

# 2014-12-21 The Concept of The Sacred

Tue, 9/15 9:48PM • 39:22

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

sacred, people, buddhism, world, divide, awareness, word, monastery, creates, profane, present, mind, open, heart, religion, important, idea, zen, thinking, shoes

## SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

Good morning. I guess the topic for today is the concept of the sacred. And does Buddhism have anything that's sacred? And what is the sacred and one of the kind of aspects of words like a sacred and spiritual is that it's very easy to use them. And in such a way that people are inspired by the sacred spiritual, some people. Whereas the people using the word don't have the same reference for what it means. So it's a wonderfully vague word. And we can evoke the sacred and everyone thinks they know what it means and everyone's inspired. And maybe there's very different understandings and definitions of what it is. One of the things that's interesting about Buddhism is that Buddhism didn't get started in the English language. And it got started another language Indic languages and then other languages in Asia. And there's some English words, Western words which proved to have a poor fit with Buddhism as it was spoken or written traditional texts. And so the word spiritual, you know, where does you know, Buddhist teachers even I use the word spiritual often enough, but there's no you know, you can't translate spiritual back into the language of the Buddha you'd be hard to fit hard pressed to find out what you know, what's the good thing. And then the word sacred as well perhaps, also the word even the word Buddhism, you'd have a hard time finding a good match for the word Buddhism in, in, in most traditional Buddhist languages. There's words like the Buddhist teachings, which are often used as substitutes, but the word Buddhism is a kind of a Western invention. And then the other word that's kind of interesting is the word religion. Some countries had to coin a word to translate the English word religion or into their language. And so, in Japan, they kind of made up a word when they encountered the West in the 1800s or so. You know, but it's such an obvious, you know, for many people who grew up speaking English, it's like, an obvious word, right? It's like, doesn't everyone have a religion, it means Buddhism, sacred spiritual. So I didn't grow up with any religion, and particularly didn't grow up with Christianity or Judaism. And I started to encounter especially Christian practitioners, after I was a Buddhist teacher having more deeper conversations with them and exploring their shared religious life. And one of the things that took a little while for me to understand was the starting the starting point for the discussions for what was really religion was very different. And one of the maybe it's difficult to see that from if some if someone grew up here in a Western theistic religion, it might be hard to kind of see that difference. But if someone didn't grew up in a theistic religion perhaps did this, to me, for example, stood out like was very different. And as I understand it, maybe I don't understand these religions very well. But as I what I've seen is that people who come out of a Judeo Christian background, have a very strong idea idea that the sacred is out there, that what's divine is out there. And there's a relationship you have with what's divine relationship that you have with God, and God has hopefully good relationship with you. And that relationship is very important. And so there's always almost always going to be this kind of distance or separation between you and the sacred you and the divine and establishing the right relationship to that is very important. And sometimes some people said that certain kinds of theistic religions the idea of God fits very well into various kinds of paternal ideas that people have parental ideas people have of what the parental figure should be, and people hold the god

up that way you relate to the person just in that kind of way. So they have a relationship to something. Whereas in Buddhism, the way that I was introduced to it and practiced it was that there was no God out there. There is no thing out there Sacred Realm out there. There's no heaven out there that we're supposed to be in relationship to.

