

# 2014-10-13 Castes And Judgement

Tue, 9/15 3:30PM • 35:45

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

people, divides, brahmin, buddha, world, person, society, actions, brahman, brahmins, birth, mind, species, human, designations, india, born, divisions, social constructs, life

## SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsda

IMC on my calendar, it says today is Columbus Day. And when I remember when I was a child and we didn't go to school on Columbus Day with my children went to school today. Then, though some of their friends who are in different school districts didn't go to school today. And I think that that represents change in our society about this particular day, and about how we see Columbus. And some people are celebrating indigenous people day. And I think that a number of cities now around the country have passed resolutions that this should be indigenous people day. But that upset some of the Italian Americans. Because it turns out this is also Italian American day, maybe because Columbus is Italian was Italian. So this points to, I think, a lot of things in our society or social life, how much strife there can be. And in so many different ways, but also across different divides. We live in a society of all kinds of social divides. And one of the big tasks I think, for the globe is how to live in some way these divides that we live in live amongst are there five, we find myself in so much prejudice, so much bias, so much animosity, so much stereotyping that goes on. And one of the early teachings, I think of Joseph Goldstein or someone in our, in our particular insight school, had to do with and then 60s or 70s, maybe as hippies or something going off to India to learn meditation. And so they took the bus across the Middle East and across, probably Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan down to India. And back in the time it was relatively safer to do that, though John Travis, one of my colleagues spend time in jail 60s in Turkey on his route to India. And they came across this huge desert. And they were just taking this bus across this huge desert and there was apparently they were stories told there's no real markers of anything just desert and in the middle of the desert, was a border post. And it'll fence on either side of the border post and The bus had to stop and but they looked around and like, it's just desert. You know, this isn't this is a human construct. It's not like any kind of special kind of divide, a real divide in natural world. It's just like this flatland, and they decided to draw a line through it then. And now we have to stop the bus and get out. And so the very interesting issue in our teachings in Buddhism, is to point to how much of our life is a social construct, and how much of our social lives and the divisions that we exist in our social constructs that we created our convention designations are some of the Buddhist terminology. And to be able to really see that and see the, what is the social construct what's a converted like construction of language, and has no inherent exist in nature, I think is one of the contributions of something like meditation, where the mind gets quiet enough. To see the workings of the mind and see how the mind produces thoughts and concepts and ideas, and overlays them on top of our reality, it was one of my first realizations when I went to a Zen monastery in practice there, I would walk around kind of amazed looking at all the things I could see kind of and, and I could kind of feel or see or experience my mind paint the expression I for myself was painting my reality with reality, you know, like I see the tree and I mean, you see a tree right a tree so, but I could feel how my mind was kind of labeling and making and seeing and projecting tree nuts on the tree. And maybe a tree is not a good example because a tree supposedly a tree, but but there are lots of things that you know, I

mean, the example I've used here before is so this bell that we have here, you know, it's about a six inch or so, diameter Bell and

