

2016-07-10 The Buddha And Black Lives Matter

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SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

You know, often I like during need to talk about what's on my heart when I come here to speak. And a variety of things are here in right to talk about them, in terms of the practice we do here. And the Black Lives Matter movement is a very important thing in our country right now. And so it's in my heart. So I want to start by talking about, you know, the statue of the Buddha we have and represents a man who lived in India, some 2500 years ago. And he was a renunciant of the time meaning that he left his home life, just as many people in our society will leave their home they grew up with and go forth into the world to discover something about their lives. And but in his life, it was a radical practice of letting go of renunciation. So at some point, all he had was the robes that he wore in his body. And he had a bowl that you go around, to gather food, people add food in it, that was the custom back then for people who were renunciant spiritual seekers. And he didn't have any other possessions. And he wandered around, and it's at one point, he sat under a tree, next to a river, narrower River. And I've been to the place where supposedly that happened and kind of flat flat area to kind of probably more like an oak, I don't know, if a plane exactly a tree tree, or trees and, and but kind of a flat, expansive area that goes down to a river. And he sat under this tree, the Bodhi tree. And there, they say that he woke up, he understood something very important about our humanity, or human capacity and understood about freedom and compassion. And it happened outdoors under a dream. And from that, beginning, there was very little, there was almost nothing in terms of buildings and institutions and books and teachings. And it was just this man who was sitting there under a tree in an open open area, and didn't have much baggage didn't have, you know, probably didn't have a backpack and very simple and, and we have these statues that is supposed to represent that event. And the statue here specifically invent represents the moment of his awakening, just before he awakened, sitting under that tree. And we can see by his posture, the way statue was made, that is a man who's sitting here with dignity, and value, but also not assertive, not pushing himself on people, but quite open in his chest is kind of a little bit exposed his robes only over one, one breast. And so he's kind of open. And it's just, it's kind of large, maybe because it's a big heart in there. But also because of certain he's not collapsed. He's not kind of afraid or intimidated, but they're in a very confident, open way. And so this symbolic idea of being open and present, and really present and rooted where you are, and then open to what is around you. And the idea of it happening in outdoors, this whole experience, it was no walls, and symbolically living in a world with no walls, in your heart, no walls, you know, physically that separates us from people is a very important symbolic kind of symbol, I think for Buddhism, that this openness, this willingness to stay rooted, stay calm, but with the eyes open, his eyes are slightly open, have opened the, you know, seeing what's in the world, seeing what's in oneself, and learning how to be not reactive to that, not closing down to that not putting up walls to that. And some of us put up walls to the world around us. Some of us put up walls of what's inside of us. And some of us managed to put up walls in both

directions. And I don't know what's in between, you know, no man zone, you know, where, you know, in between these walls that we can put up. And so, at least in my mind, this is a very beautiful, symbolic kind of beginning of a religion.

