a disservice to everyone I think. And so there is a so there's difference here makes the Sigmund violent tension, angry tension, hostile tension and, and then the creative tension that helps all of us



move forward and clarify what's going on. The purpose of our direct action program is to create a situation so crisis packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation. I therefore concur with you in your call for negotiation. Too long has our beloved Southland been bogged down in a tragic effort to live in monologue rather than dialogue. I was kind of when I read this, I was kind of touched that he called it our build love itself land. I myself had a lot of prejudice against the South growing up. I grew up in California, right and I was like, you know, how could they do those things? Those people as a white people, I just felt like an awful place just kind of in my mind. I apologize any computer from the south but you know, I had This kind of strong kind of prejudice of my own and then to read Martin Luther King's in my our beloved Southland. One of the basic points in your statement is that the action that I and my associates have taken bring him his untimely replies to that. By friends, I must say that you that we have not made a single gain with our civil rights without determined legal and nonviolent pressure. lamentably, it is an historical fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily. Individuals may see the moral light and voluntarily give up their unjust posture. But as Reinhold neighbour has reminded us, groups tend to be more tend to be more immoral than individuals.

We know through painful experience that freedom is never volunteer. given by the oppressor, it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I've not yet to engage in a direct action campaign that was well timed, quote. In the view of though, well timed in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I've heard the word wait. It rings in the ears of every negro with piercing familiarity. This weight is almost as as almost always meant never. We've come to see with one of our distinguished jurists that quote, the justice to long delayed is justice denied. We waited for more than 340 years for a constitutional and God given rights. The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with just like speed toward gaining political independence. We we stiff creep at horses budgie paced towards gaining a cup of coffee at a lunch counter. Perhaps it's easy for those who have never felt the stinging, stinging bark of segregation to say wait. But when you have seen vicious mobs Lynch your mothers and fathers as well and drown your sisters and brothers at whim. When you've seen hate filled policemen curse kick can even kill your black brothers and sisters. When you see the vast majority of your 20 million digger brothers smothering and airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society, when you suddenly find your tongue twisted in your speech, stammering as you speak to explain, as you seek to explain to your six year old daughter, why she can't go to the public museum newsman park that had just been advertised on television and see tears welling up in her eyes when she's told that fun town is closed to color children and see ominous clouds of inferiority begin To form Andrew, in your little mental sky and see you're beginning to distort your personality by developing an unconscious bitterness towards white people. When you have to concoct an act concoct an answer for his five year old son, he was asking, Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean when you take a cross country drive and find it necessary to sleep at night after night, and uncomfortable corners of your automobile, because no motel will accept you when you're ameliorated day in and day out by a nagging sign reading white and colored.

Then he goes on and Dan.

I hope you were able to ace the distinct I'm trying to point out, in no sense to advocate evading or defying the law. As with the rabid segregationists, that would lead to anarchy. One who breaks an unjust law must do so openly, lovingly, and with a willingness to accept the penalty. Isn't this interesting? So he is going to protest the break the law and his nonviolent protest. He says you need to do it openly and lovingly. I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells them is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over it's injustice is in reality, expressing the highest respect for law goes on and on with analysis of just an unjust laws. I speak of our activity and berming you speak of our activity in

Birmingham as extreme. At first, I was rather disappointed that fellow clergymen would see my knowledge Violent efforts is those of an extremist. I began thinking about the fact that that I stand in the middle of two opposing forces in the Negro community. One is a force of complacency, made up in part of the Negroes who as a result of long years of oppression, are so drained of self respect, and a sense of sense of somebody, somebody notice that they have adjusted to segregation. And in part of a few of middle class Negroes who because of a degree of academic and economic security, and because in some ways they profit by segregation, have become insensitive to the problems of the masses. The other forest is one of bitterness and hatred, and it comes perilously close to advocating violence. It is expressed in various black nationalist groups that are springing up around the nation, the largest and best known being Elia Muhammad's Muslim movement. nourished by the negress frustration over the continued existence of racial discrimination This movement is made up of people who have lost faith in America who have absolutely repudiated Christianity, and who have concluded that the white man is an incorrigible devil. I've tried to stand between these two forces, saying that we need to emulate neither that do nothing ism, of the complacent or the hatred and despair of the black nationalist. For there is a more excellent way of love and nonviolent protest.

I wish to commend the Negro sinners and demonstrators of Birmingham for their sublime courage, their willingness to suffer and their amazing discipline in the midst of great provocation. One day, the South will recognize it's great, it's real heroes. It will be the James Meredith's with a noble sense of purpose that enables them to face cheering and hostile mobs. With the agonizing loneliness that characterizes the life of the pioneer.

