

2013-08-18 Compassion Without A Basis

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SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdaal

The motivation for this talk today is the topic of compassion. But it's possible that if I hadn't told you that you wouldn't know. So you might want to keep this in mind.

So there is a fable. I don't know where it's from, but there's a fable of a monarch who wanted to find the wisest person in the realm. And so had the Royal ministers round up for the people that many that we consider kind of the wisest of the realm and went to find out which one was the wisest These were rounded up. And they were thrown into the Royal dungeon. And we're told that unless they found a way out and three or four hours, it would be off with their heads. And with that, the door was slammed shut, and they were left inside the dungeon. And when they looked at the door, it had a big complicated lock, combination of combinations and keyholes and whatever else puzzles and on the floor next to the door was a box of tools. So there's three of them began studying the lock. bringing out the tools, tinkering with a lock trying to figure out how this lock worked. One of them set back on the back wall of the dungeon and just rested looking at the door. And the three they were trying to figure out the luck as that hour, two hours went by and time was running out you could imagine all for their heads they heard it. And so one of them got really angry. Furious, the monarch, the injustice of it all. The other became really afraid and started running around the room like a trapped rat. The third became completely depressed, ready to give up, it's hopeless and the fourth, calmly looking at the door. And when the time got close to the time, three hours were up, the one sitting down Just got up and walked to the door and pushed it open. Because it had never been locked, there was a lock on the door. But they never considered the fact that that maybe the door wasn't locked to begin with just this thing, big thing hanging on it. So the basis of the activities investigation, that problem solving the basis of the emotional life of the first three was based on the notion of there's a lock, there's a problem here that has to be solved. We could say maybe the fourth one didn't see a problem. Maybe the fourth one understood something wasn't caught by the issue in the same way. And so this idea that our thinking or the way we see the world and see ourselves has A basis and that that basis by which we see our life and see the world might not be an accurate basis, we might not be seeing things accurately. And it's possible to free ourselves from these inaccurate base this is base I basis and see things in a very different way is the premise of Buddhism. And its premise which is often overlooked, or difficult to really grasp or understand. Because it's very hard to step out of our usual way of thinking. And imagine that there's any other way. And so even if we might hear a Buddhist teachings, it's incorporated into our existing way of thinking. And sometimes it's helpful, the Buddhist teachings, but it's keeps us in the old basis. It's all the kind of issues that are there. And so even the practice of mindfulness, as powerful and significant is can be, is sometimes incorporated into the old thinking. And it might make us more. We're capable, more functional, more balanced, going through the world in the old way of thinking.

But mindfulness wasn't designed to make us calmer, more peaceful, in the old basis of thinking it was designed to offer us a radically different, I could say basis for how we see the world and see that see ourselves. But I think the preferred way and Buddhism is to not so much say it's an alternative basis, but to be without a basis. So what's that? And so it's a whole different, you know, a shift and some people might say a paradigm shift. It's involves and it's a hard to see a paradigm shift is we're kind of caught in one. I saw this this weekend I went to the Exploratorium with my 10 year old son, and there was a puzzle. It's very simple puzzle. And if I can describe it, there was a picture of two horses galloping. And they were, you know, you saw the side and they were kind of just one was galloping one direction or the other direction and they were kind of feet two feet. And then there was a plank of wood that had two riders on it. And you had to figure out how the way the riders are positioned, how to place the plank with the riders on top of the flat one picture of two horses, so that they would be the riders we will be riding horses and what the proposal requires was not to try to get the riders to ride the horses as they were seen as you saw them, but rather the way that you could turn the plank with the riders, 90 degrees and overlay part of the horses in such a way that the head of one became the head of one of the but to the other horse became one horse. So that's probably explained that very well but you had to kind of see the whole thing you have to kind of not see the puzzle as being solving the horses there. Were there. You have to make new horses to make the puzzle work. Or they're famous, you know, puzzle of the nine dots in a box, right? How do you get with three lines that connect all the dots where you have to leave the box and come back right? So once you see it, it's obvious. Once you see that the old way of thinking is not the way to solve the problem. There's no other way of seeing it then it's obvious from then on, and it becomes boring. pretty quick. So Buddhism is pointing to this other way, other basis, and perhaps it doesn't make it perhaps it's pointless to talk about it. Maybe there's no way of kind of understanding with that kind of thing. But so, you know, so I look at my life. And I could see that looking back the history of my life that I built my life at various times, upon certain basis. It's all my thinking, my problem solving my everything was upon that. And, and one of the interesting moments I had was a second year in college. And I would became very self conscious or aware of how much I was concerned about how other people saw me. It was like really kind of, you know, I think much of my thinking where if I could not think that way, if I saw Someone will be thinking, Well how am I how are they judging me? How are they seeing me and all that? And it was kind of very painful to live this way. And then I was been riding my bike through the college town. And I thought what would it be like if I was invisible so I imagined myself invisible. I think I did a pretty good job. Because then I I kind of invisible they can't, they can't see me. If they can't see me, they can't judge me. And I got a feel a very different way of being in the world I felt much freer and happier.

