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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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## SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

So good morning. Good morning. I guess I speak sometimes out of habit because I was last time I was teaching here was yesterday morning. That's what I said. But good evening. Can you hear me okay? This is all okay out there. Okay.

So this being the beginning of the year, I'm still a little bit thinking of offering teachings that are more like not necessarily beginning teachings in Buddhism, but foundational teachings, the kind of teachings that you want to. Maybe you want to start with. One of the observations that has been made by especially scholars of Buddhism is that here in the west of people who are like convert Buddhists to coming to Buddhism, That the primary door towards into Buddhism has been through meditation, that people get interested in meditation. They start learning meditation and as they learn meditation they get more interested in other aspects of Buddhism, they started reading more about it, other other things of it. And eventually, they will get interested in something called sila. And sila is spelled s i l a, and it's not clear how we're supposed to best translate the English because almost every English word that kind of more or less fits someone reacts to in some way. So, probably the most common way of translating it is ethics. The some people will call it virtue. Some people call it morality.

So those are kind of the three most common ones probably an order of translations. So the idea is so the trajectory for a lot of convert Buddhists start with meditation and eventually realize that maybe you should clean up your life too. And so they get interested in ethics. And traditionally, especially in Asia, it goes the other way. In. In there was a scholar who noticed this phenomenon many years ago and asked some monks in Sri Lanka about this. Shouldn't we start with meditation. And they were really upset by this idea is you start with ethics. I had a friend and someone who took a class for me many years ago. And she I think he was born in Taiwan, mostly raised in this country, but you know, raised with Buddhist Taiwanese parents and had kind of a raised as a Buddhist. And I met her when I was studying at Stanford. Buddhist Studies Department there and she was studying Buddhist studies as well. And at some point to pretty serious she had been a lawyer, she dropped out of being a lawyer to go to Buddhist studies. And so it's a big life change, right? So I asked her, do you meditate? And she said, No, I am preparing myself to be worthy enough to meditate. It was such a, I was both inspired and surprised by this mark, you start meditation, you don't have to wait. Let's jump right in. But she had a tremendous respect for meditation felt like she had to kind of get her ethics together or get other things together to really do something, a special thing called meditation. So there's a tradition in Asia and traditionally in Buddhism that you would start with ethical training. And then eventually, you would come to Meditation and meditation in Asia was considered something that very few people did. It was mostly the domain of monastics monks and nuns. And until probably about 70 years ago, there were very few late people who meditated in, in like countries like Thailand Burma and Sri Lanka, it was a modern phenomenon that meditation was, the doors to meditation was opened up to light people. But But one

of the things that lay people were taught was to practice ethics, and live a good life. So whether you start with ethics, start with meditation, I think you start wherever you're at, it's fine. But the tradition is that ethics is the foundation for meditation, it will make meditation easier. It's much more difficult to meditate. If you're living in any kind of conventional sense, a wildly unethical life. You probably won't be settled in relaxed enough and, and you might be filled with anxiety because you know, if you've been robbing banks, it's hard to sit down and meditate. And you're kind of worried about some things. And so, and then sooner or later, there's the issue of remorse.

