

# 2013-09-30 Nature And Liberation

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## SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

So as some of you know, the first week of October has been designated Earth care week. And by the, our Buddhist extended Buddhist community. As I said here a few weeks ago, there was a, what we call the international Vipassana teachers meeting that happens every three years happened this year in June at spirit rock. And with a little bit of fanfare, there was this roll out of scroll in the middle of we sit in a big circle concentric circles, is big scroll. There was some I don't know how long it was 40 feet long. It was rolled out in the middle of the whole meeting. And it had some 2000 signatures of people to this letter to the to this vipassana teachers, requesting that we offer leadership and guidance around climate change and environmental issues of our times. So Got our attention from 2000 people sending a letter like that. And so one of the results of that was we work with the teachers, we're going to go to the first week of October, do teachings do events that somehow focused on the issue of climate change or caring for our environment. And so that starts tomorrow. So I'll do some of the teachings I do over next week. We'll focus on that Wednesday morning. And next Monday is still the first week of October. And but I thought I would get a head start on the topic. And this evening, and mostly what I want to do is express an appreciation for our environment, natural environment, and stress how its natural environment has been a really integral part of our Buddhist tradition for two and a half thousand years. And, and there's something many of the teachers in our tradition, practice many years, decades sometimes in the woods in the jungles, natural environment, and came to love it and came to see that there was some important connection between their practice between their hearts, their realization and the natural world being in the natural world. And I just came back from teaching two week retreat at our new retreat center in Santa Cruz. And for those of you haven't been there, we have a very large kind of picnic deck that's not connected to any buildings but it's kind of a deck because over kind of built an overly sloping Hill and every lunch we would have our lunch there the staff and has a spectacular view of this beautiful kind of gorge that goes down the hill on the other side of the gorge that's off, covered with trees, forests, redwood trees and Douglas fir. And, and it's quite a beautiful kind of sight. And I'm so glad that we have it there. In right as part of the retreat center, we have a small woods of our own, not very big but small and I mean putting in trails that people can walk into a little wood. And the whole property is two and a half acres, 2.8 acres. So with our parking lot and building and all that our, our own wood is not that big, but enough to put rails in. And I like it that we have this connection. I spent three years of my life practicing at Tassajara Zen monastery down in the Big Sur coast and deep in the last powders national wilderness. And Zen training was very important for me, but and it was also very important that that training, that living that life was three years in the wilderness. It's quite remote down there. And I spent a lot of time away from those few buildings. So Tassajara, walking the trails, walking in the river, up the river down the river, just kind of living kind of close to that natural environment. And I feel it was very important part of my own training, and how I was changed by the practice and, and in some of the, you know, I found that in the in, in, in relationship to nature, there was a feelings or understandings sensibility that arose that, among other things change my relationship to myself. And I

think that's where many Buddhists feel that strong connection with nature is when the feelings of nature, connection to nature helps us to break down some feeling of separation from nature, some feeling of being somehow tightly bound up in selfishness or self concern or self identity.