And I think it's important to remember for those of us who practice the simple beginning, because Buddhism ends with us, began with the Buddha and ends in US We also can discover this capacity to be really rooted and present in our lives present in this world of ours. And the same way, live with an open heart and open chest open mind and see what's going on around us see what's going on inside of us, and see it calmly see it intentionally, clearly look and see be a witness to what's happening. And from that, hopefully respond in a wise compassionate way. And then some, you know, almost 2500 years after the Buddha, there was another great teacher in India named Mahatma Gandhi, and, and who represents something different for me, and what he represents many things, very important teacher, informative person for me and what he represented what he taught. And Mahatma Gandhi was one of my first Zen teacher, and capsulated, something very powerful for me. In talking about Gandhi, he said, The Buddha, his contribution to the world, was to sit and meditate. Gandhi's contribution was that it mattered where you sat. And so it's one thing to, you know, to sit at home, safe and comfortable, it's one thing to be in Redwood City and sit here to one thing to sit, you know, changed, our community changed when we moved from Palo Alto to here. And I'm glad that we moved. And we did, because Paul does a wonderful place. But demographically, it's a very different feeling than Redwood City, though I think Redwood City is kind of catching up. So we have to move again, the Latino, but what where we sit represents the idea that where we bring our capacity to be a witness to see to be mindful to be present, depends, and if we put it, if we do it, back in their 1980s, friends of mine went and sat on the train tracks, here in California, where they brought the nuclear material for bombs, back and forth, and they would sit there protest, the protest to nuclear armament. So they would sit and meditate there, sit there on the train tracks, and now they could meditate at home peacefully, that would have been nice, but they sat meditate on the train tracks. And then we have people this weekend, who are I don't know if they're meditating in the way we think of it. But on freeways, and 880, in Oakland, and it makes a difference to, you know, to sit there and or to walk there. And it gets certain kind of tension as a kind of bearing witness. And it kind of asking all of us to bear witness to what's happening in our society. And so the idea that, you know, we take our practice, and we bring it in a dress and meet this world, I think, is a very important one. Rather than just making just for myself, and for some of us who live comfortable and advantaged lives, there's a way in which doing Buddhism can subtly kind of reinforce that advantage, because it's kind of like makes them more comfortable and more peaceful with what we have. And rather than kind of stepping forward into the world, we step back and kind of look over here we are comfortable. So then on Thursday, we had this, I received this, many of you probably did Thursday evening news about the shooting in Dallas and murder of these five police officers. And coincidentally, for me, before, before I learned about this, my wife introduced me to an a national public radio show about this remarkable woman named Ellen Baxter, who had devoted I guess much of her adult life to working with people who have, you know, mental challenges, who are considered to be insane in some way. And I was so moved by this program as I listened to it, and so I want to tell you a little bit about it. Because it kind of spoke to a little bit to this idea, my idea of understanding the Buddha sitting there and open available presence, but not being reactive.

So this woman on Baxter seems that her mother had a mental illness and didn't get much help. So as a college student, she went to study psychology. It's 1970s. And she convinced her professor to help her get what's it called done by English gone via sign on sign but committed, committed to the local Insane Asylum mental institution for a week, without anybody knowing that she was there she was she they found a doctor or psychiatrist that gave her a prescription or something or committed her. And he had

all the paperwork for it. And he was sent there. And she was there to study what goes on. And in her particular place where she went, she discovered that nothing going on there, there was no care for people there whatsoever. Back then, there was television, and, and waiting, waiting for food waiting for this waiting for that. And she was just kind of stunned that there was nothing whatsoever being offered. So she then spent a lot of time trying to research, what she got out of what can be done and looking for best practices around the world. And she learned about this town in Belgium. And I didn't know about this town. It's I think it's pronounced something like hell spelled g e L, it's in the Flemish part of Belgium. And since the 1400s, the people in this town have been taking in people who are have serious mental challenges kind of mental illnesses into their homes, and, and letting them live with their family and in their communities for now, for centuries. And the peak of this custom of this town of taking in people from other places and taking them in in housing them was in the 1930s whenever 3000 people a third quarter of the town, where people with mental mental illness or mental challenges or something. And now we're down to about 250 people. Okay, there's downs people take in. But what's remarkable about so they've been doing this since the 1400s, kind of an amazing thing that somehow they ended up kind of historically, being the receivers of a lot of people. And in recent times, it was it's very, very well organized. And they only take certain people who have never been violent, and you know, and they get kind of medically psychiatrically checked out first. But then they come and live with these families. And the average length of time that someone lives with a family is 28 years. And a third of them have lived with a family for 45 years. It's kind of remarkable that this even happens. And But what's more remarkable, and this is why it inspired me so much. The approach is that this town is to accept the people who come on their own terms as they are, they're not seen as being problems, they're not seen as anybody to fix them. They're just kind of take them as they are, and treat them as part of family treated part of the town. And everyone kind of just learns to live with and no one's alarmed or concerned or they just kind of live as they do. And so they don't see them as being someone who has against it, fix them, but rather to allow them to live a healthy life in that community. And they live there happily, many of them are very happily for decades, in this way. And so a couple of examples was, so there was this one man who one of one of his things he did was he would take the buttons on his shirt and twist it until it broke. And they do the next button and twist it. And everyday he did this. So he lived with his family. And every day the woman in the family. So the buttons back on. And then the researcher said, Well, why don't you get nylon thread? Because that one break is quickly. And the first one was kind of horrifying. It's like no, you don't understand. He needs to do that. He needs to do it so she fixes it day after day. Isn't that great? just accepted. Or the idea of the one family talked about how there was someone who every night or many nights would have nightmares and visions emitted visions. A lot of people have schizophrenia. visions of lions jumping after after him in the house jumping out of the wall. And so, okay, there's lions jumping after him.