And so when I've had been involved in Christian Buddhist dialogue, sometimes I've seen deists perplexed by me completely confused, like what? How can this even be a religion? If there's not this relationship with this thing? Which is the sacred realm where the divine or something like that? And you know, maybe I'm perplexed too, because why do we need it? Why do we need that relationship? And maybe I'm drawn because I'm drawn to some of the Christian mystics, a little bit of red. Because it seems that what I've read is that some of them and that as you go into the dimension of God relating to God, God kind of dissolves or falls away, or the concepts of God falls away, and you can't have a concept of gods that falls away. And so that doesn't become another out there. And maybe it just is, but what is Buddhism has a sacred if it doesn't have something which is the other which is sick or something you can relate to that thing which is going to be that the thing the divine. The word sacred us, you know, is connected to the word profane. profane, means that literally apparently means in Latin In that which is in front of the temple. And so the temple is a sacred place. So there's a with whether whether with the word sacred, there's a division to divide between that which is profane, and that which is divine or special. And some people have felt that they've made a very strong divide, divide between that which is profane and sacred. And some people have seen the body as being profane, or the world is being profane. And what's sacred is some other dimension, some other place or maybe in the church, or maybe in heaven, or maybe connected to the saints or God or whatever it might be. The other thing about the word sacred that's changed, I think, in our society over these last I don't know, century or two more, is that I believe that the it used to be what was considered sacred was had a certain I certainly have power to it. It was something that people were a part of Afraid of there was fear and all connected to the sacred. And you don't want to cross the line, you don't want to. You don't want to mess with what's sacred. And that's true in many societies where there's a taboo about certain religious kind of activities. You don't want to mess with the religious dimension of life because it can come back in. And, you know, trouble you. But you know, what's in the last hundred years, I don't know how long especially here in the modern West, reality has been domesticated, and spiritualities and religion has been domesticated to a grip to a great degree. And so the idea of being afraid of the sacred is not something that seems very current, or certainly not very popular, at least among people that I talk to her hang out with the domestication of it, and I wonder what's lost when things get domesticated. When things that you know, everything becomes see into the filter of being tame or being easy or being comfortable or being kind of, you know, kind of everything has to accommodate it. To me, you know, and everything is safe, everything's come safe. Video of everything should be safe and comfortable. I don't know maybe that's a middle class dream.

So the sacred. So traditionally, the word that probably comes in Buddhism that comes closest to the word sacred is the word and in Pali, it's Ariya. And it's an ancient word it refers to a certain people originally the Aryans, and it gave us the name of Iran. And Aryan people who came in from the steppes of Russia or someplace and came into India about I don't know four or 5000 years ago, the Aryan invasion invaders and you got established there and they became a little bit the kind of the, among the ruling class of ancient Indians and kind of created a seemingly a divide between the natives and the Aryans. And over time over the thousands of years, and by the time you get to Buddhism, the word Aryan was still being used. And, the Buddha used it for particular kinds of people and not the people who were born as the Aryans who came from particular lineage of people, but rather the Buddha redefine the term to particular people who've had certain spiritual attainments, and because of the word Aryan is a difficult word for many people still to this day, because of Germany and all that, in the West.

The usual way of translating to English is as nobles and so the noble therefore, Aryan truths of Buddhism are the Four Noble Truths.

The four Aryan people are the four levels and then lightened meant that people can Buddhism says you can attain but we call them the noble one. The noble ones is usually English translation for all this. And so here the what's considered sacred is not found in a reality outside of people, but in the people who have a certain level of attainment. Now sometimes in Buddhism, then those people are considered a sacred. And there's a lot of funny business that goes on among Buddhists about these special people who have attainments and they're highly, you know, spiritually mature and, you know, people want to have be close to them. They wanted to get married from them, they want to have certain charisma and so how you treat those people is very important. There's a lot of superstition sometimes around those people and the craziest little superstitions I heard in Thailand was of a soldier who went into the toilet after a very highly attained monk had used it to collect a little piece of his poop. Put in a little bottle and, and kept it because he thought then he'd be Captain battle he'd be safe he wouldn't be shopping. So, so, you know this is not these noble people have you know are seeing sometimes it having very special qualities so if you sacred poop, but still they are repository you know the closest word to the sacred in Buddhism is probably already out. Aryans are these know the noble ones. But if you don't focus on them out there as being those people get having a relationship to something outside of you that's going to save you or benefit you. And the idea is to have the focus back on yourself here. Understand what goes on in your own mind what goes on here with you. And one of the things that we can begin understanding is how the mind creates all kinds of divisions. And the mind creates a division of inside and outside the mind creates a division from Buddhist point of view the mind creates a division between sacred and profane. The mind creates the division Being good and bad. As Shakespeare said, so maybe was Hamlet to said, there is no good and bad, but people make it. So the idea that we're, you know, a huge role that our mind has in creating how we see the world that we live in. And so one of the aspects of Buddhist practice is to begin understanding very well, what our mind is doing, how the mind creates concepts and ideas that we live in. And one of the things we see is the divide. So if we're suffering, or say differently, if there is hate, we live in a divided world. You have to live some self and other out there, create a strong separation to have hate for someone or for anything. The same thing with greed and lust, there's a divide, there's separation. And if we live and also probably fear to some degree as well. And those those movements have greed and hate and lust and fear, create suffering for us. And so one of the ways of understanding suffering if we suffer, we're living in a world that's somehow divided against ourselves, there's a certain kind of tension and stress. And that as we sit and practice and learn to dissolve that stress or that tightness or that go over dissolve the greed and the hate, then the divisions those create start falling away. And one of the remarkable things to experience is a mind that has no hard and fast separation between self and other, that is mine that the awareness they can hold everything, the awareness that is not have it doesn't have an idea of what acceptable and not acceptable, what's that this is not okay. This is not acceptable, not acceptable in a particular way, acceptable or not acceptable to receive it in an open heart to receive it in an open mind. Anything that can't be received and an open heart and open mind is then put outside, profane, outside of what is acceptable.