And there's something about being in the nature that can lessen that quote, Bit as probably many of you realize, I've known your pocket experience of having things that were extremely important for you living in an urban life. But as soon as you went to a park or went to the beach or went to the mountains and went for hiking, that some of those concerns seem to recede from importance, and, and even sometimes you wonder, what was I thinking? So, I want to tell you a story from the time of the Buddha which I find kind of touching. And, and perhaps ask you as part of this, why you think this you know, why this particular teaching that was given this story was so significant because it was given a nature and natural setting. So, it has to do with the Buddha son, and many people don't realize that there was a father and four The first seven years of his son's life, he seems to have been away getting enlightened. And, and then for the rest of his sons growing up, it seems like he was the primary parent. We don't know much about that because there was this monastic order. And I don't know if other monastics could take care of the sign or how it worked back then. But the son was under his care. And there's a few stories of the Buddha teaching his son caring for a sinus, his son was growing, growing up, and his son became a monk. And when his son was of age, we don't know what that means. But my assumption has been been 19 or 20 years old. I had been a monk for some years, I've been in the monastic environment for much longer. And the Buddha could see that his son was now ready for some deeper teaching for some wisdom. And so he took his son I got up one morning, and he said, Let's go for a walk. It seems like a parental thing to do with the child and let's go for a walk and we'll have a talk. And he took his son deep into the woods, to a place that we still know the name. We don't know where it is, but that's the text called a blind men's growth. Why it was called that I don't know, but they say was deep in the woods, in a grove of trees of what's called the Sol tree. And the Sol tree in India is kind of like the redwood trees of California they're quite majestic and large. And, and they have these notes it's called the or they call it like plaster Banyan. Yeah, but how these these kind of roots the roots kind of come from the trunks, critical Banyan Dominion tree, you know, whether it's a tall tree, well, you know, you have this ballast or this, like a fence wall that comes down but buttress that holds it up. Anyway, so you can kind of Tuck yourself in there and feel cozy in the corner of these wings that come down. And so they took a circus on in there into the woods and deep in the woods and they sat there under these big majestic trees. And then he proceeded to ask his son questions kind of maybe Socratic people call the Socratic method. I don't know if that's fair. But as this son, the are your eyes. Are some of them like do what you see through your eyes. Is that yourself? Is that who you really are? and his son said no. Are your eyes who you really are? No. Is what you hear what you really are? No. Are your ears who you really are? No. Is What You smell. who you really are. No. Is your nose who you really They are no is what your taste who you really are? No. Is your tongue who you really are? No? Is what you think who you really are? Maybe pause then no, is your is the thinking mind who you really are? No. And so it was kind of went on like this for a while. So a questions about identity. He didn't ask him Who are you who is your true self or something like that, but he kind of did a kind of like guided meditation and pointed to all the things that we can directly experience. So not an abstract idea or, but rather in the world of direct experience, what you can feel, touch, taste and all these things. Does any of that thing qualify as your essential self as your true self and the sun can have maybe turned his attention to each of these things and said no. And pretty soon there was nothing left to say yes to because the whole experiential world itself had been covered in these questions. And with that, in the tech say, his sons, his son, as mind became disenchanted. It's a great word disenchanted because it implies that he was enchanted before. And so kind of caught in a trance of self perhaps of identity, me myself in mind, and somehow he became disenchanted from the notion of holding on or identifying. This is who I am creating an identity out of his experience experience. And with that, his clinging faded and resist clinging faded. He became free because liberated So, you know, it's kind of touching a father son story with such a good outcome.

And every father wishes that I can't wait to my first son turn 1619. And but, but I think I think it's significant that this event happened in the, in the woods deep in the woods with these majestic trees, the Indian redwood trees, something like that you can imagine. What do you think the context of giving those teachings about not self, of letting go of self identity? What do you think the context of being in this natural setting, what that contributed to that teaching? What did that offer what are the context offer for this event? This teaching in this little story is very something you think

In the back, you can catch them at like back because he could have just as well taken him to the mall sat him down there and had him give him a little talk. I was thinking of a sense of connectedness into connectedness to the surroundings to the natural world and how would that help with his teaching or this understanding?

Well, it kind of

it seems like as the boundaries of self are dropping away maybe kind of a unification Okay, so next boundary to sell fall away unification. Great. Thank you. Use the mic. Please wait wait for the mic is that some people can't hear otherwise a sense of insignificance in front of such a large tree. That sounds scary to be insignificant. Is there a little bit serious significant can seem like a kind of like a dismissive term? Or is there? Is there some other way of saying it that would make it seem more more helpful for this process of liberation?

Let's say centered on oneself and more centered on a larger world. Great. Yeah, that works for me. Thank you. So

I was just wondering if he could get more in touch with his own true nature or that's my experience when I'm in a natural setting.

So it could be the text says nothing about true nature. It just says let go, let go let go. But that led that profound experience of letting go. Some people might call this a true nature. And because there's nothing there's no no limitation on our consciousness, then another mic over there. Yeah. Take a

shot out.

spaciousness came to mind the

spaciousness. Yeah. So wouldn't be so spacious probably in the mall.

No, wouldn't great

rather than pay the brightness of being in the surroundings of humans, them all or anything like that as a distraction or as something to compare yourself with, we're always comparing ourselves with other people, that our identity is often tied up. And so being away from society, sometimes it's very helpful because it's easier for the mind to put down its comparative thinking and, you know, which is kind of pervasive in human mind often comparing ourselves to others and judging ourselves against others and, and many times our creation of self identity can happen in contrast to other people or in relationship to other people. So that whole operation of identification may sometimes can fall that fall or fall away in the wilderness. That's one of the reasons why some people like to going into nature is the way that you know that the usual self preoccupation, significance of vichara self centeredness falls away Someone else

also kind of reconnecting with the elements of what we are made of the five elements and they also exist much closer rather than your earth element and water. So the natural elements of the world are found in us as well. And that feeling that connection and that we are nature is helpful. Good. So that's great. And so there's this process of going into the woods and question questioning your self identity to the point at You're willing to drop a lot of it. Is this appealing? Or is it you know, better to go shopping? So I'm gonna see some some yeses I see some people just what