Or when I was younger, I went the other way. When I was 19, I went to I guess around the same time I went to Morocco. And after a while of being in Morocco, I noticed that my mind there was a part of my mind that was fresher. more relaxed or open or something different, I could tell something different. And I kind of tried to understand what it was. And I realized that what it was, was the men back then in Morocco, where you love us where these kind of long gowns kind of thing. And I'd never been in a culture where men didn't wear trousers and this kind of Western clothes like this. And I had no basis upon which to judge them the way I did and back in the US today, where I would be concerned with that, that guy's a jock, that guy's a businessman, that guy is this I had all these categories, I would immediately kind of put people in categories. I knew them because of how they were dressed. And I couldn't do that in Morocco because I hadn't, you know, I didn't know what that meant. Maybe it meant something in Morocco, but I couldn't tell. And I could feel the relaxation of not having this ideation this conceptualization is judging going on, I was free for temporarily have a basis of thinking. For a while, the basis of my thinking was insecurity, variety, different kinds of insecurity. So how I saw the world was through the filter of solving that insecurity. And so, you know, everything was about that. Until I discovered that I didn't have to be thinking or considering myself as being insecure. I might be. I mean,

you know, it's pretty easy to think it's very easy if you want to think that your life is insecure. It's very easy to do that. In fact, some Buddhist teachers love to tell you your life is really insecure. If you only knew. And if you're if your basis of thinking about life is already insecure, then it just adds Fire gasoline to the fire right? But is it necessary to keep that as a basis, always problems always solving trying to fix the problem. The one of the basis for that is has to do with self identity that we have in it we weave in somehow from our family or society or life experiences. We have an idea about who we are. And it's there as a basis for all our thinking was kind of invisible. It's kind of like the background or it's the grammar for how we think we might know how we're thinking but we don't see the grammar that constructs it. So the grammar there's a subject there's me and I'm this way. And there could be a lot of different things that we carry with us. There I've gone through a whole cornucopia of added In my lifetime of who I think I am, and then everything's about, you know, trying to fit that are tied that or reinforce that, or defend that, or solve that, or do something with that, that identity, that idea of who I am. And with that identity of who I am, comes the identity of who other people are from self and others, and I'm this way or that way. And, and it could seem very obvious, it can seem like that's just completely natural part of life to be this way, because maybe the family grew up we have a family identity or an ethnic identity or national identity that is been been told this is important to have. It's how we understand ourselves, how we understand ourselves against the rest of the world. So we need to keep that going and defend it and keep it and all that. And there's nothing wrong with any most identities means now ethnic identities, national identities, all kinds of identities. But when we see it as a basis of our thinking and our worldview, do we see it as optional or not? Do we pick it up and evolve with it when it's useful? Or do we is it always there as the orientation the way we understand our life?

So, you know, I've had those things. I was born in a foreign country and, and when my, when I was in my teenage years, maybe 20s, the idea of not being an American. Not being in the United States was an important part of my identity, partly because of the Vietnam War and what America was doing, like, Oh, you know, and so, I am here with her. In 1974. I went to the New Year's Eve Grateful Dead concert in San Francisco. That was kind of interesting. And but the big surprise when I got there and saw these Grateful Dead, I was kind of shocked. They're American. They're like, 100% I couldn't believe how American they were. They were more American than hippies or whatever, you know, it's like, wow, you know, because I hadn't, you know, somehow I hadn't I hadn't identified didn't want identify with that park, you know, so and, and I suppose a lot of the hippies are that time, that the fact that the Grateful Dead were American was not the identity they saw them through, they saw them to the counterculture, but because where I came from myself in a certain way.