And then there's something which is acceptable something special. And so then we're trying to protect ourselves or protect what we think is who we are, protect ourselves from what we think is dangerous or difficult or not appropriate or not sacred. And that creates that divide, which Buddhism is trying to heal. So if the sacred is set in opposition to the profane, who doesn't, doesn't doesn't have much rule for it, then we're trying to heal that divide and wear heels is not in our ideas. It heals in the mind that relaxes the mind that opens up the heart that relaxes and opens up the heart that's willing to be open and receive everything. And so as Sharon Salzberg book title says, the heart that says why it is the world

the creativity, ever build it to say yes in a certain way to everything but to come here not to hold things away. And that's a difficult thing to do. Because we have a lot of conditioning within us that gets triggered by many of the things that go on in the world. And know we get frayed we get hurt, we get full of desire, hostility, all kinds of things go on, where we, you know, because we have the conditioning we have. And so part of this idea of Buddhism of practice, is to be very careful and compassionate and sensitive to how difficult it is to begin living in the world and an open heart and open mind. But that's the direction we're going. And so to do so we can break down the divides at the heart makes. It doesn't mean that the conventional distinctions are disappear entirely, but it means that They had they occur within a heart This is what is a world they occur within this wider kind of field and context. So one of the practical ways in which this plays itself out and Buddhist practice is, which for me it was really one of the powerful lessons I had from Zen practice was that everything you do, everything you encounter is sacred. Everything that so it isn't that there's some some things which are more sacred than others. But that everything you encounter is sacred, not because it's sacred in and of itself, because that memory that's establishing its relationship to things so the world out there. Buddhism doesn't any strictly speaking Buddhism, neither is neither against the world or for the world. It's not celebrating the world, nor diminishing or demeaning the world. The world is what it is, the world is not good. The world is not bad in Buddhist terms, the world is what it is. But how we relate to it is really the main thing that's important for us as an individual, what comes out of us, there's a famous Mahayana teaching that says, if the mind is pure, all things are pure, if the mind is pure, all things are pure. If the mind is not pure, then you will start seeing all kinds of things being then we start dividing the world. And then you know, all that. So in zen, you know, the idea that everything you encounter, if you want to meet it with a certain kind of presence, you can immediately engage with it as as it may be as if it's sacred or as its sacred is found in that experience. And so, what happens in that encounter? What happens if you really willing take everything as being something you give yourself completely to as being this is this is it, then you start discovering? Maybe that you're not really that way, that maybe you have some hesitation, that washing the dishes is not really that special, you know, there are more important things to do, you know, are driving your car to go and meditate to come here to IMC, right? I mean, you really so important for you to meditate. And that's what really is kind of sacred and special and spiritual. And that's what's really important than and so driving a car is just kind of like, how you get to the sacred to the special, right? So you don't have to pay attention to driving your car faster. Or you can get here, pull some wheelies and, you know, you know, run a few red few red lights, you get hit get here in time, so you can really be present, really be present and relaxed and open to things as they are. I mean, that's, you know, you want to be you want to be you know, you want to really encounter the universal sacredness of all of life in particular places in particular times when it suits you Right.

