

2015-01-05 Timeless Insight And Adaptable Teachings

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SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

So Good evening, everyone. And can you hear all right? loud enough? Okay, a little bit louder, a little bit louder outside. How's this is better now? Okay. Okay, good.

So it's the custom here at IMC that the first Dharma talk first Monday talk of the year is on the Four Noble Truths. And I gave one yesterday because it's also the custom to give it the first Sunday talk of the year. And today's talk will be quite different than yesterday's. And as an introduction to this talk, I'd like to say that what the basic idea that I'm about to present to you is based on is a revision of Buddhist teachings. The teachings of the Buddha. It's based on recent scholarship. However, you don't have to worry about that scholarship because you wouldn't have noticed Biden said at the front.

So in the history of Buddhism, there were two monumental Lee important events. The first was the Buddha's awakening. And the tradition holds that he was awakened and a particular night under a Bodhi tree outside in the plains of Bihar, India, and without awakening, he became liberated. In the words awakening, the worst liberation are the key words that describe this monumental event. The next monumental event was that he started to teach. And it said that initially he was reluctant to teach. But that some point in his mind was changed. And he set forth to teach and when he first gave his first teaching, that celebrated by a tradition to been the turning of the wheel of the Dharma. So the Dharma the teachings get turned, the teachings get started, they get moved, they start moving in our world for us all. And so there were these two things, there was what he realized and there is what he taught.

And many people, many, many people down through the ages into modern times, have thought that these two things were the same thing. And they've said that what he realized the night of his awakening was the Four Noble Truths. And what he taught when he started teaching is turning of the wheel, the Dharma was the Four Noble Truths. So is awakening. Some of you who are new to meditation, or can remember when you're new to meditation, might have had the experience of being surprised that your mind was out of control. That you seemed quite capable to get along with your life and get up in the morning and put on clothes and go to work. And, you know, get enough food to eat or something. And it seems like you on the surface, it seems like you've had things well under control and masters of your life until you sit down to meditate and close your eyes and try to keep your attention focused on the breath, or focused on the present moment. And some of you probably discovered that, wow, I can't do that. My mind has a mind of its own. Some people will report this to access something like some people are quite shocked at the swirling and twirling of their mind and, and the Buddhist teachings of the idea that there's a monkey mind that though I have monkey minds, like this crazy mind, and they're just kind

of jumping around and active. And it can be it's amazing how much we're pulled around by the nose by some of the things we're thinking about and concerned with that come on in our Mind, we get to see they sit down to meditate, you see it so clearly. And it's not to despair we see this but it's to actually be encouraged that it's a quite a profound insight to start becoming aware of how our mind operates. And it's much better to know your mind is out of control than to have your mind out of control and not to know it. So, if you know if you know it, then you could start taking that into account you can start to have some wisdom about that you can start doing something about it. And then slowly what people who meditate find is that, that monkey mind that busy, active, swirling twirling mind begins to quiet down. And for most people, it's a slow process. And the mind quiets down and that quiet mind that comes still learns still there is a mind that is said to be stable. Mind that is not so in constant constantly changing and going up and down and swirling this way in that way. And that's very satisfying to have a mind which feels kind of at home in itself that feels contented in itself at he'll settled in itself. And just that Buddhism calls when that happens strong they call it Samadhi celebrates a very celebrated word in India the word Samadhi. So this, you know, collected mind settled mind and the night of Buddha's awakening, he had come to a mind of Samadhi of mine that was very settled, very quiet, very peaceful, very still. And so the usual chatter of the mind had quieted down. And one of the things that happens when the usual chatter and concerns and thoughts of the mind quiet down, is we can see more clearly what's going on. We can see it to the depths of them. In a way, that's much, you know, not available unusual situations. And so the mark, the Buddha's mind was quite still quite calm, quite peaceful. And then he saw something that he called suffering. And, you know, it's probably just a kind of a general category word for many different things that could be called sufferings. Maybe he was sad, maybe he was angry, maybe he was discouraged about something who knows what it was, but he called it suffering. He saw that he saw that he was suffering. And he saw that suffering arise appear.