And I once was in San Francisco and I saw a someone begging on the street with a brass Japanese Bell just like this. And I almost did later I thought I should have come back and bought it. It looked like a really nice one. But, you know, it's a battle here at IMC It was a begging bowl for him. My teacher in Burma, he had something very similar to this. That was a spittoon. And I don't know how you guys would feel if I was, you know, you know, gargling up my saliva and going great, a perfect game, you know, into my spare to in the middle of a Dharma talk. You know, that probably some of you think what a Buddhist teacher spittoon So, you know, so we, we put it, you can feel sometimes in the mind, what it's like to kind of overlay a thing like this with a bell or digging bowl or just tuna, whatever. Whereas in the ordinary consciousness, I think we don't just take it for granted. It's a bell, you know, it's like, that's what it is. So I think meditation helps a lot slows the mind down or creates greater clarity in the mind. So we can see the constructs that are arising in the mind. So we see what goes on. And so that's nice for bells. But it's really important for people that we have all these divisions in our society, which are, you know, some of them are social constructs, some of them have some reality to them, but to, to live by wrong social constructs, has created tremendous amount of suffering and pain or in our world. And in that, that exists that was true in the time of the Buddha's life and it was true now in our life. So I wanted to relate to an ancient sutta discourse of the Buddha that addresses this issue in particular and you could interpret it or apply it in many different ways in our modern society and the kind of divisions social divisions that exist in our society and how they play out. So, there were two Brahmins, students, they were they were they were they were priests nebra monocle religion of ancient India. And there's text describes him as being really well educated, they were masters in the Vedic lore and very knowledgeable some and apparently fairly high status in their, in their training to be priests. And they had an argument and their argument was one of them said, that a person becomes a Brahmin, high caste, high caste person India back then and some degrees still to this very caste oriented society. And caste means a big it's a big division and it's countries like that and, and it's Very painful for some people who live in those caste divisions to believe at the bottom of it, and not to feel like they can move through or have move up through it. And so, the Brahmins, this kind of priestly caste sometimes took themselves to be the top of the hierarchy. And, so, and they also believe they had this lore that they were born from this house presented in the bullet Buddhist texts, that they were born from the Brahmas mouth. And that's pretty good to be born there. And you know, it's a high status of it, but the lowest class of caste was born from Brahmas foot and it put it in India, so like, you know, kind of like the considered pretty, you know, almost like, you know, the head is almost like pure and futon was like defiled or something impure or something. So it's pretty bad be born by for the foot to Brahma. And so and the Brahmins believed that there was a hereditary caste, so they were Born into the cast by virtue of the birth. So one of these two Brahmin students in his contribution to the argument was saying, a person is a Brahmin by being born that way, by being born to a lineage of Brahmins down through the generations and the other Brahmins had no a person is a Brahmin, by their actions, by their deeds, what they do. That's what makes a person a Brahmin. So they can't agree. And so they go to the Buddha and, and the Buddha, here's their argument, and then he offers his reply. And, and, and, you know, most people, you know, will assume that he, and when she does, he agrees with the one who says that you're Brahman, by virtue of your actions, not by your birth, but this is what he says.

I will teach you that generic divisions of living beings for their many different species know first that the grass and trees that their mark their distinguishing characteristic arises from their birth. You see, I had the distinguishing mark arises with their species, the word species is also the word jati, which means birth. And this his idea is that by your birth, you're characterized who you are, and sometimes in India and use ancient texts, your jothi your birth is the same thing as saying your caste how you're born. So it

is kind of a going back and forth still hard to translate this in English. The distinguishing mark arises with one's birth it rises with their species. So trees and grass so certainly you know there you can distinguish the species of trees and plants by their distinguishing characteristics and their different species, different classes of things. Next comes the Matsya the butterflies in the ants and termites. Their distinguishing mark arises with their birth, you know, characterizes their species. And then he talks about the water dwelling fish and the birds they go so they're all these different things and there's different species you can actually distinguish make clear distinctions between them. Well, in these births, the differences of birth make their distinctive mark with humans. No differences of birth, make a distinctive mark in them. Isn't that nice? That that's that's what he wants to say. So there's only one species, Homo sapiens sapiens. I always thought that sapient meant human knowers But recently, I found out that Mensa means wisdom wise. So the wise homos the wise, you know, hominids, minutes, and minutes. And then we're the Homo sapiens sapiens.