My teacher in Burma, he was very fond of giving Dharma talks of to tell stories about people who had either been in soldiers in the Burmese army or soldiers and the other side that this is the kind of the rebels fighting the Burmese government. And there has been many years fighting each other and then they retire from being a gorilla or being a soldier and then they'd come to the monastery to meditate. And so you would tell the stories of these people that have come to the monastery after years of being, you know, involved in killing and other things. And the One of the morals of telling these stories was when you sit down to meditate after a life of doing those kinds of things, it catches up to you when you meditate. And so and I've seen that too many times in people that if there's some real big issue in people's lives, any big issue, but ethical issue Also, since that's the topic for today. If you go on meditation retreats, there's a purification process or an emptying process or owning up process owning up to what's going on. And even though you might have spent years, not thinking about what you did 20 3040 years ago, if it's a big if it costs a lot of harm, chances are pretty good that it'll come back. It's buried, it's lodged in someplace deep. And I've known people for whom sitting, meditating, minding their own business, being calm and then just kind of like like an explosion in their mind and at all, no. What did I do back then? And so then they'd have to go make amends or figure out some way to deal with that. It's not quite the same story, but I've got a colleague, a friend of mine named John Travis. And he practiced he was introduced to this practice in India in the 1960s. And he was living in India back then for quite a number of years and was kind of a wandering sada wondering dress like what you know, he kind of was a hippie kind of thing, but he went there and he let his hair grow long and matted and went barefoot and went to kind of a holy men kind of robes and just kind of as this was a holy man was Assad who kind of wandering around India. And so he did a meditation retreats. And at some point, he felt like he couldn't make any more progress. He couldn't go any further in the retreat. And I think he starts during thinking But his father he was estranged from. And so he went to Ram Dass who he met in India back then. And Ram Das, said shave your head, get a suit, and go back to Tennessee and see your dad. But don't stay long. So that's what he did. He went and got a tailor to make a corduroy suit in India and shaved his head, shaved his hair shave, but he, you know, got a haircut and went and saw his dad and somehow made peace or somehow resolved something with his dad. And when that was taken care of he went back. So this idea that you know, so if you're interested to live an ethical life is seen as a foundation for meditation support for it. So also seen as a foundation for living a good life or a life that brings happiness right Happy does good for the world. So ethics see this word sila is, is foundational to Buddhism. But it's very different than ethics as some people think of ethics here in the West and that's why I think a lot of people here in the West who speak English and kind of maybe acculturated in the West, but these words don't like some of the English choices. morality is really bad. Yeah, who wants to be moralistic? And there's a legacy of people feel it feeling being hurt by excessive moralism and being good and bad and what's right and you're good person, bad person. Some people feel like they did nothing wrong. They're just living their lives. And but the social, the ethical More's around them, condemn a person like who they are and so they don't like you know, this kind of emphasis on rules and ethics. They've had experiences of rules being followed very narrowly, and the pain of that. And so they don't like the idea of rules or ethical rules.

Sometimes ethics is understood to be something external and external rules that you have nothing to do with you. And there's a very strong tendency in the West. There's a lot of tendencies in the West, but there's a current of Western thought comes out of the romantic and enlightenment movements in Europe, where what's important is, what's the natural expression that comes out of you. And so anything that's external, the external rules are kind of not really that interesting. What's interesting what you feel like doing it what you know, you trust your feelings, you trust what's there. And there's something nice about that. But it's has its own limitations, that approach that those people sometimes don't have anything to do with rules. Here's an ethical story ethic story that many years ago I was, you know, just in the San Francisco Zen Center, the Zen students, and at some point I was on the board of Zen center, and board of directors. And the year that I was on board of directors think a couple of years before the early 1990s. Zen center decided that he needed to have a code of conduct ethical conduct towards teachers. And that was in the wake of the 1980s, when there was a number of ethical scandals by teachers, they were kind of somewhat big. And including one event center. And so a group of people committee was formed. And they looked around to see what kind of ethic guidelines were good to have. And for some reason, they there was very little models in Buddhism of these kinds of codes of conduct. There's ethics rules, but not specific for teachers. So for some reason, they went to the association of union therapist in San Francisco was called the union school or something there in some Cisco somewhere. And they got the ethics for the yogi and therapists. And they kind of adapted a little bit for Zen center. And then they presented this to the community. And you know, I've been living there for many years. These are good people. For the most, you know, for the most part, I've never seen so much hostility and anger. It's in center as when this document was presented. And I happened to be at this meeting, I was sitting behind the committee that had formed, formed, you know, this thing right behind, I wasn't on the committee, I was, you know, out of the firing range, but I was in the firing range, I guess, but those behind them, and I could see the hostility. And because in partly because Zen students in America, coming out of the 50s and early 60s had a little bit more the expressive in command. Take idea just just go along with your feeling bus be spontaneous, don't have any rules just just be empty and free and just express your freedom this way. And so rules were just like taboo. And so and so they were very angry and upset. And, in fact, then they their whole thing came to the board meeting, I was on the board, right? And they were very, you know, basically really good people. But somehow there was so much stress around ethics. It was such a charged thing that people at the board meeting were yelling at across a table each other and calling each other names. They needed to have an ethical code of conduct or to deal with trying to come up with an ethical code of conduct. It was such a hot issue. And so anyway, so eventually they got one min. I was involved in the next version of the ethics committee. And my dedication was to spend so much careful time and get so much consensus and so much, you know, the whole community, that by the time we finally, were going to ratify this new code of conduct for the, at the board level, everyone was going to Yon. And they didn't yawn, but that's basically, you know, it's just like, you know, of course we're gonna do it, it was no big deal anymore. Because it was it was slowly it was chaotic, you know, anyway. So ethics can be hot issue. Some people are troubled by ethics, you know, if I, if, you know, we have a lot of people who come to the intro to meditation class, but if instead I said, the beginning of Buddhism is not meditation, but it's ethics, or an intro to ethics class, some people would come, but not so many. And some of you probably already don't like the fact that I'm talking about this topic today, these days. And it doesn't, you know, it's not relevant for you. ethics, you know, you're, you're basically a good person to why should Why should you?

