

2014-12-01 Buddhism And Culture

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SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

So Good evening. And I'm happy to be here with Bruni de Vila, who has been around practicing at IMC for maybe 10 years, maybe, something like that. And she's also been one of the managers at our retreat center and a great Dharma practitioner who's now beginning to do a little bit of teaching little bit of supporting other people in their practice. And this today, she was part of a training program that we Andrea Fella and I offer here at IMC, on training people to be Dharma mentors. And today's one of the topics for today was multiculturalism. And it had when we were having a discussion about this in their program today, I thought, well, that would be a nice topic to talk about today and Monday night, and Dharma and multiculturalism and Bruni was there and I heard that she was going to stay and, and I thought, why don't we have as Bruni to come and do it with me. And she's given some thought to this topic. And I thought it might be nice for us to do it together, partly because I have a lot of respect for Bruni, and also because I don't actually know that much about the topic, and which is probably good. It's probably the best not to know because it's really good to have a lot of curiosity about all kinds of multicultural issues and multicultural societies we live in and just be very interested to understand what's going on. And for this program that we had, we had assigned a reading from a book. And some of you, your therapist, maybe hopefully you know about it's called counseling the culturally diverse theory and practice the fourth edition and A big heavy kind of kind of clinical book. It's kind of the classic book in this field of multicultural counseling and psychotherapy, and all the issues that need to be addressed and thought about in this area. And the chapter one begins with this statement. What is multicultural counseling? therapy? What is slash therapy? Isn't, quote, good counseling, unquote. Good counseling. How applicable are our standards of clinical practice for racial and ethnic minority populations? Is there any difference between counseling a white client and counseling a black client? What do we mean? Okay, so that's kind of how the book opens. So I rewrote the first few lines of the book. What is multi-cultural Dharma teaching isn't good Dharma teaching applicable to all racial and ethnic minority populations to all populations. And this question about the connection of Buddhist practice and culture is one that people have been negotiating probably since the time of the Buddha and, and it's particularly a very alive topic in our particular insight Vipassana communities around the country. It's grown over these last years and more and more concerned and interest in becoming multi culturally aware and aware of the variety of issues that come into play when we have in a multi racial society and United States. And so it's been quite nice to see these come up and be thought about and it's not without a lot of content. Mercy and concern, it's a lot of opinions about this. And partly because it's a topic, which is a lot of controversy in our wider society. And it is a topic which also comes with a lot of suffering in America. And as it has a lot of suffering, there are people who don't want to look at the suffering, have opinions about it, who want to deny it, push it away. And there are some people feel that, you know, the good Dharma is, you know, culturally independent, it's free of culture. And it's the pure Dharma just, you know, pure emptiness and, or something and, and we're finally the Dharma supposed to take us out of these kinds of problems, raise us up to a higher level of great, wonderfully

open hearts that can hold everyone in a great compassionate way equally, or great open minds that somehow transcended our conditioning, our cultural conditioning, and so we can just relate to everyone in unconditioned, non cultural ways everyone is supposed to be equally people.