We have a lot to live up to hope you do soon. With humans, no differences of birth make a distinctive mark in them. Not in the hairs not in the head, not in the ears, not in the eyes, not in the mouth, nor in the nose, nor in the lips, nor the brows, nor in the shoulders, or the neck, in the belly, or the back in the buttocks or the breasts, not in the hands, nor in the feet, nor in the fingers, or the nails, nor in the knees, nor their thighs, nor in their color, or in their color. That's a big one for many societies, distinguishing people by their color or in their voice here. Birth makes no distinctive mark, as with other kinds of birth. So, there's a wonderful list of human characteristics. Of course, we differ a little bit around those things right? And there's a lot of human suffering around these differences, you know, my height, my hair, my nose, my size, you know, all these you know, my color, you know, this all kinds of things right. And people suffer a lot, because of the social conventions and comparative thinking and around all these kinds of things. But the Buddha says, Here birth makes no distinctive mark, as with other kinds of species, in human bodies in themselves, nothing distinctive can be found, distinction among human beings is purely verbal designation. So in terms of a real distinction, like separating out different species of humans, that those distinctions are there Human, rarely verbal designation. But then the Buddha is willing to make some distinctions. Some now that he's a set a claim that there are verbal designations. There are verbal designations that distinctions between people that he's willing to make. The person who makes the people who make their living farming are farmers. The people who make their living through crafts or crafts people. The people who make their living through merchandise are merchants. Those who make a living serving others are servants. Those who make a living, stealing or robbers those who make a living by archery or archers. Those who make a living through crease, priestly craft are chaplains. Those who govern the town and they're ready Are rulers. So here the distinction the Buddha wants to make is not anything inherent by birth, but rather is by what they do. So here is agreeing with the second Brahman, it's by the actions that some we just kind of beginning to agree with him by actions that we distinguish people. And so what we do becomes important, you know, this is very simple things. It's kind of obvious, right? While you're farming, you're a farmer. While you're parenting, you're a parent. And the question is, when you're not actively parenting, are you still a parent? You know, when when do you when there's a line when you pick up that role, when you put it down, when you pick up that identity, when you put down that identity? And is an interesting question, since you know their verbal designation based on what we do they say. So, but then the Buddha goes on, to define who is a Brahmin. And remember, Brahman is the hierarchy. See that scene is a high class person in society. And so it's kind of like maybe like saying, who is really an aristocrat? Or who is really the elite or something. And so now who is going to provide that explanation? I call the person that Brahman. I do not call the person to Brahman, by the person's origin or lineage. If attachments still lurk in that person, that person Oh, that if attachment still lurk in that person. I call them basically says someone who's pompous. But one who is unattached and clings no more. That is the one I call the Brahmin. So now he's beginning to redefine a Brahmin away from birth, being born in particular caste, but making it available to any Anybody have any cast of any situation based on how they live based on

how they are and how they've been practiced and how they're purified themselves. And this person is willing to elevate to you know, aristocratic level or an elite level or you know someone to be to be honored or respected.

The person who endures without a trace of hate, abuse, violence and bondage, with strength of patience, is the one I call a Brahmin. The one who does not flare up with anger is the one I call a Brahmin. The one who has laid aside weapons against all beings, frail and strong. Who does not kill or have them killed is the one I call a Brahmin. The one who is unopposed among opponents. It's a nice idea unopposed among your opponents. The Buddha often says that, you know, I have no argument with anyone. People argue with me but I have no argument with them. So my man came to the Buddha, really angry with him, but his teachings and the impact he was having in society and, and he said, What's your teaching? And the Buddha said, my teaching is such that I have no arguments with anyone. I made the man more angry. So, the one who is unopposed among opponents peaceful among those given to violence, I call a Brahmin. The one who has dropped all less than hate, dropped conceit and contempt is the one I call a Brahmin. Who in the world will never take what is not given, is the one I call a Brahmin. The one who has crossed to the further shore and meditates is unperturbed and unprepared. attained Nibbana through non clinging is the one I call it Brahmin. So here is redefining Brahman eventually to someone who's attained what for the Buddhism is the kind of purpose of their spiritual life. So has high spiritual status or high spiritual attainment of purifying themselves freeing themselves for all these kinds of lust and hate and greed and clinging and these things. And then he goes on for name and clan are assigned as marriage designations in the world, originating in conventions, they are assigned to here and there. For those who do not know this fact, wrong views are long underlying their hearts not knowing that a clear only one is only a Brahmin by birth. One is not the Brahmin by birth, nor by birth, a non Brahmin. By actions when is Brahmin by actions, when is In non Brahmin, so it's really what you do. So Harry's measuring people, by their actions and behavior. That's what the Buddha said, You're that you're the heir and the owner of your actions. There's a tremendous emphasis in Buddhism, focus on what you do. But actions are three kinds. There's the physical actions, the verbal actions and the mental actions. And the list of these kinds of qualities of a Brahmin are not just physical actions, but also the mental actions not to have any hate, not to have any lust, not to have any conceit or contempt. So there's a very high standard of how, how much it's possible to in the ancient language to purify the heart and the mind or to clarify the inner life to say it's free, from what constricts it narrows it and, and brings out the worst in human beings.

And in, in, in, in the Buddhist world of India and Sri Lanka, this particular verse is a very, very, you know, it's resonated, and it's quoted and repeated a lot. It's very important in a way maybe we can't quite understand. Maybe we could maybe there's probably a categories in our society in America, maybe they're comparable to this, that we could substitute Brahmin here. And I don't know, I think I don't think I'll choose to try. I might offend someone. But I can you know, you can imagine some two.