So it's like, you know, if you're sitting quietly someplace, and then at some point, maybe maybe it's at middle The night you're sitting maybe in a bench someplace you're in the Sierras, maybe backpack and you woke up early or something. And it's dark. And then some point, you see that the dawn arises, the dawn appears to conclude, oh, look, it's appearing and you know what that means. Now the day is going to come. And sometimes maybe you could sit on the bench the end of the day, and you see the sunset. And you know, now it's gonna get dark. So the Buddha saw suffering. But more importantly, he saw the arising of his suffering he saw it appear. And many times where our suffering or sadness or upset about something, we just find ourselves in it. And we don't maybe we don't know how it arose or how it appears. Or it appears so quickly. We don't really, like so aware of it arising in a calm, easy going way. Oh, wow. Look, here it comes. And then if it does arise sometimes we immediately get caught in it and involved in reactive and, you know, pushing it away or judging it or making big conclusions about it or something, but to me, you know, but remember, the Buddha's mind was very calm and very still unsettled economists. So he saw his suffering arise, just let it just came. He probably didn't take it personally probably didn't react to it, just saw it arise like the sun arising. And then he saw something that really was the key to his liberation. He saw the suffering cease, he saw it pass. And it's probably not a little thought exercise. So strange for you to think of times when you were suffering. And then after a while, you didn't have that suffering anymore. You probably He had suffering in high school. Those of you who are not in high school now that you're so glad is not happening anymore. And you're clear, it's not happening anymore, you know it's passed. And so you and sometimes it's much shorter. Sometimes you have some big concern, you're upset about something and you get distracted for a few minutes by something. And then you realize those minutes without, that was nice, it's not there, but then it comes back. So they did that suffering would arise appear, and then not appear, is a relatively ordinary thing to do to see. But in is a very quiet, stable settled mind of the Buddha. The suffering arose, he saw it arise. And he saw it sees he saw it pass and in the passing when it's seized and gone, saw his freedom. He saw that when the suffering passes, there's no more clinging, there's no more

craving, there's no more grasping onto anything. There's no more resisting. And in that, and so maybe it arose in past many times, but in the gap when it seizes that gap is kind of like a gap, a void of emptiness of not, you know, something is not there. But it's not like nothing is there ever like, but what's not there is the suffering or the clinging connected to suffering. And then he saw his freedom. And maybe because it was so clear and so open, the mind was so subtle, it wasn't foggy, or it wasn't a lot of static and things going on. He could see right in through the possibility of freedom in that passing and that seizing of his suffering. Some of you have that experience perhaps, but you've never stopped long enough for been quiet enough to appreciate it. So maybe you're passing your suffering passes. And your mind is on to the next one. You know, you have a lot of suffering you'd be concerned about. And so you know, you know, maybe you checked off one, but then you have the list list, right? So you speak, you know, your monkey mind goes on to the next one. But if you don't have to go on to anything, your list of complaints, just freedom. And then he realized that this practice is this, these insights into arising and ceasing of suffering. That is the way to the end of suffering.

So the way he described this, he said, I knew I knew directly when you described his own awakening. I directly knew this is suffering. So the this is important like this, right in front of me right here right now, I see it for what it is, it's suffering. And then he saw, this is the arising of suffering, the birth of suffering. And he said, I directly saw that this is the cessation of suffering, the passing away of it. And then he said, and I directly knew that this is the practice that leads to the cessation of suffering. So, it has to do with the direct insight in his calm, subtle, quiet mind. And it's talking about so, I call this the four liberating insights that the Buddha had. So then, the Buddha through that experience the Buddha, something transformed turned in the Buddha's mind and heart and he discovered how To live with in that gap and that space and that openness, where there is no clinging, no creation or arising of suffering, he found a place to rest. So then he decided at some point to teach. He was reluctant at first because he said he didn't think anyone would get it in thing anybody would understand. But he started to teach. But when he started teach, he had to kind of figure out what to teach. And he taught for some 45 years, he was his experience, they say experiences awakening leaves about 35 36. And he died when he was about 80. So that's a long teaching career. And so that's part of the reason why we have all these records because he talked for so long, perhaps. And those records would survive. If they're accurate enough of his teachings. They shows the teaching of someone who has a very adaptable, very creative in responding situationally to the particular people he was talking to, they would come in particular questions, particular concerns, particular backgrounds, philosophies, and he would kind of shift and change how he thought to suit his audience. So that was kind of built into how he was as a teacher. He didn't just have like a, you know, the stump speech that he gave over and over again. And so, you see this adaptability. So there's these two things. There's the core root insight of awakening. And then there's the which is timeless. And then there's the adaptable changing, teaching that's pointing back to that insight. But that is of time. of time, meaning, that's changes and morphs according to the times the generation, the people we talk to and everything, the teachings of Buddhism are always going to change. Because we have to change into cultures, different cultures, different society, different times different situations. And so they change, they're adaptable enough. So how do we harmonize the core insight, a timeless insight with the teachings that have to change to be suited for different situations different, you know, every generation changes it. I'm kind of now beginning to go into I think the last, you know, the old generation, that last generation, you know, the current last generation or their, you know, what a great thing right? When I started in Buddhism, I was 21. And now I'm, like, you know, over the hill. And so now there's going to be a whole new generation, some of you that come along and you'll find new expressions of the Dharma. You can't wait. You're programming. You're probably listening to me for a long time and We're ready for something new. That's your job. And so it's adaptable, right? This is the core insight, which is timeless. And then there's the teachings, which is adaptable. And so then we come to, so I'm calling the fooders insights that he had, for example, in