So we have identities, you know, all kinds of identities, ideas of who we are, we operate under. And these get very, very subtle, so subtle that sometimes to even the idea that I am, that I exist is a basis of thinking basic orientation basis of part of this problem solving we're doing. And of course you exist, right? And of course, we have to kind of find our way of life. So because we exist because it's find our way in life, it seems Of course, we should be thinking this way of course, we should be problem solving this way. This is how it this is how it is. And the idea of not problem solving or not orienting that way. If you feel insecure the idea of not thinking about how to be safe. It just produces more fear just it's inconceivable like why why why would you do that? Well, how do you find your way you're not safe then. Or if you know, if you're not only your life has been built on having an entity, but your family and society has done a great job in cooperating and insisting you have an identity. They trick you into as an identity, they treat you a certain way. So you're that kind of person. And if everyone's caught conspiring to see you that way, it's you know, it's inconceivable not to be that way. In fact, if you're not that way, don't think that way. Again, you're not safe, you're not cooperating with the status quo. And you know, where are you? And just like those, the wise men, the three first Wiseman all these things, our identity, our orientations, our desires, our fears, all these things that can create the basis of our thinking and our

approach can stimulate our emotional life and our emotional life can be in you know, quite activated because our identity is threatened. Because, you know if did get it if getting having our desires fulfilled is what seems important. Then if our desires are not satisfied, it could be frustrating angry, we can get depressed and everything. So the question for Buddhist practitioners are the issue one of the top tasks the Buddhist practitioner is to understand what is the basis upon which I base my life? What is the view the opinion the idea of what's important to who I am or what's the problem I have in my life? Do we understand that basis? And then it's very easy then if you understand it, to address the problem in the old paradigm. I have an identity, which is not serving me. And I better become the person who doesn't have the identity. And then you tie yourself in knots trying to be the person who doesn't have the identity, right? And not seeing the paradox of that.

So, so in in the practice of mindfulness to, we could practice meditation practice or mindfulness practice. The very strong sense that I'm the one who's doing it and I'm doing it for certain purposes I'm doing it for in order to attain solve my my problems. But if my problem stems from some kind of unexamined basis, it's possible that the mindfulness will help you cope better in your life and things are more comfortable and nicer and you have more wisdom, understanding what's going on, but it's never addressed. The practice never turns around and goes deep inside to address this the core thing. So one of the teachings of Zen That is very fond of it more like a cliché, is that practice involves taking the backward step. or practice involves taking the mirror of attention and turning it around 180 degrees to be able to look deep back down inside, below the ways in which we objectify the world way in which we're trying to solve our problems, the ways in which you're trying to run away from our pain. Pain is one of these bases upon which everything else kind of mushrooms from react to pain. So to go back and look at the look behind deeply so it gives you a little example. Occasionally, there are people who are very motivated for the to find a meaning of their life. They're searching for the meaning of life. If you turn a take it take the backward step and look back You wouldn't be trying to answer the question, what's the meaning of my life? But rather you would look into why am I asking this question? what's motivating the question? And I but my theory is that the stronger the drive is to search for the meaning for life, the more likely the basis for that is fear, or some kind of personal pain trying to deal with. And what happens if instead of solving the question of the meaning of life, you solve the fear or you dissolve the fear or dissolve the pain. The issue of meaning of life still remains. But it maybe doesn't have the same importance anymore. It's like, Oh, you know, I'll take it or leave it. You know, it's because the emotional basis of our life is no longer dependent and solving it that way.

So, if if, you know, if you have if you keep your hand in a fist the whole time, then and that's all, you know, then the problem might be the thing is you're constantly orienting your life around having a fist and how do you manage to get through your life with a fist? And how do you get things done with a fist and, you know, it's you can probably do a lot with a fist, you know. But then, if you realize you don't need to have a fist, you can open your hand then then it's a whole different world that we're living in. So the same thing with our we have fists in our hearts and our minds are contracted or tight in various ways. And if we assume that the inner contraction the inner tightness is the way things are supposed to be, then the task would be to how to figure out go through life, with that fist in the heart with that contraction or that pain. But the task of practice is to open that hand of the heart that the you know, to open the fist of the heart. And to see there's another way. And here's where it's kind of inconceivable. This realm because it doesn't belong. This realm doesn't belong to concepts. So it's kind of like it's it. If you apologize for this invention of a word. It's unfixable. You imagine a light hand without fists, right? It doesn't. A fist is where does it fisco when you open your hand, what's the existential status of the fist when you open your hand? You know where to go. Poof. I'm a magician. That's, you know, you can make him You know, the sleight of hand? The fist is gone.