You know, so let's how you drive your car. How do you drive your car? Do you drive your car in a way that's sacred in your car you discovered a special divine quality of life. And so it really depends on what you bring to the situation. Do you bring yourself fully to which was just that one activity? Many people, not so much now nowadays, but used to be that because I mean, maybe after I more recently left Buddhist monastic life, people who are not going to become monastics would ask me, well, how could you How can I, as a lay person, get the same benefits of practice as a monastic? You know, living in a monastery. And one of the things I think a good answer for that is, when you do something, just really do that one thing when you're doing it. And that's something that that's that would be you know, you get a lot of the benefits of being a monk or nun. Use really when you're really present for something with the person you're with. The activity you're doing the dishes, you're doing whatever you're doing, just really be there for that one thing and engage in it. My certificate, I've always kind of joked that there has been after my years of Zen training, there was particular Zen activity that I should have gotten my monastic activity, I should have gotten my certificate in Zen training and poor. And that was, when I first came to the monastery. They put in the meditation hall, it was probably twice as big as this room here. They had platform like I'm sitting on here, platform, they've got all the way around the periphery of the



of the room where people meditated on. So it was quite a quite a lot of platforms. So they just built them, and they were getting ready to install them. And for three months, my job was to sand the tops of them to make them smooth. So I was given an electric sander. And during my work days during the monastery I was sanding, and that was my training and Zen. You know, so The idea was that, you know, you don't think of you know, Zen as a monastic life as being a training and sanding. But just give myself over to this activity and just sand and then you know, I many times I didn't want to do it, I didn't think this was really spiritual, I've come to the monastery to meditate. What is sanding have to do with anything about Buddhism, the sanding was, you know, just a silly little thing. And so I had all these reactions to it. But as I learned to work through those and through those and just look and learn to be simpler and simpler, and just sand the sanding became delightful. It was like a special gift because not because we're sanding was delightful was delightful is not to resist it, not to be judging it not to be fighting and not to be just just just very simply just be there with ascending. So one of the words, one of the ideas of the sacred for me in Buddhism is the awareness which includes everything When awareness can be inclusive, then we're in the sacred dimension. When awareness as soon as awareness excludes something, that's not okay to be present for, then we have a divided world. And if you have a too divided then you can one way form a divider wall can take is a very tight separation between what's sacred and profane, which I think is can be a problem, if you want you want to do is to be as hard as white as the world. And so an awareness which is all inclusive, is one of the challenges that we're trying are one of the tasks of mindfulness practice, to sit and what is it like to meet this what is it like to be open to this experience? What's it like not to be pushing away or holding tight to experience or having preferences from my experience, or being selective what's supposed to happen or trying to get rid of what's here to get something better, just to really just be present for this, they keep opening to this opening to this to find Not that things in the world change, but you change in your ability to hold it all. It's the mind that can hold it all peacefully, which I would like to think of is that which is most sacred in Buddhism.

So one of the ways that so the word so I don't really like the word sacred too much as a buzz word which I prefer, but just doesn't come off my tongue well enough to want to use maybe because of other associations, but it's the word holy. And the reason I like the word holy, it comes from the word whole, be complete. And so rather than sacred that comes already has this word idea of division in it sacred and profane. I don't know if the word holy has something that you know, I guess the opposite is partial, but to be hold to be complete, and so what is it to see another person as being hold? What is it to see yourself as whole? What is it to, to be to have an awareness or presence or heartfulness, that can hold it all. And to see ourselves as whole to see the situation as whole. And that's a very strong preference that I've I find is the preference to see individuals as being whole or complete. See the situation is complete, and whole. And I think the reason I have that preference is that idea seems to be most closely in affinity with the sense of open, relaxed awareness. That is not creating divisions, not creating judgments, not creating a problem in the world. You can't underestimate how many problems we have because our mind thinks so. Who is maybe it's Mark Twain, someone said, I've had a lot of problems in my life, most of them which never happened. So how much do we do the mind create problems? So I'd like to end with a reading a story. From my little book, The monastery within, it's called with as a wonderful thing for Buddhists very bordering on sacred title. Because it's so important such an important value in Buddhism, like one of the highest values and stuff, wisdom and compassion. So this is very gonna be very promising chapter it is such a high, lofty, chapter title, we prepare yourself for a lot of wisdom, a lot of compassion, the depths and fullness of it. Maybe all you need to know about these this topic. When it was time for the monastic community to meditate, the new nun headed for the meditation hall, placing your shoes on the shoe rack, she looked down and saw they were not lined up parallel to each other. This helped her to see that she was slightly distracted due to the excitement of our first day in the monastery. That didn't go over distraction. She looked more carefully at what was in