So there was an ethics as you know, the so here's sort of saying this that so we bring sometimes our conditioning around what ethics are and we react sometimes to the Buddhist idea of ethics when it's brought up. So rule based, sometimes it will based people who have familiar with commandments that come from God. They're like have absolute authority. And so, when you hear about the Buddhist

precepts, the associated with this absolute commandments, you have to live this way. And so people like you know, pull back because of that. So, a few things about the philosophy or the other context for living an ethical life following Buddhist ethical guidelines which I'll tell you in a while, what they are, is that in that when the Buddha started offering, mentioning ethical guidelines to people, he was not the Pope, he was not channeling some ultimate authority like God. He was a human being, who experienced awakening experience and kind of freedom and had some wisdom from that a lot of wisdom probably. And then for the people who are interested in attaining what he had attained, he was going to offer them trainings, the training for how to accomplish that. And if people came and talk to him about marital difficulties, you know, he offered some guidelines of how to, you know, make that go well and be happy in those moments. Life and things like that. But as far as I can tell, I don't think the Buddha it ever occurred to Buddha that he was supposed to come up with, you know, absolute, you know, guidelines and rules for human beings of everything is supposed to live like, like he wasn't in charge of people he had no authority and responsibility and he wasn't hadn't been ordained to be the person who tells humankind thou shalt. So he didn't go around telling people like, you know, he wouldn't go up on a soapbox, say that, you know, this is how you should live your life. If people came and talk to him, he'd respond and offer his wisdom. But as Buddhism became a world religion, world religions are supposed to have much big you know, they're supposed to have huge you know, understandings of reality in life and the cosmos and all kinds of big the big issue kind of things including ethics or you know, how are you supposed to live your life But that's not how it all began. It began with the Buddha offering a training for people who wanted to have the freedom he attained. And so when he offered ethical guidelines to live by those guidelines were meant to support the people who want to do that training. And so if you didn't follow some of them and you're off someplace in the village next door You know, it wasn't really the big put his business what you did over there, you know, it's kind of unfortunate maybe if you were robbing banks, but but you know, he wouldn't maybe occurred to him that he's in charge of kind of charging them and you shouldn't be doing this. So it has a different feeling. They ethical guidelines, it isn't like this absolute moral authority thing. It's more like if you want to Train the path of freedom, then this is what you should do. And the reason why the connection between that is very simple. So, generally, when people intentionally cause harm to others through unethical behavior, something is going on in their hearts and their minds, which Buddhism would call an attachment and clinging, a clamping down to closing down, being caught by something. All these things are the very things that keeps the heart the mind in slaved keeps it not free. So the very forces of intentional unethical action that causes harm are the very forces that the training is supposed to free us from. So ethics is not just like, you know, kindergarten boot. that prepares you for the really important things later on. It's the very training in the very movement towards freedom that the tradition is all about.