the so I think the argument or the teaching that's been made down through the centuries in Buddhism is that the natural environment is a very important support for the process of liberation. It's a very important support for the process of spiritual growth, that something happens in contact with the natural world. That's harder to do in an urban environment or a serious environment with a lot of, you know, the ordinary social concerns and things that people do. And so it's been a very common phenomena for the serious practitioners. Buddhism, back in the old days was mostly monastics because that was, you know, that was how the world was set up back then that many of them would go and live in the wilderness or live in the woods for their practice, or they would live on the interface between the wilderness and the urban environment, like kind of live in the woods but close enough because they couldn't have they couldn't keep food, they couldn't cook for themselves. So they were dependent on being able to go into urban areas or villages to get food so they had to live close enough for that process. And so this very interesting dynamic of being a monastic, especially the forest monastics are feeling connected to the natural world. And getting some of the benefits of that, at the same time, being completely dependent on their sustenance on on the villages and towns And cities that are nearby. They couldn't separate themselves away from society. But they could live in that that's why they kind of lived in the interface between the wilderness and society. And so this so the idea of being dependent on others, also does something to someone's mind. I mean, a lot of people like to be independent take care of themselves. But the fact that your sustenance, your well being depends on the people who support you. their generosity, their care, does something to a practitioners mind. And what else What do you think some of the benefits are? The same way as being in the wilderness can benefit this process of liberation? What do you think the benefits might be in the process of spiritual growth or liberation, to realize understand and experience, that your welfare is dependent on other people taking care of you

monastics have no savings, they don't go out to the restaurant to buy food. They actually the Rule of the Rules for monastics if someone gives you food one day, then you have to forfeit it by noon and you can't store it away in your cupboards and then get it the next day you have to actually you're not actually at all to eat food it was given you what one day you're not allowed to eat it the next day. So it just, you know, just can't, you know, you're just not allowed so. So you're dependent on going out there with your bowl and hoping that someone gives you food The next thing. So how does this benefit a person? Any ideas? I see a hand way in the back.

I would imagine that it Would foster a sense of trust in the unfolding of whatever happens, because of you know, you're completely vulnerable to people's generosity. And so in response to that generosity, there would be a flood of gratitude and loving kindness towards the people who are giving you sustenance allowing you to live. But I also imagine that there would develop a large trust in the unfolding of what happens, the unfolding of life and, and giving up a sense of control of believing that, you know, that the monastics or I would be in the center of

I guess it's right answer

would be at the center of the

UN Yeah, I think it would reduce my sense of importance. Mice and reduce my sense of self because as being held separate from from other people, it would foster a sense of interconnectedness as well.

Great, thank you.

I was going to say that to that I think both ways. Sort of dissolve that little self by being an urban or being with others, and connecting with the others. And the same with being in the wilderness and sort of getting it feeling in perspective, you know, that the little self kind of shrinks in both what can shrink in both ways and not take on the importance?

Great. Thank you. saw another hand here to here, right.

I'm noil and Your talk is reminding me of this really bad experience I had on the John Muir Trail. I was out there like by myself, and I thought it would be a wonderful experience. And it was it turned out to be like, I was exhausted and, and I missed. I missed my life so much. And I couldn't wait to get back in

a car.

And you know, when my husband picked me up at the trailhead, I just never felt more loved for anybody. And when I came back, you know, I wanted to kiss my front door. And since then, a huge sense of humility and gratitude and

embarrassment

has filled my heart. And it has to do with learning from me from learning from just my experiences, just let it be out there for so long alone by myself in great discomfort.

So you benefited from that. Absolutely. Would you do it again? Would you do it again? No.

Thank you.

And the other thoughts about this dependence that the monastics have on others.

Accurate it was it was him

It seems to me about it's a daily practice in letting go of it daily practicing non attachment is they, the monks are not supposed to. Well, they're deprived of the security of knowing where their next meal is going to come from. So it's it's

Yeah, that that sense of letting go.

Yes, I think has a lot to do with it. Another interesting thing that has that I've seen in some monastics and I felt that when I was a monastic is that if other people are going to support me, with food and whatever I essentially already need for mastic life. If I'm going to live a life of trust not have any money Keep food and very few possessions that my welfare and well being depends on the people around me who who want their generosity to support me, I want to be worthy of that support. And so, it was an inspiration for me to practice I need to practice seriously here, because you know, these people are not