front of her placing her shoes in the shoe rack she looked down and saw they were not lined up parallel to each other. This helped her to see that she was slightly distracted due to the excitement of her first day in the monastery. Letting go of distraction. She looked more carefully at what was in front of her. She saw that her shoes were old and worn. Remember remembering when they were new, she reflected on how all things are transients how quickly they change. Soon she thought, I will be an old nun in this monastery. Reflecting and how precious each moment was. She reached down to straighten her shoes. Doing so she noticed that if she moved them to the left, then there'll be space for another pair of shoes to the right of hers. Thinking of the other monks and nuns were coming to the meditation hall. She just gently pushed her shoes to the side. Happy the new non end through the meditation hall. wisdom and compassion Help you understood to really be there for that experience fully, and to see the wisdom that in that situation and the care for others in that situation, all that you needed all she needed that moment was to be really be present for putting your shoes in the shoe rack. You guys do that today. In our shoe racks here shoe racks are sacred as much as anything else. Anyway, so I hope that these thoughts about the sacred are interesting for you or useful especially want to encourage you to the value of really seeing being present for each thing that you do, how valuable that is. And each person and that an all inclusive awareness is an awareness allows us to be with other people, other people with a heart is white is the world that includes other people that doesn't divide us in them and all the ways that can be painful for All of us. So I hope that as we come to this end of this year and beginning of next year that you will be inspired to have a heart that's includes everyone. Everything.

So we have a few few minutes anyone have any questions or comments or corrections about? Hello?

I like being in the moment I try practicing that, but one problem with it is time.

I get lost.

That's a problem with time you know, life is time consuming.

Then I'm late.

A lot.

Yeah, yeah, that's how it is with kids. You know, we had, you know, like my sons when they were like in kindergarten or nursery school. You know, it's time to go to school. And they were so much in the moment. We would leave and they would stop at their front of our house to look at the flowers, and they'd stop and look at the gravel just really be there with the gravel by the parking lot and, you know, just, you know, just really just really be present for the sacredness of that moment, I guess. But, you know, the schools, you know. So I think that part of awareness that includes everything is also includes an understanding of the context that we live in. And so the context also includes the future. The wider context of our agreements, our life that we live, and if you don't, if you live too much in the only in the present moment, it's a problem. It's a problem for other people as well. But the problem is you have a heart, the mind that's open to it all has to be open to the way that the mind functions, and all those different ways and it does function with projections into the future with making plans with the agreements understandings of things which are not part of the immediate visible world. And so that's part of what we have to be open to the functioning of the mind. To have very narrow idea what it means to be in the present moment is, I think is which some people have leaves too much out. So that, but sometimes we train ourselves to be just really present for one thing. When we're doing that, so that we know what it's like to be present, and then it with, with time, we know how to be present and relax, as we think about what the plans for the day are and what it takes what it requires to get some place on

time and includes reflection, what do I have to adjust what kind of behavioral changes do I have to make so that I can live my life in a way that's in a relaxed way? So if you have to get someplace on time, and you know, you have a tendency to stop smelling the flowers, then and now you're upset with Buddhism because it says you can everybody because you can't stop and smell the flowers. Because you have to get there on time. I think there's also behavioral changes are necessary. So maybe you need to leave home earlier. Or you didn't like that apparently.

That would solve the problem.

Yeah, so it's very important to think very behavioral changes are very important part of all this. And to expect that everything's going to work magically Well, if we just fully present four things, is magical thinking.

Yeah, I have a question.

So one of the things that the awareness has to hold us also when the moment is, is not very, as is a bad moment, right. If a lot of anger comes up or fear her, then the idea is that that also is a sacred moment and You get into the story and the mind starts going building at story. So it's just a matter of kind of holding that that is.