enlightenment, the four liberating insights. They sound very similar to what has been known as the Four Noble Truths. What the tradition says is when the Buddha began teaching, turning the wheel of the Dharma, he started teaching the Four Noble Truths.

And it's the truth of suffering, the truth of literally it says, the arising of suffering, the truth of the cessation of suffering and the truth of the of the practice leading to the cessation of suffering sounds very similar. To the insights. However, these four patterns these four statements, suffering, arising cessation and the path get explained or defined in ways that are different than the foreign sites. So, for example, the last memory of the fourth liberating insight is knowing that seeing arising and seeing rising and passing is liberating. The last the fourth of the fourth noble truth is seeing is the teaching that the Eightfold Path is the way leading to the end of suffering. They throw a path or not a particular insight directly in the moment. They fall path is a way to live your life that applies to your life in general. It's a very wise way of living, it creates the conditions for deepening our understanding. insight is a way of creating conditions conditioning that allows the mind to settle and have deep meditation. And but the Eightfold Path is our whole life. How are we supposed to live? The way that the second noble truth is taught? Almost no one refers to the original teaching. But what people say is that the second noble truth explains the cause of suffering. Have you heard that before? The cause of suffering. The original doesn't say that. But it says something, you know, something somewhat connected to that or something interesting. But whatever it was that original said, The Buddha almost never said it. In fact, the explanations of the Four Noble Truths that appear in the ancient records are very rare. In fact, there's only five places in the sutras, where the Buddha explains what he means by the teachings of the Four Noble Truths. There are 18,000 texts, some of them are quite short, that survived from the time supposedly from time to Buddha. And of those 18,000. There is only five that contain the Buddha teaching something called the five noble truths. And Buddhist scholars say that the two primary ones almost certainly don't come from the Buddha. The famous text called the Turning the Wheel of the Dharma, they don't think could have been his first sermon. They think it appeared way after he died.

So the teachings so there was only five places where the teachings of the Four Noble Truths are attributed to the Buddha. And what's even more interesting. The each of those five places that teaching is different so let's say they all were the Buddha's teachings, just say that this is fine. But he taught it five different ways. It's adaptable, it's changeable. He changed it adapted and it's just maybe suited to his audience at his time. So for us, so I think we have permission to take this wonderful teaching of the Four Noble Truths and change it and adapt it and interpret in different ways for our time. I think the for the four liberating insights are timeless root and unchanging insights. They're liberating. The teachings on the Four Noble Truths are templates that offer a perspective that are really useful to to explore and understand our life, and we don't have to be get stuck that there's a true and definite interpretation, this is what the Four Noble Truths are. And one of them and I find the Four Noble Truths very, very useful in my life, and the way that I like to interpret them for myself is that there is suffering from time to time. And there is a cause. And if I can understand the cause, then I have some choice around that suffering, I can do something about it perhaps. And the idea that the cause is explained as craving thirst, even desire to some degree, I find useful. But I have to interpret it, understand it for myself, how that works, how that's how that is. My you know how that's what am I What am I doing? It's kind of like a teaching of take away responsibility for your suffering.

When people suffer, it's very easy for people to blame other people to, complain about something else. And there are other things that contribute to our suffering. But there's something very maturing, very grown up about focusing your attention on where you can make the biggest difference around your particular suffering. And the place that you can make the biggest difference is your contribution to it. And so calling it craving, clinging desire, whatever it is, or just even if you don't even call it that, just call

it there is a cause inside of me a psychological cause. Let me get quiet enough still enough in my mind, so I can see what that is. Let me explore it. It's a very mature thing to do. I think it's a great interpretation has been great for me in my life. And it's good news, very encouraging to hear this idea that yes, suffering can see come to an end. You're not to be stuck suffering. And I find it very helpful. This idea of the Eightfold Path. It's a way of kind of applying and living my life kind of a guideline for a really wise way to live life so that my life can be in harmony with a path to freedom and liberation.