And what that means is that the ethics is not supposed to be pushed to diminish you or constrict you. The ethical guidelines, guidelines in Buddhism are supposed to free you are supposed to open you up, it's supposed to be enlivening, and for your betterment that you feel that way. So it was my surprise when I first went to Thailand. I practiced here in this, you know, in Zen in America, in Japan for many years, where it might seem very odd to you if I tell you that. Ethics was not emphasized. Many years later, they had this big, you know, the board was yelling at each other. We tried to have ethical rules, right? But the ethics was not really packed and I did it, just practicing in this and so we went to Thailand, I was surprised by the emphasis on ethical training. Thai Buddhism, Theravada Buddhism, but the thing that surprised me the most was that when the teachers talked about ethics, they were happy. They've kind of like delighted, like, oh boy, like, this is a great thing. They're, like, all laid up and happy and then I met people who were delighted by their good ethics that they're that you bet they hadn't, you know, Rob any banks today, they just had so unhappy about this. You know, they hadn't, you know, lied to their, you know, or done something to you know, hurt. I don't like what you're happy

about being ethical. That was like a whole foreign idea to me, like, from when I was growing up in high school, if you were ethical, there was a kind of a derogatory term back then and English called you're a goody goody. And the last thing you want it to be was a goody, goody specificity especially if you're a hippie. And so I didn't you know, I wasn't really unethical in high school, except for talking in class a lot. But, but but I wasn't really unethical, but I, you know, had no interest in being ethical. I don't it's interesting because unethical had lack of imagination. And so surprised me when I came to Thailand people are this like, ethics brought joy to people. And this is actually a teaching in Buddhism that living an ethical life is also supposed to be not only support you in your training, but it's supposed to be something as joyful. That's, that's really good for you and feels good. It's such a wonderful inner thing to be ethical, that the Buddha called it Inner Wealth. If you really want to be well wealthy, be ethical. And, and, you know, and one of the nice things about ethical well, is it's portable and it's hard for someone to steal it and The interest on the investment is really good, comes back and really benefits you a lot. I myself prefer to call the word sila virtue. I know there's some people don't like that word. Also, because the emphasis on virtue and ethics a little bit, it sounds like rules. Virtue has to do with qualities of character that you have. And the cultivation of quality of characters is an integral part of the Buddhist training and ethics. So you want to cultivate and develop your good heart, your capacity for generosity and wisdom and kindness and love and compassion, these things. And to develop these things is a really good thing. And I can say with tremendous confidence that in your heart, it feels a lot better to develop compassion, than to develop greed a lot better and develop love than to develop hate. In the past, probably you saw in the news last couple of days that it's better to cultivate optimism and pessimism if you have a choice. So, these are two very strong tradition in Buddhism, to train in ethics. And for lay people, the, the entry level training in ethics is called the five precepts. In English, it's called the five precepts. In, in Pali, the Buddhist language, it's either called the five pillars, this word sila, which we don't know quite how best to translate English. And literally, sometimes the Buddha call it called it the five things. And, you know, in terms of diffusing some of this, you know, Grant authority, ethics, you know, just call it things, you know, then you're kind of like, you know, it's not so heavy then.

So, these Five Precepts are the precept not to kill the precepts not to take what is not given the precept not to engage in sexual misconduct, and the precept not to lie, and the precept not to get intoxicated. The behind these five precepts is a principle. And it's a beautiful principle. It's a principle that if you live by this principle, the idea is supposed to really nourish you, and be a gift to the society around you. And that is, don't cause harm. Try not to harm and that's really the principle with which to interpret each of these five precepts. Probably its most important around the precept of no sexual misconduct, because there's many, many different forms of sexual activity that people do and, you know, I think that there's a wide wider range of things that human beings are capable of doing sexually. And some of us are very creative. And when there are rules in some religions about what is the proper way, being sexual, it sometimes narrows the range dramatically. And those people whose sexual expression is outside of that range will often be ostracized or condemned. It's very painful. In Buddhism, then to look at sexuality and what is appropriate or inappropriate sexuality. It's really measured by the by the principle, is it causing harm? Because that's what we don't want to do. We don't want to cause harm. If it's not causing harm, then maybe it's fine to do it. It's not an ethical issue. But who do we look at for where do we look for where it causes harm? While didn't cause me harm? You know, that, you know, don't go Don't be that, you know, go a little bit further beyond that. You know, if it involves a sexual partner, then you know, is it going to harm the partner in some way or other? Or does your sexual partner have a partner is that the person is going to be hurt or you know how far out you go and you realize that sooner or later someone will feel hurt. And so you take that into account. So there's not an absolute, you know, certain behavior that's prohibited, but rather it's those that behavior which would cause us harm. The and it's so again, the, the principle and other principles that you're supposed to be enlivened, exposed to enrich us. So as a training, taking on these things as trainings, we don't take them on as