And so we shouldn't look at these things. But I think that I want to tell you a few things about my experience with this question this issue over the years of practice and bringing it up didn't actually talk about what we would do. Except I asked her and I said, I said, Unless you enter, I said that she could interrupt me. And then I forgot, I forgot to said, you want to start I was gonna say, do you want to start? started but you know, I forgot to ask. No, go ahead. It's difficult position because he didn't know what to believe what I was gonna say and, but she was just willing to kind of, you know, play improvise with me or jazz or something. So we'll see you know how this goes, I don't know. So I'm going to tell you a few things and then one of the strong things that so I'm kind of more or less in that first generation of, of people in the West, who are convert Buddhists in this particular way that started the 1960s perhaps. And I was first involved in Buddhism through Zen Buddhism at San Francisco Zen Center. And at some point and then, from my experience in the 1980s, there started to be a very strong reaction against what people call Japanese culture. That was that was combined with the practice of Zen at the San Francisco Zen Center. And sometimes it was quite clear they were wearing Japanese clothes. Jeff and John and their robes were not Japanese robes per se, but they were the Zen robes with long flowing sleeves or Chinese court robes at the Buddhist monks in China adopted for themselves. So what if Chinese court robes have to do with Buddhism? And here we were these, you know, Westerners, you know, walking around with these Chinese court robes being Zen Buddhist monks and priests, you know, as if this was the pure, pure unadulterated form of Buddhism that, you know, we didn't know any better with this is what it is right? It worked very well for me to wear these long flowing black robes and a shaved head when we, when this woman was mugged getting off the bus, like chase this guy down the street. And he thought I was like this kung fu master. You know, I weighed 140 pounds and all I had going was the robes the shaved head and he kind of stopped. So So, you know, sometimes these things can work to your advantage. But at some point in the 1980s, there was a strong reaction to this and there's a strong movement Since there have many people, many people do, let's separate out Buddhism from Japanese culture, as if we could really separate them. And so and so they did some degree, there's some people stopped wearing Japanese clothes, they stopped wearing, you know, speaking a lot of Japanese terms, some of the Japanese ideas of hierarchy and social relationships, how they work, and there's many things that people felt were more Japanese culture than they were Buddhism. But you can't really separate Buddhism from culture. Just like you can't really separate Buddhism teaching Buddhism without having a language. You know, so it's culture and languages, ways people communicate and how they get along with each other and for not get along, but how they organize themselves. And one of the things that happened I my kind of analysis of it is that as people dropped the Japanese culture they adopted it. different culture and that different culture for people who were deeply acculturated in American societies different ways American culture were represented those cultures and so we have a no American culture of various forms kind of coming together. And sometimes it's invisible to the people who are creating a new form of Buddhism that they have a culture we think we're culturally free. But there's a culture is like here at IMC You know, I think normally when I come in here and you're here I you know, I don't you know, don't think about this being so much of culture and, and I mentioned that to this group of people that knew me well today in this class and, and it was all kind of done in jest, but because I don't take it. So anyway, they said, Yes, skill, you'll see it because you created it.

To some degree, that's true. I was, you know, I've been building thing, but I'm very conscious that that we have a very strong culture and people who are new coming in for the first time, they probably feel it quite strongly it's very different than than our popular culture it's very different a lot of other groups and

organizations and religious centers that people go into and so that people feel something but the rules of how you behave in this particular culture. We don't write them out it's not clear. So some people come in here What am I supposed to do you take off your shoes do not take off your shoes you know you're supposed to bow you don't by the guy up front, he bows Am I supposed to bow? You know, people don't necessarily talk to you when you come in through the door if you're brand new. So is this a culture of kind of people being shy or, you know, what is it What's going on? And so it can be a little awkward for people who don't are not familiar with what's going on what's happening here. Who What is this? So what is the cultural norm that's operating here. And then we have people who are already in America who belong to other subcultures in our society, or they're not subculture, but full, fully formed cultures in very different where Buddhism has a very different expression. And we have ethnic groups of Buddhism, that you have the ethnic temples and the culture is, you know, quite strong, some of them are seen as cultural centers. And so, say a few more things. When I was in Burma, practicing in Burma, we had a one eyed a wonderful teacher. It was also very strict. And he, one of the wonderful qualities he had was he was very inclusive of everyone who came to practice there. And there were people from all over the world and Burmese themselves and people from all over the world. And from all I could tell he was equally inclusive and gentle. in teaching everyone the saying everyone could practice there, everyone was taught the same, it was all great. And that was great. However, he was culturally blind. He had seized the lens in which he saw people was through very much a Burmese cultural lens, and a particular Burmese Buddhist lens. And he applied the same lens to everybody. And because he was inflexible in the lens that he did, he missed a lot of people. And he gave advice to people that was actually quite detrimental to them. And there were a lot of people who were actually quite harmed, practicing that environment. I knew many people read to come back to the west and do years of psychotherapy, because it was so powerful. The The, the atmosphere, the conditioning that was there. So he was inclusive, but he didn't understand the differences people have when I practice in the monastery in Japan, They're some of the monks who were there were not very inclusive. And I was told directly to me these people said, Why are you here? Practicing Zen in Japan? You have to be Japanese to understand Zen. It was really limited, you know, that was such a, it was very particular to Japanese. So like, you know, who are you stepping in here? You can't understand this, you know, I was almost like being pushed away. So, is Buddhism is enlightenment is freedom, liberation does have anything to do with culture. How do we live in a culture as a Buddhist community as Buddhist teachers? How do we understand these issues? How do we, how do we understand them well enough so that we don't cause harm to people, offend people, and what we say it's very easy, you know, to say things that excludes people. My favorite painful example, is a colleague I was teaching with who said gave a talk about mindfulness about how it's so easy not to be mindful. Because when you're doing things you can get so excited what you're doing. You don't, you know, you're not being mindful at the same time. And she said it this way, she said, to the audience, we've all had the experience of eating at an expensive restaurant, and having expensive dessert, and being so animated conversation, we don't taste the dessert. Well, we all have had that experience. We have a society full of poor people who are poor and challenged financially. And I could imagine there was someone there and the audience had heard that they probably felt a lot of pain, like oh, you know, you know, what about me and my situation? So that's not exactly a cult exactly a cultural thing. But it's, it's so easy.