If I walk that path Well, okay, so is it back on, okay. So I find that the Four Noble Truths are very, very useful. And what's very nice is the liberating insights work very well together with the Four Noble Truths. The four noble truths are about how we figure out one way to figure out why way of living in our life. It's a particular template is particular perspective that we can bring and explore and understand. And it's adaptable, it's changeable. It's an interpret, it can be interpreted in different ways. It's it can be adjusted, it can be applied in creative ways in our lives. But the four neighboring insights, give us kind of a North Star, about what this is all about. It isn't just a matter of living the Eightfold Path because it's a good, wise way of living. And it isn't just kind of adapting and interpreting the Four Noble Truths or Buddhism for whatever way we want to interpret them. You know, you know, you're, if you're like, kind of robbing banks, then you can, you know, apply the Four Noble Truths to robbing banks and become a better bank robber. You know, that's silly, right? So there's a Northstar. There's a purpose we don't interpret, complete freedom to interpret any way one Apply any way we want. And the North Star is the experience of liberation, the freedom from suffering, the freedom from compulsion, the kind of freedom where we're where there is a profound sense of ease and peace and freedom in the heart, the mind in the body into being that we're here. And so the four liberating insights are the North Star for the Four Noble Truths. And these two things go hand in hand support each other. But they're not the same thing. And until recently, people have always assumed these were the same thing. And people didn't didn't recognize the for liberating insight as As for what they what they actually are. They always have thought that the Four Noble Truths is what the Buddha experienced the night that was awakening and it According to what the explanations are of the Four Noble Truths, it just doesn't make sense that that's what it experienced tonight it was awakening. So it's kind of perplexed people and, and you know what? And but this is the connection between the two. So we have the four liberating insights. And we have the Four Noble Truths at different times in our life, one or the other will support you. And both of them are monumentally important aspects of Buddhist teachings. And in particular for our Vipassana tradition, because Vipassana practice, insight practice is meant very explicitly meant to bring us to a point in meditation where our mind is very quiet, steady, still peaceful, to be able to really see the arising and the passing the dawn and the dusk. Whatever is happening with mind as peaceful and open, receptive and un-reactive to what's there. And that ability to see that is the doorway to liberation. So now's your turn. Do you have questions or comments or protests?

So Gil, Yes, please. Yeah. Yeah. For those of us that are in cold medications, could you repeat the four liberating insights? Again, you said it at the beginning and then, you know,

Four liberating insights are very closely connected to the Four Noble Truths. In fact, the four liberating insights are probably the pattern used to come up with the Four Noble Truths. So the four liberating insights are In terms of when suffering is it's basically it's used many, many hundreds of times in the suttas this pattern, sometimes towards suffering. And sometimes for other things. It's really important insight how often remember the Four Noble Truths are, are taught on the five times by the Buddha, but the four liberating insights are referred to hundreds and hundreds of times. And so the pattern is x, seeing x, seeing the arising of x, seeing this cessation of x, and seeing the practice that leads to the cessation of x. And so when it's applied to suffering, it's seeing suffering, seeing the arising of suffering, seeing the cessation of suffering, and seeing the practice leading to the cessation of suffering.

So you had a question? Yes. If you can use to make use the mic.

Perhaps related to that, I was just curious, right off hand, is there a favorite spot that you see that you said happened so many times? Where he has the, the initial insight? Is there a particular nicaya or particular spot of one that we could, you know, look at ourselves in terms of

the fourth discourse in the middle length, discourses the discourse on fear and dread it's a nice it's called that because the Buddha talks about how before he was enlightened, how he practiced with fear. It's nice to know the Buddha before is enlightened was afraid. Maybe like some of you. And then he described the process by which he became awakened and the end of that though, it's a short discourse end of the discourse. It describes these four liberating insights.

Was it is confusing? Yeah, some of you Sorry about that.

Are there any particular practices to see the arising of x?

Oh to see the arising The, the practice is mindfulness. personal practice the practice is develop your mindfulness practice. So it has a lot of stability in it a lot of strength. to it and that's the hope the especially on retreats the hold. As a liberating practice, the practice of Vipassana is meant to take you to a point where you see very clearly the rising passing of things. And it's a quite a remarkable experience to to be quiet and still enough and that you start seeing the whole your whole is you know, your whatever you're experiencing is just arising and passing Some people say it's like people experienced in different ways or describe it different ways. Some people describe it as as bubbles, like the whole body and ledges feel like bubbles bubbling popping. Some people describe it as sand kind of flowing down. You know, just kind of sand just flowing everything sand flowing, flowing, so they safely like pour sand through your fingers, I guess and Usually it comes as a very mostly usually it's a pretty initially when it first happens, it comes with a lot of plus a lot of joy. And as it gets stronger sometimes it's a little uncomfortable. Because Where do you stand if everything is shifting sands? And so people get a little some people get a little bit frightened even sometimes because there's no everything's shifting has no place to stand. There's no reference point, there's no nothing, nothing to hold on to them in a way that you used to. And but then you realize after a while, it's okay because you don't have to hold on to anything. You don't have to stand anywhere, anywhere. And then there's a deeper relaxation that happens. Yes. In the back, there's a mic back there. Yeah.