Here's a nice quote. So you've probably heard the expression. Love makes the world go round. So here's what the Buddha action makes the world go round. Action makes this generation turn. living beings are bound by action. Like the chariot wheel, by the linchpin, the action makes the world go round. So not only is the Buddha measure or designate people or distinguished people by their action, but he also says the actions really has big consequences in the world, it makes the world turn around. And so we need to be careful with our action. We need to be careful with our all our actions, including our mental action. And I think this is one of the very important contributions meditation can make, that makes us can heighten the clarity and the energy and, and sharpness of the mind. So we can track what's going on in our mind, the actions of our mind, including the ways in which we see each other and relate to each other. The divisions that we live by in our society because of fear or because of

ignorance or because of just going along with tradition and convention about how we see Society in the world. And I think it's very important. And I think as much as racism still lives exists in our country, and prejudice exists in our country and all kinds of very painful desert divides exists in our country. I mean, there's people dying, right because of these issues to this day in this country. It's an active, very big concern for society as a whole. My impression is that they're not you know, I'm not an expert in this area. But as that there's, there's enough momentum in American society, enough interest in American society to try to overcome some of this divide. That I think America has a chance to be a model for other countries where it's much worse. There are countries in the world where it's You know, as we know, right just right now and we're in in, and Syria and Iraq and Yemen, these places where people are doing terrible things to each other. And they're the divide is religious, and big, there's some of the most religious and ethnic, all these divides. The some of these countries are the places where my friends took the bus trips across the desert. And there was just this border in middle of nowhere, right? There's all these, all these divides, that in that desert of human society, we create them and put people outside. So I think it's a great thing. Whatever effort we can do in the society in America, to become more attuned and more sensitive to cultural differences and distinguish things to be more tuned and sensitive to where we fit in, in the whole world of prevalent prejudice and distinctions and divides that exist there too. The ones that we don't even see yet or we don't even feel like we belong in, to really kind of become heightened and aware to this, I think is a great contribution to the whole world. And we'll make it so that we can all kind of live together more and more in harmony and respect for each other. It'd be great to treat all be great if we could cheat on each other as Brahmins, you know, as noble nobility or something that ability or dignity of each person. The one of the one of the examples that often held up but what the how the Buddha wanted society B was how he created the monastic orders. And he said that the monastic orders are like the ocean, all the four great rivers flow into the ocean and they lose their names. So I think what he meant was all the four great oceans sometimes, like all the four great or they castes in ancient India, there were four kept main main caste systems. They all when they went to college, People different castes joined into the Buddhists order, their caste background had no meaning anymore. And they all became the same. And some of the people who are the lowest in the content in society were has had some of the lowest caste became some of the highest people in teachers and stuff in the monastic order.

So, what does it take? I would like to suggest that if you sit quietly, sharpen your mind in meditation, mindfulness, and watch very carefully, the Genesis the birth of ideas you have about other people, watch them arise, get more and more sensitive to what gets born in your mind. And start questioning put a question mark around the interpretations, the assumptions, the projections, the commentary that you have about the people you run into, notice how quick you do it and put questions and Mark around around it. Is this really true and in that Question mark, and pause of seeing what your mind does before and slow down enough. So you see the mind does it as opposed to assume that how you see is what actually is there. Because how we see is through the filter of our thoughts, put a question mark around it, and then practice something that is now seen as one of the really important strategies in diversity work and cultural competency and all this. And that is humility. A little bit of humility goes a long way, humility meetings, maybe you don't know, maybe you don't know the person that you're with. Maybe you don't know the person that you've encountered, maybe you don't know know, their background. Maybe you don't know what's happening to them. You don't maybe you don't just lock you don't know. And so that kind of humility of not knowing at allows you to kind of put aside for a while, the interpretations, the judgments, the assumptions that you might have. Then that's not knowing, you know who to ask or look more carefully and see, I'm very fond As some of you know that, that the word respect comes from a Latin meaning to inspect again to look again, you know, like the spectacle. So to look again, look again, and I think if we can stop and look and give people a second chance, the third chance and try to see below the surface, what's going on. I learned this in a very powerful way. After I