So how do we take into account so we don't like the Burmese teacher who didn't take it into account, and what's their proper way of doing it and how do we how do we, how do we relate to our own culture or Buddhist culture? We have one how do we We relate to it. I think it's very important not assume that we're culture free. But we don't have to give up our culture but what do how do we relate to and how do we relate to the cultural differences people have and, and I apologize to really go on and on but I'll do one more thing. And then the one of the things that I find a lot of very appreciative of, is the degree to which we are a diverse, diverse population here at IMC. People come from all over many countries and

many different backgrounds. And I would love to have more diversity here than we have. We have some and it's so wonderful. And seeing the people who come from many different backgrounds. I'm also people come and talk to me. I'm aware of People have different orientations, different understandings different about how this stuff works. And some people come from cultures and countries where they're a little bit disoriented. They have particular ways in which the expectation is cultural expectation and related of how people should relate to a teacher and religious teacher. And they're a little bit disoriented, but surprised, didn't know quite what to do. They come up to me and talk to me. So what's going on here? For example, if somebody interrupts me while I'm talking, you don't interrupt this teacher. Maybe they raised their hand I have a question. And that's, like, unheard of in some cultures, you know. And so that's, you know, it's kind of seemed odd to them, and they feel disoriented. So it's so easy to have this kind of thing happen. So what do we do? How do we live in this world? And how do we practice what is the Dharma have to do with this stuff? is kind of the question that's behind This this evening.

So one of my core shuttle etiquettes is not to interrupt the teacher.

I'm very grateful for the opportunity to be here tonight and sharing a little bit of my experience with these practice and

what he's been for me.

When I started practicing, I started because there was something within Buddhism that called me that it felt so comfortable it felt home in some ways. And when I started going into retreats and go To centers. That feeling of home started changing a little bit I started feeling very isolated, very lonely within the practice and it was very confusing and very possibly for me because there was such a strong calling and love for for the Dharma. And at the same time there was tremendous loneliness. And as I continue going to different centers on interacting with different Sangha as I was looking for ways in which for ways that I could share my full experience, the experience of whatever showed up at that moment unexperienced of loneliness and experience of feeling different and not understanding what what what was about

and

also how to

keep things from, from my background how how to keep honoring everything else that was showing up also in terms of being raised Catholic and being a gay woman and feeling respect for elders, family, a collective that held me together when I was not here in this country. So through Buddhism and through the practice I got to a point in which I started. I started to touch to touch the edges of what it was that brought that isolation and loneliness and it was an experience of difference. It was an experience of difference but it was the fact that I, I was not talking about it. I was not being inclusive in meeting the full experience that was showing up for me at different moments. I was pushing away everything that had to be with the friends and I was bringing it for me in me not, you know, not talking about it fully or calling it how it was. What How come I'm How come everyone is white in this room. Let's Say or how, why they're not in a Sangha, where the majority were people of color, why, where are the white people I came here from Puerto Rico. And

my cultural heritage comes from

they are free can, the Spaniard and indigenous people and so coming from that mix, it was surprising to me to be like in a group in a homogeneous group sometimes.

So all that to say that

once I was able to meet that suffering that meeting the experience fully been inclusive in that way inclusive In, in acknowledging everything that was showing up from the joy of meeting someone else from my country to meeting also someone else that had some insight about sharing with people of other countries or from other backgrounds, to the suffering of feeling my own inner racism, my own inner inner self hatred, to a point of also acknowledging the compassion for my suffering and transforming that and feeling the collective grief, fill in the collective fill in a collect Holding me, in that sense in in feeling that suffering and me being also part of a collective that was holding other people in seeing whatever experience they had. That's when Buddhism became interesting to me. That's when I started feeling more at home. When everything that was showing up, I was able to call it to acknowledge it to say, Okay, what else? What else