So it's inconceivable because isn't doesn't belong to the world of concepts doesn't work log to the world of thinking about, in fact thinking about freedom thinking about this, letting go. Releasing the fist is obvious. If you think about letting go the fist, that's not like going, that's not letting go of the fist, right? So thinking about letting go the fist in your heart is not letting go. And so it's inconceivable what this is like. Because what it's like doesn't belong to the world of concepts of conceiving. And so it's a kind Like what? Well, where do I stand? What do I do, man? I don't know any other way. That's That's all I've known my whole life. So it's inconceivable. I have to concede a bit if I can't conceive of it, how do I know I'm safe? I'm not gonna conceal but how do I know I can find my way through life.

So if I, if I'm kind of like this bell that I'm holding, and I'm really clutching tight to me. And I use me as a sledgehammer to get what I want in the world. So, you know, I get that. Or if I hold on tight and hold it close in, I'm not gonna you know opened up to anybody I get that right and but if I kind of figure out a variety of things, do some mindfulness practice, learn to relax a little bit learn not to be so caught up in ideas. Learn to be economist above my anger not be so caught up in my concepts and ideas fit into society and the way society wants us to fit in nicely. And then society and I meet and it's it's night are great. Now I'm one of the attractive people. And this is great being attractive person is one of the basis of ordering very important basis of life. Some people oriented their whole basis orientation becoming attractive. So what I did it then mindfulness helped some of the world's Magazines now that are coming out around mindfulness, and the pictures of it, give that impression that you'll be a very attractive person. I'll be wearing yoga clothes. So, but as much as this as nice and wonderful. It's, you know, it no guarantee it's going to stay this way. You know? And anytime, you know, because there's uncertainty principle you know, all kinds of things can happen, right? You know, and so what do you do, you know, hide the self, make a bigger self get richer, bigger house. You know, take martial arts so you can learn more, get a PhD in Buddhism, do something right to kind of like, you know, do this do something good with this thing, right? But there's another option and this is the option in Buddhism the chorus option. And so look what happened. So if I have the striker in my right hand and the bell on the left, it does that right.

Put the bell down. There's nothing in my left hand but a striker is still in my right hand strikers in the world. And I hit to the striker.

It doesn't hit anything, nothing there to hit.

It's possible to make the mod so it's possible for the mind, the mind, the heart, the inner life when it's based on a big When it's founded on some principle, idea, ideation, identity, desires, fears and all these things. Then the heart the mind becomes a lightning rod.

It's possible for the mind to be like an endless, empty, clear sky. And this paradigm shift of Buddhism is to go from having a mind which is a lightning rod. For something that's going to hit it come along and hit and have a mind which is like an empty sky. So if I have an identity, if I need to be an attractive person, and I'm tractable, by the close I wear and some of you really don't like men who wear blue shirts. And you're like me No. So what happens is that you're telling me you know, men with blue shirts are just lousy then that those words come like lightning. And I have a rod up. I have this basis this idea this mediation, and it's going to hit that idea. Oh, no. This is the very thing I was most afraid of coming to IMC today that someone was going to judge me for my clothes. This proves it proves it. So next time we're going to come when some other way I won't even come at all. It's too dangerous. So I'm kind of in this world. But if I don't that thinking and have no thoughts at all, about what you think about my clothes, I just don't you know, it's not not concern the mind. I don't know. I don't care. I don't not care even not caring as it can be based on a basis. This this paradigm shift, paradigm shift doesn't even

involve not caring. Just just not there. Then you might tell me that, you know, men with blue shirts are lousy. And it's kind of like it just those words still occur they heard in the mind, but rather than hitting my lightning rod, they just go right through. There's nowhere they land. They're where they touch. So this has to do with compassion. There was never the beginning I said this talk was about compassion. Compassion is a beautiful, quality, important aspect of life. Empathy is very, very beautiful and wonderful. It's one of the great treasures of human life is that people have can have empathy for each other and understood And feel what's going on. But that capacity of empathy is a world of difference. If the empathy the compassion is experienced it in the world of having a basis, the world of these identity and ideas and fears and kind of concepts by which, implicitly, sometimes unconsciously, or organizing our life versus compassion is operating in a mind that has no basis. And one of the basis that and one of the basis is that compassion and empathy can operate under as many of them but is, I am the one who's experiencing someone suffering. Of course, it's you if you're experiencing it, but it's not an innocent thing to say. I'm the one who's experiencing it and chances As soon as you say I'm the one experiencing it or operating that way, it comes as a magnet for all kinds of other ideas you have. But what it means to be I to be me, I'm responsible, I have to look a certain way, I have to respond a certain way. This is going to impact my rest of my life. I can't open to this because there's to demand just on and on the list of things. Or I have a responsibility. This means a lot, you know, all kinds of stuff. And again, part of the way that compassion can be a drain is some of these bases and ideas that we have that how we pick it up and relate to it are quite challenging. And then it's possible to get become wise about this compassionate world and stay in the world of the basis. But just rearrange the deck chairs on the Titanic so it's more comfortable as you go down. You know, just kind of make make it work in a more conventional way and make it work for the society you're in or something But it's a world of difference, to have compassion in the heart that is like an empty sky. They have to experience compassion without the self self identity rising up to meet that. It's a world of difference, a whole paradigm shift.