narrow constrictions to limit our lives. We take it to explore and understand ourselves. And one way that these five precepts work as trainings is that they become kind of a limit beyond which you're not gonna go. But when you come up against that limit, and you feel like I got a really good, you know, release a good day to rob a bank, you know, it's feels like it I have the feeling it's good. The bank doors are open, you know, it's like, probably meant to be whatever. And so you feel like you this is really good. It's a really good idea, you know, and he said, Oh, but wait a minute. I'm supposed to be training in this Buddhist thing. And Buddhists, they say don't don't take what's not given and don't steal. And so you stop at the edge of that boundary. And don't feel bad about yourself necessarily for what you want to do. But you stop at that and the precept comes a mirror with which to study yourself.

And so the idea is turn it around, see what's motivating me to rob banks. What is it that what is it I'm trying to do here and what's the context of rubbing this Banks what's happening here with me. And so we use the precept as a mirror that stop and take a really good look at ourselves. It's kind of like Buddhism says, Yes, if you really want to deepen your spiritual life, here's a great opportunity to understand your motivations, your beliefs, you your connection to other people, how you, you know, how you live in relationship to others, how you ignore them entirely? Do you take them into account? How do you take them into account? So that's one of the ways we train. Now the way we train is that as we start feeling ourselves wanting to do something that's not not, you know, break one of the five precepts. Then one of the things we can notice is, is there any compulsion in that, and some, I think, there's often a compulsion involved in really grievous ethical violations people can sometimes it's impulsive, it's things of the moment. You might have heard the story of a friend of mine teaches meditation and anger management nonviolent stuff, to lifers at San Quentin, Rockford. And he does this great exercise. He gets a room full of 20 30 lifers who've done pretty serious things to be San Quentin for life. And he asks them, how long have you been in prison? And he has a blackboard and he writes down the number of years for each prisoners like 20 years, 30 years, 40 years. These people have been there for a long time, some of them and adds it all up. And he gets something like 700 and some years total Prague to group in that room. And then he says, when you committed your crime that got you in prison? How long was the period of danger when you were in danger of committing the crime? And so then they start saying that their little period of danger, we know where they got in trouble, how long it took two minutes, four minutes. And they added up all that. And I forget what it was, but, you know, a few hours or a day or a couple of days for the room of people, that was the was the moments of imminent danger. And so then you see on the blackboard, the difference between 723 years, and a few hours add up. So the idea of impulsivity has big consequences. So this compulsion to act. And so the idea is that when you come up against the boundary of the precepts, you notice how the compulsion to act is there, and you learn not to give into it. And to learn not to give into compulsion is a fantastic thing. You can save yourself a lot of headaches, a lot of problems A lot of regret. They say that, you know, it can take months, you know, a long time to develop a good friend. But it can take just one sentence to ruin their friendship, if you say something impulsively. So to learn not to be impulsive and in bad way negative way, is part of the training of the precepts when you could choose other things to limit yourself by. But this is a good thing to limit yourself by. The precepts are also meant to be a training in our relationship to other people. Because as we get into the precepts into Buddhism, the idea is to also be attentive to the people around you. It's not just about your own inner practice and what goes on, but you want to live a life that supports others connected to others and with friend friendliness and care. And so the precepts are also the our ethics, our behavior, our lines of communications we make with others and how we interact Once in effect others, and so as we kind of study and train with the precepts, the precepts are an opportunity to notice your connection to others. What kind of relationship do you have with others?