I remember one of

also coming to terms with with being a here for many years, I moved to the states See in 1990 and for a period of time and it comes some goals is less often now but at some point I just didn't know where I was I was here or I was at home going to Puerto Rico at some point my parents are going to a store where you really are from here. You don't sound like you're from here I oh my gosh, I completely lost it. Just feeling okay who I am, who am I in this moment in depending where I was going or places where where I was sharing with other you know, people different from me or people that at some point I felt part of that group and that now with other experiences in In my life that now is you know I become so broder How do I hold that identity? So

at some point I was like this I love this example of the hands of the issue at hand book from Gil. I started like this here I was inside this hand closed in a fist and holding all the different identities so afraid I was going to lose everything so afraid, okay. If I'm going to be just be, how can I be without losing? I'm going to lose everything. Do I have to assimilate completely Do I have to stop praying that their father at night and not say the precepts so through the practice, and Meeting experiences just lead tell by litella opened the till by little and, and everything was here. And here I was

Puerto Rican,

Catholic,

Buddhist and sometimes nothing sometimes not necessarily needing to identify with one of the identities just holding everything is so liberating. I just feel so happy and so grateful for these practice doesn't mean that some days you know, I wake up and suddenly I'm like this but it is through these practice through going through. How does it feel right now? How is this experience of

fear Or

Joel your love how we seen the breath how it is in the body, how it is in the mind how it is

around me that

I can be sitting here in front of you right now.

So

that's, I think that's

one of the things that I the thing that's I think some of these batteries are low and got happened to me when the batteries

that we tried to give me some fresh batteries okay and

In a good place first first you have to do it.

So, each one of them say one of the things that resonated with me now is release. Practice of being present whatever shows up and not pushing things away or denying things and just

being present showing up for it right what showed up for you.

It is too much to start fixing it. You know it's tool sometimes it's just too overwhelming. Right.

So here we are today. And here it would city at IMC and a large community of people that some of you have been here many times before some of you it might be your first time here. And we all have our differences, we all have our similarities. And we all come from some culture or cultures that we have within us. And we come and encounter a community here and IMC, we encounter teachings, teacher, variety, different things that go on here. And there's a meeting of you and what's here, you and Buddhism and you and a community, community and you and so Bernie gives a wonderful example of someone who, you know, found the center of the suffering of pushing things away and found that she had to kind of stand up ourselves at home when she included so the question for you is if anyone would like to be part of this is what would be a good good thing is to show up for. And on this topic here today. Anybody want to anyone has their own things they want to. We don't want a long explanation of something but anything that someone would like to name that would be good to show up for and just name the way the Buddha named. So

I come from a Christian background. My name is Noel, Christine and I was born on Christmas Day. And I married a Jewish person and I am here. Just I go to church. I love Christmas. I love Christmas Eve and going to church and I love going to the synagogue. I love bar mitzvahs. I love every kind of wedding anywhere because Especially love it here because I really just show up two places where I find the divine, where I find something really that we're participating in, that is connecting us and lifting us, inspiring us. And I find that when I find it, I go back and I go back again. And so I'm here so much because I show up really just for that. The Divine I'm finding in all of us and tonight and every time I come

Thank you.

So in order to be whole or complete, what should be included which we show up for to you show up for what would be good to name to recognize

lately it's been important for me to show up

for sadness. Thank you.

What else is speaking?

Yeah, sure.

I'm here for community. I could be at home doing a guided meditation using a cell phone app

with other people doing this

great community

I also come here for the community. And one of the things that is sort of hooked me here is we're all here sort of struggling with the same thing. The meditation stuff is not easy. And I feel like everybody is here just struggling against whatever they've got in their life and trying to make the meditation work.

Yeah. So what we have in common is our suffering. Thank you. What we have in common is our suffering and hopefully our practice to meet that suffering, not to ignore it.

I find that curiosity is a good quality to show up with. I'm mindful of what I heard as a good definition Have a gap year God's love, which was to have an overwhelming passion for the other person to be exactly who and what they are in that moment. Nice. And when I bring that quality to any encounter I have including unpleasant ones or ones that are uncomfortable for me. I find that I bring a different quality to that experience.

Nice.

I'm here to do something different.

Sorry. I said, I come here to do something different.

Thank you. In keeping with the theme, I think it's it's challenging to be with all the different feelings that come up for things like the shooting in Ferguson

the things that are going on that are

so sometimes seem as if they're tearing us apart.

To show up for that.

That's important.

I'm really struck by

how the, the our inner world is. We could see it as a multicultural group to you emphasized including everything that comes up. And that's what we're talking about that in the inner sense of sadness comes up for

shyness our you know, I've been working with just

Being showing up search for shyness when it comes up.

But I really love what what you said because it

it points us to the inside being the real

challenge for including and that the inside and the outside are probably mirrors of each other and that that we can work on both fronts including the outer and the inner.

So thank you.

I think this is a really interesting question.