And he goes on, he says, In the end, if I've said there's a long letter, this is only two excerpts from it. If I said anything in this letter that overstates the truth, and indicates an unreasonable impatience, I beg you to forgive me. And nice to if I've said anything that understates the truth and indicates my having patience that allows me to settle for anything less than brotherhood. I beg God to forgive me. So I think here is his like, he's also offering his willingness to talk and to look at his own faults and, you know, be in negotiation being discussion. I hope this letter finds you strong in faith. I also hope that circumstances will soon make it possible for me to meet each of you. Not as an instance In, in degree machinists, or civil rights leader, but as a fellow clergyman and a Christian brother, but it's all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away. And the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear drenched communities. And in some not too distant tomorrow, the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their Sicilian beauty years for the cause of peace, Martin Luther King, Jr. So, that was a long thing to read. I hope it was okay. But I thought it was I offer it to you, not just as a memory of what happened here 50 years ago and the significance and the wisdom of this man what he had to offer, but also as a, as an expression of the kind of Dharma practice or practice of liberation that I Hope that Buddhist practice is about as well. It's possible to trace a little bit the teachings of Martin Luther King's teachings on non violence through Gandhi back into the ancient dharmic roots of India to Buddhism and Jainism and other places where they had the teachings of non violence. Gandhi himself was inspired by that long history in India and Martin Luther King was inspired by him. So, what is our practice for? What is our life for? And each person is going to ask that for themselves and there's not a right or wrong answer. But I believe that the practice of sitting in meditation, the ability to discover peace, they're going to resolve the tensions and divisions within ourselves is a phenomenal thing. To offer to our wider community prepares us, does a self work purification. That, you know, is something you know is the prepares us to be able to respond to our neighbors, our communities in important ways. And I think it's a bit of a pity. It's like a terribly underused resources. If Buddhist practitioners do all this work of self purification, and then just sit around and don't, don't use it. So there's many ways of using it, of course, doesn't have to look like with Martin Luther King did. But I would like to adopt Martha King as one of the patron saints of Buddhism. And to,

to be there in the pantheon of Buddhist saints, Buddhist heroes, to challenge us to consider what our practice is about what our lives are about, and what the potential is for what we can do with this practice and the piece that we can offer Our world. So probably didn't expect this tonight. So I hope it was okay. But, you know, the risk for all of us is that when I come down here I've talked about what's on my heart. So is that enough or is anybody want to make any comments or questions? Yes, please. There may be people use the mic please.

He has a he has a T shirt that says freedom on it.

It says free freedom to roam. It's Yeah, the whole thing about that. But I just wanted to say that I first I want to say thank you for bringing that

last time I heard that

it's just very emotional for me right now because last time I heard that was read to me by my grandmother.

When I was 16.

She got that she led protests and movements in Palo Alto to allow black people to go to like this rinconada Park, which they couldn't back then. And

she took me into those protests has a very young

and

oh, and this letter was written and came out. She came by our high school Palo Alto High School, and she read that letter aloud to our history class. She asked to read this. And she always, you know, she directly taught me at that time that she's a practicing Catholic and she said that all this religion and everything you're doing is so that you can be touched. By the divine so that you don't know the divine and you can show the next person

they too are divine.

And until all people are equal, and no one is equal, no one is free. She said to me, then she's a long toss me She will tell me so Sunday you will be asked to go and kill someone and they will tell you it's for your freedom. And that did come to pass. And I was like you I was not gonna go do that. And let protest here in town and Stanford etc to stop and you know, burn your draft card, etc. We're not going to do this. This is not how we're going to solve our problems.

And

when that occurred, shake came with me to Stanford, late one of those protests and sat where we burned out draft cards. And this you know, at that time about his seven year old grandmother sat with me and she was That's right.

You have to be

you have to be willing to stand firm and take the consequences of your actions. And

so

I just, that was just so morning is to hear that tonight is brought back a lot for me until

this, thank you and

thank you for telling us a lot and it brought brought it all you know, it brought it home right here to our community. A local, not just the South. straight back in the back

I was on the San Mateo coast in by Davenport yesterday, suffer cup of coffee and they had a big picture of Cesar Chavez.

And we were told that

that was Cesar Chavez day. Yes. March 31. And it was, I was thinking of that when you were reading at that he was again was another person who followed that

nonviolence

thought that too and I was thinking about reading this was Chavez's being remembered these days also yesterday. And he also had you know, as he has a local connection here, he was kind of discovered in a way and are promoted or coming promoted, but kind of encouraged apparently was a very shy young man here in LA Altos Hills by people who owned what now called hidden villa. Are they called the duvet next?

Okay, well, yes more. One more.

I'm from the south and the western edge of the South but it's still the South. And I'm old enough to remember the whites and coloureds signs segregating in department downtown department stores, the water fountains in the bathrooms and movie theaters and so forth.

And, but, but

but I do feel quite saddened every time I hear some California expressing something critical or down putting of Texas south in general because I go back about once a year to visit family and I am always strongly struck by even though the fact that almost everyone there votes differently from almost everyone in this room. I mean, complete opposite. Yet the people there are incredibly generous they have been they were they were my dad's neighbors who didn't know him at all. helped him a lot and now they're doing the same for different people but incredibly generous to my to my mother, who they don't know or didn't at first.

Just because just because she needs help.

I saw that I went to I went to travel Through the south and early 70s, I had this prejudice about the South because of what I you know, from a distance and I was stunned by how friendly many of the



white people were that I met. I had no idea and I didn't, wasn't expecting it. And, but, you know, but I met other white people too, that, you know, I felt lucky to get out alive. Mentally, I think there was one one situation where I was traveling, this guy who was a comedian, natural comedian, and because of his amazing capacity for comedy, got us out of what was certainly going to be violence, because I was a hippie. And hippies didn't go very well with rednecks. And, and so the, the, the, the juxtaposition of these very friendly people, and this capacity for racism was quite quite an interesting kind of mix. Out of those two, how do they work together? So yeah, how does that the psychology of that is, you know, something to consider.

And I think it's changed some Oh yeah.

change a lot. The world countries changed a lot but it could change some more.

Great. Thank you all very much for being willing to listen to this.