left the Zen monastery, I been there for three or three years, so maybe, you know, and then I went to a soon after leaving or something. I did a weekend workshop with Steven Levine. Stephen The line was one of the pioneers and then 70s and 80s of working doing hospice work working with people who are dying, and he put on some really great workshops. retreats are on death and dying and, and so I signed up for this I read his book who dies and that was very moved by the book and I signed up for this workshop. And before the workshop started, we were all kind of milling outside in the courtyard before the conference area. And the people I saw there were, they were just like, ordinary people, whatever that is. But, you know, they were kind of like, ordinary run of the mill people. And, you know, you know, and I, you know, that was my kind of assumption about them, and I kind of hope, you know, and then we went into the workshop. And Stephen, the line is very easy. He was brilliant in connecting with people and helping people open up. And he had within a few minutes seemed to me, as I remember, in the course of the weekend, he had people standing up and telling why they were there. And they were people who were dying. They had, you know, for cancer, there are people who just lost their young child who just died. And there was one death, one connection to death after another. And, you know, I just can't I just did Zen monastery, I've been meditating, I'd be happy, you know, and my life was pretty good. And these were ordinary people, I thought, you know, their life was good. And I saw Wow, I did not know, what was under the surface of these people. I didn't know what their background and experience was. And it was very humbling for me. And so now when I walk down the street, and I see the ordinary people, or the non ordinary people, you know, see people I don't know who they are, I don't know what goes on behind them. I don't know their history and their life experience and, and, and what you know, and what it means for them to be even alive, what it means for them to see me what it means for them to see to anything. So I want to be very careful. With my assumptions, I want to be very careful with what I, I give you another example a little one. So I was working as a, as a chef cook in a restaurant in San Francisco. And I was having a good time one day cooking, do my work. And then

it was a change of shifts. And I was up in the changing room and I was taking getting my getting out of my chef uniform into my clothes. And a friend of mine came in to start his shift. And as soon as he came in, I was happy to see him I was kind of happy go lucky and, and I kind of kind of kind of greeted him with kind of a exuberance and kind of a joke and a little bit of teasing or something, something like that. There's all good meaning he was my friend that was kind of my affection for him. And what I but I didn't take any time. The respect thing to look again, to find out who is this person, you know, as you know, maybe I don't know This person you haven't because my friend, maybe I don't know him. But you know, it's gonna be good to wait take time because no. So someone very close to him had just died. And he was grieving. And so my way of joking confusing with him was actually kind of painful. So I had this assumption, right, I kind of came with the old history ideas. So this also was very humbling for me. So this idea of take your time, and learn to watch what your mind does. Learn what your emotions do when you encounter someone and put a question mark behind them. If someone's scary, put a question mark by nothing. Look, again, this person really scary. If this person is different than you put a question mark, maybe they're not so different. If this person is the same as you, that's your mind does put a question mark around that maybe they're not so same as you. And I think it's very respectful, very meaningful to live in a world where we have the mindfulness capacity to notice what our mind does, and, and not believe everything, it's there, put a question mark behind things and long enough to look again, long enough to give people a second chance to kind of show themselves to reveal themselves who are these people. And because we live in a world where mutual respect and positive regard is a really, you know, and not and not, not enough of it. And whether it's in places of work or in our neighborhoods or on the streets or in the freeways, it's really good to want to do that. And then I'll end with so this was a big issue of apparently in a time with the Buddha, because there's a lot of suttas, a lot of discourse in the but a lot of teachings where the Buddha was addressing this issue of the divides the caste divides in the society. And I see a number of arguments to talk about You know, they do the different way of

looking at caste or kind of create more sense of equality, that it will look at the oneness of human beings. We're all one species, for example. And he said that someone also came along and wanted to know about the status of these Brahmins and maybe only that only they are special. And the Buddha responded, is it only Brahmins that can have loving kindness? What do you think? Only Brahmins that can be kind and loving and goodwill? And so the answer was, of course, the people in the text said no, not only Brahmins can be kind and friendly and have goodwill, other people can do in fact, everyone can do in fact, some Brahmins don't have much of it. And some others don't have much of it, but anybody can have it. And so the for that Buddha, that that pointing to the Oneness that we're all in it together, we have equal status, we have equal possibility and And so let's have lots of goodwill. And maybe that's how we all become Brahmins is through our goodwill. So cultural humility, human humility, questioning your mind. I hope that your mindfulness practice your meditation practice sharpens your mind enough clarifies your mind enough. You can watch how your marvelous mind works. So you don't believe at all. Thank you.