To not take anonymous personal responsibility or see it through the filter of me myself in mind. I have to do this, it's up to me, this is happening to me. Even the idea is happening to me, I'm experiencing someone's pain is extra it's part of the old basis. So this radical aspect of Buddhism is pointing to this possibility of being in the world, experiencing the world experiencing what goes on and being alert and present to it. Which is pretty amazing when people can be that way. But have it kind of not have it hit a lightning rod not have it, touch a basis not have a touched to let it be experienced in the inconceivable capacity of the mind the capacity of the mind that doesn't have to think exactly about it, they still think but that part of you doesn't have to relate it to a basis to a worldview to an assumption, to ideations to concepts to all this stuff. It doesn't have to see it even from the point of view of self versus other. You're suffering and I'm experience I'm experiencing your suffering. Some people will describe this alternative paradigm as being the subject and object falls away. Your suffering is my suffering, just there's no difference. And this new paradigm of Buddhism of liberation of liberated heart This is where it gets even more things tricky for the old paradigm to appreciate. It's kind of like there is no problem. There's no problem here. It's possible to be present for someone and feel the old feelings of pain, sharing their pain, having compassion. let it wash through In fact, the more free or less overlay of concepts you have, my experience has been the more fully you feel in the world. But it becomes cleaner. And so and so there. So it's isn't like a radical. Isn't this like a terrible idea that you can experience as someone suffering, feel compassion, and not see it as a problem? I mean, isn't that like awful? Doesn't that make you a bad person? In the old paradigm, in the way that the thinking of self and AI ideas of what you should be, it does make you kind of a bad person kind of. But hopefully you get tired of the old paradigm. So what is it to have compassion to be present and not see a problem?

What I see is that what it leaves us with, and that open heart, it leaves us then to allow the heart to respond its way. And you're here I said that very carefully, allow the heart to respond in its way as opposed to letting you respond. It's kind of like you don't have to respond. You kind of you know, you're not there in a certain way because they you that's always been There is the word you that's built on ideas and concepts and histories and past and imagined futures and lessons we've learned and emotions and fears around what it means to be a person. And if all that is put to rest and to relax and to trust the open heart and trust the space of not needing to have a problem not needing to solve anything in the usual way, but to allow the heart to respond and will the heart respond adequately.

I hope really respond to adequately

One answer to that question. Again, because you're always looking at looking at the, you know, this problem this the solve it, what's the, what's the other way? What's the other paradigm the other way and this is the classic Buddhist way to solve this problem is it adequate is to appreciate that all the ways all the all the alternative ways of responding involve suffering and who wants to pick up a hot skillet hot, you know, touch a hot stove. So, all the other words suffering so, you know, it has to be asked to work this way. And then if you see some of the people who are most mature in the practice, they tend to have a lot of care and compassion for the world and they tend to respond in nice ways in good ways. But they tend not to take credit for it or tend not to be so caught up in what it means for them.

So, I offer you this talk as a way of both talking about the radical nature of Buddhist message. And Buddhism historically has periodically regularly kind of made a kind of dichotomy between the world of samsara and the world of Nirvana, the world of clinging and the world of the basis and the world with and then the world mental world which is free of basis. And that the practice that we do is not a practice to help us get along and cope better in life as it is it does help. That's all you want great to hear right place. But it's not about that the core aspect of it is to help dissolve these deep, deep structures of thought and ideas and clinging that is the basis of our life to experience this whole other possibilities, whole other paradigm. And so, I offer you this then for two reasons, one is so that if you appreciate that, then perhaps you can not be so strongly wedded to doing the practice from the old paradigm. And the other is to offer you a perhaps, a radical difference. approach to what it means to be compassionate than maybe you've ever imagined.

The idea of compassion existing and that mind heart which is like an empty sky, and then to end now with a change of analogies, so hopefully you can manage this change the so in that empty, sky like world where everything can flow freely through that your compassion is like this.

There's no obstacles in space for the traveling of that sound The sound just is there in that space. So it is with compassion. So I hope that made some sense. If it didn't make any sense then maybe I'm on track.