I think for me, being gay, I think most of my life I've kind of looked for how I've been the outcast and what I know notice is that in my upbringing in early times in my youth, I walked away from Christianity because of that. And so just this discussion is making me think, well, what if there had been a space for me to be angry? What if there had been a space for me to say what about me? Or space for me to really express my sadness? Or my isolation? My feelings of those things? Might I have stayed there? And so it makes me think, okay, so if we are going to address multiculturalism, is it about being able to include everyone's perspective? Like, I don't think that's possible. But is it more about being able to actually hear when people are angry or feeling isolated or sad, and actually being able to hold that space?

Thank you. Thank you. Second part of the open forum this morning. This this evening is to give for you And other people that chance tonight

noticing when and where I need to set boundaries when things are different than I'd like or maybe somebody's doing something differently than

than I would do it.

Yet no one's limits and boundaries take care of oneself.

I show up to come home to me

nice

I haven't been here for a while, and I was really missing it. And I realized that I show up to really, now really to be in a totally different environment and experience and what I'm used to spiritually. And I've been to some other saunas recently, and I was really drawn to come back here. And part of it is the learning and just all everyone sitting together, knowing we're all doing the same thing. But I do like to show up where there's a component of interpersonal interaction and Thursday once a month really

draws me in, I hate to miss it, and I'll even come up It's late. And part of it is I think I saw her tonight there's always a meaningful exercise. process to go through. And then a deep sharing, in addition to meditation and those three components together are real draw for me. And I'm really grateful to have that Thursday once a month. I wish it was more often by Friday. No, it's Thursday morning for the women's group. Oh, that group. Yeah. Wonderful.

Yeah, women's group that

it's once a month. And the other thing I just want to share this with you, as a child, I lived in New York and Puerto Ricans were kind of looked down on in New York, especially when I was in a public school for a short while. And it wasn't really until I've been now to Puerto Rico, four times. And each time I've had a really rich experience and when I really started learning about the culture, the lack of jobs, and being in the presence and being in the minority and being surrounded by this warm welcoming people that I met, did I have a whole new spin on how easy it is to make assumptions, and when you don't really know anything about the reality of that culture. And so how we can somehow infuse that experience without having to go say to Puerto Rico, where I've been traveling all over the world, and I noticed that with my husband's work, I noticed that each time I go to a country and meet the people, that it just puts a different spin on it completely. So I'd love to know how that same feeling could be acquired from being here with people from these other countries by not having to travel and immerse myself

do I answer that

So

I think he's still out. Okay.

My experience has been that the more open I am in meeting someone, where they are and bringing myself my whole self to that moment, and being fully out authentic as much as I can, I can, I can travel without having to go on a plane. by experiencing that person fully by listening, the listening where this person having the curiosity of who is this person how this person came here, sharing the Dharma, sometimes not even without, without words, but just by sitting together, sharing together, there's, there's a moment for everything. There's a moment for everything. So to be fully present to that person. That's what I would say that

you can go around the world

without going on a plane

This is

sound. So I just want to say a couple of things. One is that I think that in this whole question of how to be inclusive and how to meet everyone and meet ourselves, one of the things, one of the gifts we have, we have is our practice or mindfulness practice, which is not really meant in itself to offer solutions, but to make the space where everything can kind of unfold and be met and be seen and I wouldn't I tremendous valuable to just to have space, as the man said in the corner over there that make space to hold everything and be respectful and be curious and interested in what's there. And that's how we learn. So I hope that I am see our community here. can have that as a goal is to be a place where it's safe to come and be yourself and to express what's going on and, and find support for it or recognition

for it, or at least someone who's a group of people are all kind of willing to practice mindfulness or curiosity interest, what is this, rather than, you know, you know, pushing things away or avoiding things or saying that's not acceptable, something that we hold everybody. And so no matter what background you have, the hope is this place where you're okay to be who you are and your practice as you are in a community or other people who feel safe to be who they are. And that's the hope and, and hopefully we can do that together. And but I don't know how well we can do it together. Unless people come and talk about it or say what's going on. You go out in the open, the more we can have things out in the open in healthier it is for all of us and to find our way through these issues. So with that, I think I would like to ask Bruni to say the last words.

See

everything is included.

Everything is included. Including the discomfort including the discomfort of saying, I don't understand, including the discomfort of saying

are you from

this place or the solder place or I'm afraid of saying something wrong or everything is included

in the Dharma.

So I hope that whatever, whatever words you take with you tonight or whatever comes to you later after you leave that bear many, many fruits for you in your practice.

Thank you.

Thank you.