giving food just because I can sit around and, you know, play cards. They, you know, this is I got to take this seriously. And it was actually felt really, really good for me to have the serious this kind of gets, you know, to kind of apply myself more in my practice because of this feeling of the mutual support for many people around me. So I wanted to read a few passages from various monastics who live this forest life. ajaan Shah is a famous teacher Our particular tradition whether a tree, a mountain or an animal, it's all dharma. Everything is dharma. Where is the Dharma? Speaking simply, that which is not Dharma doesn't exist. Dharma is nature. If one sees nature one sees Dharma, one sees Dharma one sees nature, seeing nature when knows the Dharma. One of the nice things that happened to me in the course of practicing in nature and natural world was at some point, before I went and practice Buddhism and practice Buddhism in nature. I had a very strong separation bifurcation between the urban life and the natural life in the wilderness, and I really kind of stained the urban life and felt like it was all about you know, living going back to nature living in the woods and after my time in the practicing and in natural settings, There was a kind of letting go of self concede self identification, letting go of that sense of separation, and realizing that in a certain way everything is nature. And so when I came back to live in the city, I came back and saw the city in a different way. I certainly saw the problems of urban life and but I didn't hold myself separate from it or feel like this was not part of nature as well. Oddly enough, it's all nature, so all dharma. And so in that way, it's all something to study and learn from. Ajahn Buddhadasa, another monk in Thailand, very famous monk who lived in the woods, I saw him and I met him. In fact, he had a little little cabin that he lived in, but most of the days that he was really old when I saw him, but he sat in his chair in the woods outside his cabin, and you can go around and talk to him or see trees, rocks and even dirt and insects can speak. This doesn't mean as some people believe that they are spirits or gods. Rather, if we reside in nature near trees and rocks, we'll discover feelings and thoughts arising that are truly out of the ordinary. At first, we'll feel a sense of peace and quiet, which may eventually move beyond that feeling to a transcendence of self. The deep sense of calm that nature provides through separation from the troubles and anxieties that plague us, in the day to day world functions to protect the heart and mind. Indeed, the lessons nature teaches us lead to a new birth beyond the suffering beyond suffering, that results from attach the suffering that results from attachment to self, trees and rock then can talk to us. They help us understand what it means to be It means to cool down from the heat of our confusion, despair, anxiety and suffering. Buddhists also said this, the entire cosmos is a cooperative.

The sun, the moon and the stars live together as a cooperative. The same is true for humans and animals, trees and the earth. Our bodily parts function as a cooperative when we realize that the world is a mutual, interdependent cooperative enterprise, that human beings are all mutual friends in the process of birth, old age, suffering and death, then we can build a noble environment. If our lives are not based on this truth, then we'll all perish.

The last one is AJahn Amaro Dinamo is a monk now lives in England, but he lived here for about 20 In California, and come and talk for us from time to time. The ignorance that human beings experience is largely based around the identification that we have with our bodies, with our personalities, our families and our work. And because we're so woven into the, to those identity identities, in the midst of our family and our role as a doctor or a teacher, parent child, as a personality, among other personalities, it's very difficult to get any kind of perspective. Being a natural surroundings. You don't have to be anything. Your role as someone with a university degree is irrelevant to the lizards and trees. You're just another thing in the forest. And those cultural identities fall into a much more diminished position in your consciousness. When you're around other people, it's hard to keep perspective but life in the forest gives you that contrast. Where you can exist and not be anything, you are able to look at the flow of consciousness, thoughts, feelings, memories, ideas, that without having to act on any of them. And you're there with the simplest elements of your being, breathing, feeling the heat and cold learning to

live with the other creatures of the forest. You're moving from a person centered perspective to one centered on nature. So, you know, the cosmos is a cooperative, and unless we cooperate, well, all kinds of problems can happen. If we don't cooperate with it, I think it's very hard to develop ourselves and develop ourselves to the point where we can let go of ourselves. And it's very hard to it's very easy for us to cause a tremendous amount of harm to ourselves. vironment and it's a mutual relationship rights cooperative. So if we, if if our society harms our natural world, will be harmed as well. And, you know, and maybe seems like a small thing, but we need to have wilderness so that our hearts can find peace. So, you know, just, you know, it's not just I think, you know, it's one of the ways that we, you know, I think is one of the ways we discover who we are as human beings, is to really feel the connection to this cooperative of the cosmos, the world. And without some ability to really feel that connection, to sense that connection to understand that connection. I think it's much, much more harder to to realize who we are, who we are not to be free. It's also harder for us to live sane life in this world cooperative, where we live together. So I'm happy that this, you know, next week is supposed to be earthcare week. I don't know if any of you are coming here in this next week. But I would ask you, those of you who come here regularly, maybe you're willing to participate in this week and do something more than you normally would. That could be considered caring for this earth, caring for a natural world, trying to make a difference. The as I say, in the newsletter article, that's not just came out newsletter about the environment. The you know, kind of the strength maybe the weakness to sometimes in Buddhism, is the idea that it all starts with you. And without you taking some responsibility, then it's hopeless. Don't expect other people take responsibility. So maybe even in small ways this week, and maybe you can recycle more or drive less educate yourself about some of the environmental problems that are local in our communities. Naked See, see if this week in small way, big way that it can be earthquake earthquake for all of us. So thank you