So with sexuality, even with the so called consensual sexuality, how consensual is it? And is it really no harm involved? And what's your relationship to the person who's you're going to be your sexual partner? What is that connection? I know that I was a young man or teenager. Sometimes I had very little concern about the welfare of my partner even though it was, you know, consensual sexuality, because I was somehow riding the currents of hormones or something, and, you know, strong compulsion there. But part of the function of the training and precepts is to begin being sensitive and care. About the people around you. So when you find yourself up against the edge of breaking one of the five precepts, we stop and what is the connection to other people and we use that to study, investigate and learn and develop. Then as the precepts as ethical guidelines kind of developing people, we leave the baseline ethical precept which is don't do these things, to something which is vague or but in some ways more profound. And that is, start living on the guidelines of being generous, of being compassionate, of being content, of being patient, of being wise being. So there's these these qualities of virtues we can cultivate and develop. They're meant to go hand in hand with the five precepts, so that not killing becomes a natural expression of compassion. not stealing maybe becomes a natural expression of generosity not involved in sexual misconduct becomes a natural expression of a certain kind of contentment and ease or peace, peacefulness with oneself. not lying becomes a natural expression of honesty and not intoxicating the mind becomes a natural expression of having clarity of mind that you want to maintain and keep. And so, then it gets more you know, more fun more interesting when you start feeling the growth and development of these virtues and these good qualities within us. All this, so that not so that but one of the four meditators. This then contributes to two different things. It contributes to a growth in mindfulness. Because to be to train in the precepts is a training and mindfulness you have to pay attention and pay the In the present moment, it also protects you from a lot of agitation. When you sit down to meditate, I have done things which has harmed other people. upset people, you know, said said things I didn't mean to see say or do something that was not right. And I sat down to meditate afterwards. And I could not quiet my mind. And I was just so caught up in remorse and regret and anxiety and different things as my mind was my thoughts were spinning. And so to put the conditions in place, so that the mind does not be agitated, and even better, to put the conditions in place that there's a certain kind of joy and happiness, about yourself, your worth your well being Wow. And sometimes it's really good to Be happy in your ethical life over a short period of time, meaning. You know, it's really great. If you didn't Rob any banks this week that just for this week, you can be happy. If you know 20 years ago, you wrote around the bag, maybe you have to make amends and do something. But people, sometimes people are given the instructions to take refuge and delight in their ethical behavior, as someone's gonna be nourished by and they'll say, I can't do that because of XYZ, and then they say, Oh, don't worry about so much about the past, just for this, like on a retreat just for this retreat. Just be really happy that this retreat, you haven't robbed a bank or something. And so the idea is to be nourished to be in Live and to be lightened by it, and sometimes looking at in the morning in a shorter term can be nourishing in the way sometimes the long term doesn't if we have things that need to be amended or resolved or dealt with.

So it's become one of my, one of my delights and surprise in Buddhism, that ethical, inner virtue and living an ethical life feels really good. It feels clean, it feels delightful. It feels free, enlivening. It feels like, you know, I'm a bigger person, a better person, no matter if it gives direction to life. It gives purpose to life, it gives nourishment to life, it's a great thing. So I offer this in the beginning of the year, that you might consider for this year. The training in the precepts of training and ethics is something that really worthwhile to consider and, and take on take. And you might read about it. There's a number of places and people now write about the precepts in Buddhism. I have some articles that you can find on the article page of the website. And I think there's one right now right? In the newsletter. And I think that and then I'll end with another teaching from the Buddha. So these five precepts not killing, not stealing, not lying, no sexual misconduct and no intoxication. The Buddha, he called it, the five sealers, he called

it the five things. He also called them the five gifts. There's the nice, five gifts. So if you can live by these five precepts, you give a phenomenal gift to our world. And all you have to do is read the newspaper to realize how many people in our world don't have that. gift in their life because of what people do around them. And if we could start offering that gift to the world, then at least locally, we start it you know, improving lives, feeling of safety for the people we, we encounter. May we all help create a safe world for all of us. So, thank you