So this is, this is where maybe it's more cautious around these words, I apologize for bringing the word sacred into your vocabulary today. Okay. And though the sacred moment, again, maybe implies that it's out there. But it's an opportunity for the sacred awareness. And that I think that I think it's I prefer to see what's the most that which is sacred is the awareness that could hold it. So if you're angry, it's possible to relate to the anchor with sacred awareness with an awareness doesn't exclude it. It doesn't mean that it's it now becomes comfortable, but an ability to hold the discomfort in such a way that we're not being pushed around by it that we're not caught in the grip of it. So how do we open to this experience to how do we open to anger to judge anger as being bad or negative? To judge it as something that shouldn't be there, or to judge it as justified to judge the I'm right and I'm gonna you know bulldoze through this world. All those things aren't you know, are create more divide, but to the task in the sacred awareness is to open the awareness up and hold the awareness hold the anger. So we're, we're comfortable with being uncomfortable. We're holding the awareness so that they hold the anger so that the anger doesn't control us. But we're also not fighting the anger. We're not in conflict with it. Thank you. It makes sense. Yes. Here's appeared Fred.

Thank you. Um, I guess I understood what you said about opening your heart completely. But what about cases where people are injuring you physically or another way to seems I suppose you could hold that with an open heart but I think you need to push it away.

Exactly, I agree. So yeah, so we can hold it an open heart, but we push away. So what we do with our bodies in our mouth, it's not the same thing that we do with our awareness. And so sometimes when people talk about having open awareness, being open and kind of accepting to everything, and it's understood to be all in, you know, you know, the last, I don't know, sometimes stood to generally awareness can be accepting of everything. But our, but our discernment, our understanding the situation, our mouth when we say we do with our body doesn't have to accept some things. So saying, No, you know, this can't be said no, no ferociously. So it's epitomized by the teaching that I think Mahindra Ji an Indian teacher in this 70s. It was a woman who was India was studying with him and I guess she has some question about maybe it happened to her on this day that some someone on the street tried to grab her. And so she went back to him, What do I do when someone grabs me? And he

said with all the love that you could muster, you hit the person over the head with your umbrella. And this this and this idea is also held in Britain Buddhist monastic rules. Buddhism puts a tremendous emphasis on Ahimsa, non violence, non harming, but monks and nuns are not allowed to have any weapons not allowed to fight. However, if, if they're being if they're being attacked, they're allowed to push away, strike away so if someone comes with a fist or with a knife, you can knock that fist away or that knife away. You don't just stand there defensiveness so the task is how To keep your mind so it's a lot, it's a lot easier to keep your heart open. If you have confidence that you have the ability to say no or to, or to, you know, protect yourself or do what's you know why in the situation, if you have street smarts. So yeah, that's the task is to learn how to do that. But to make I think sometimes it's easier if we make that distinction between what we say and do versus what we how our hearts are open, then it's easier to keep our hearts open. If that makes sense. So one more and then we'll stop. Yes.

Have you talk was very timely this morning because it seems like the world is just full of a whole lot of warring attitudes and opinions, particularly in recent months, and a lot of hyperbole and a lot of black and white thinking and it's really difficult to stay Out of that, and not participate and try to bring some kind of, if not neutrality, at least some kind of more inclusive thinking to some of the current issues. So I just want to thank you.

You're so one of the, as I say, one that inspired me to say one thing. So for me, it's been very meaningful, the emphasis that Buddhism gives on the Four Noble Truths. The four noble truths are the ways a way of studying the devices we have in this world, to understand something about the psychological roots of it. And while respecting the suffering, basically, if you see the suffering within situation, as opposed to seeing who's right and wrong, or what's true and not true and so you know, in terms of politics or in terms of whatever, but if you really if we really stop in our and pay attention here, people who are suffering, then I think maybe we can start finding the middle ground or the common ground that We all share and maybe find a way to respect each other and find our way. And if we understand the suffering, then we can also begin, then understanding the underlying causes of that suffering underlying conditions that bring that suffering up. And so there's tremendous suffering in our world and politics and then philosophies and all kinds of use. cover over the deeper underlying issues of the heart that are going on. So my hope is that people who do a practice like this might have mindfulness practice or Buddhism, or people who were able to not get pulled into the polemics the divides the controversies, because they can go kind of underneath it into the deeper human level, who what's going on in the heart, and then we can meet each other and explore what's the common good for all of us, not for one side or the other. So May you end this year, being complete, being of a heart that's whole and can hold it all. And they you begin next year with the awareness and the heart that can be as wide as the world. So I'll see you next year on Sunday next year. Thank you