I have a question.

You're over the hill or you know you over Hill. Thank

you self identify.

So I'm just I'm thinking about, you know, I think I could identify a little bit as a younger generation that's, you know, benefited from the you and the group of teachers and I hear the North Star and I'm wondering, multiple things not just like feel like being a better benefactor one, one of the questions I do keep, what kind of things do you think our generation needs to do to keep the Dharma fresh? You know, maybe that's something we have to answer. But I also think what I'm actually interested in kind of like, what the contribution You know, there, there's definitely brought it here. There's a contribution or what kind of responsibility is there in the intergeneric intergeneration ality of, not just yeah, we're gonna keep it fresh. Keep adapt. Oh, keep it live. But at the same time, like what I've seen in other things like in

education, there hasn't been an intergenerational ality for the reciprocal notion of like, Yeah, what's my responsibility as someone part of the new generation trying to keep it fresh and alive and living, but there's something to going back and, you know, like for hip hop, it be like going back to the hip hop elders, even though you're trying to keep it fresh. So that's what I'm wondering, you know, how what is intergeneration ality or what is our responsibility mutually, mutually, okay,

yeah. So, I mean, so certainly easier to talk about my response, ability, my ability to respond, my ability to participate in all this. And that is that at some point some years ago, probably about five years ago, I started feeling a real shift that my job was to start. One of my jobs, important jobs was to support other people to teach, to find opportunities for other people to teach. To train other people to teach and prepare them to teach and, and so, you know, I've done some of that now and, and doing more of it than and trying to create more opportunities, looking for opportunities. There's more and more people who can do some teaching. And so I love to find more opportunities to be able to send them off and give them experience. So that's part of my responsibility, my like, my opportunity to say, I feel like I think it's more of opportunity. It's a great thing to do this. And I suppose suspect, I hope that as I get older that it's so kind of a privilege to have this opportunity to be able to do more and more good things. You know, it's brings me a lot of pleasure and a lot of joy to see that other people are teaching now. And it'd be great if I could just fade away some point. So the but then for your generation, you know, other younger generations what those responsibilities are? I don't know if I have a good answer. Maybe I don't know the world well enough to where it's like for all of you. But the the, what's in my heart is an answer is just practice a lot. I think I believe that the Dharma flows out of our practice. So your practice, you'll find your way to find your answer to that. The second thought that comes to mind is, you know, I think it's, I think at some degree to some degree, it's important to study the Dharma. So study the some of the teachings and understand the range of the teachings and the context of the teachings at different times including our own times. And then it would be lovely if there's a there's a lot of work to wonderful work, I think could be done in the Dharma, of making it much more hold that both the teachings and also the communities, Dharma communities, making them making it much more suitable or applicable solar for a much wider range of people in our society. You know, a lot of these insight meditation communities in our, you know, part of are fairly white, for example. And, you know, that's nice. I'd like to see it as nice, might not. But I'd prefer it would be very, I prefer to have much more diversity and I think it's a richer, more valuable thing and it'd be very nice to be able to develop that much more and, and that probably needs a different kind of teachings. You know, I haven't you know, I My limitations of how I teach and probably works for some people and not for others. So perhaps, as new generations and new teachers come along, there'll be new forms of teaching, more outreach, more understanding of, of how this applies, and I would be delighted for that. Maybe that's the task. You know, I'm a little bit kind of the generation of the people that found it all this in America. And so now there's kind of found that it's very take a whole nother leap of growth and development. So be nice to see people kind of take it to that next level. And then the last thing maybe that's risky to say about is, maybe there's still a little bit of appropriateness of listening to your elders.

Man, bear with us few things to say still

So funny that I've become an elder, you know that, you know, our self image, you know, sometimes doesn't keep up with how much we grow and change. Right. Some of you probably noticed that yourself. So, you know, I'm still 21 sometimes, you know, just just, I feel like I'm still young and exploring the Dharma and it's so funny. It's so odd for me to find myself now that I become a senior teacher. So is that enough for this evening. So thank you all. And for those who this was a little bit more complicated and you cared for today, I apologize, and, and hopefully will present something that's more suited for you and other days. Thank you all.