So the thing to do is to go to chase the blinds away. So every night the family would go into the bedroom and chase lines away and that took care of it. Isn't that nice? Just so when I, you know, I'm Norwegian. I don't know how big of a customer it is in Norway. But certainly the circles that I lived in that people who had were at mental peculiarities, who, you know, maybe maybe call insane or I don't know if that's the proper word anymore these days, mental illness. They were called, they had original minds. And I kind of like that on there, it's original minds, as opposed to a problem. So this idea of, of being able to be present, and see someone, and then accept them for who they are, as they are, in certain prescribed sorts of circumstances, is a very healthy and very helpful. This woman, Ellen Baxter came back United States and tried to convince people here to do it. And people thought she was crazy. herself, they didn't think it would ever fly. So she was a what she did was she then raised money somehow. And now she has her nonprofit, I guess, has seven buildings in New York, where, where apartment buildings, and where she just advertises it for people to come and live there. But 40% of the people who live there are people who have mental illness. And the other 60% don't. And they're not completely clear that that's the case when they sign up. There's a whole the whole philosophy and

approach to how she does this. And but they live together in this these apartment buildings with the community and the people there. The people with mental illness, there also are just treated as who they are, and allowed to be as they are. And everyone in the Parking Building shares a community and does it and she's found this works remarkably well. One of the reasons why people have come to this importance is that they found with mental illness, a researcher 50 years ago, in England, discovered that when people who had schizophrenia, things like this, went back when were institutionalized for a while, and then went back to their families. They had they had relapses two to three times, that people who did not go back to their families. And so they studied that. And they saw that this family dynamics contribute not necessarily to the illness due to the illness being triggered to become problematic. So they need to be institutionalized. And they studied what happened in families. And they saw in families, that when there's criticism of the person who has a mental illness, or when they're when there's too much effort is made to fix them, that that those that tend to be correlated with them needing to get having relapse need to be institutionalized. And when and families are more likely to get involved in that kind of relationship, then, like foster homes or some other place. And so, that is what I heard there. I was kind of amazed hearing this. And then a few minutes later, I looked at the news. And then I read about Dallas. And it's so what's the lesson of the Buddha sitting there? What's the lesson of being accepting people for who they are? What's the lesson of being a witness to this? What's the lesson of not walling people off? What's the lesson of not other people and seeing them as a problem? What's the lesson of keeping our hearts open to the 360 degrees, the Buddhist sat on this planes with trees all around? And I'd like to believe that, you know, he was open and available with no walls around him 360 degrees.

And so we have, you know, the Black Lives Matter movement, which is represents kind of the tip of the iceberg kind of, of a whole big popular group of people in our society, African Americans who have been discriminated against for generations. And certainly it's got improved since they were slaves. But it's been, you know, the disadvantages they've been struggling under for decades, for centuries is quite amazing. And our society, the, you know, the, I think the last time there was official American government policy of discrimination against African Americans was in 1997. That's very recent, right? I mean, it got the government policy to discriminate. And that was with the agricultural depression. loans they gave to farmers in the south. And they would give preferential loans to white farmers, just like in the in there during time, the great deal, the government gave preferential loans or mortgages to white people, and not people living in minority communities. And these kinds of policies then set up dynamics that go on for set, you know, for decades, because of the disadvantage, the disparity and the disadvantage people are in and, and that certain generation passes on. That's a disadvantage. And, you know, living in poor people, poor poor areas in their house values don't go up as much as they went up in white areas. And so the economic disparity continues, and it's passed down down through the generations. And so the, like, Black Lives Matter movement is not just about the killing of innocent black people, by police. But it's also speaks to, you know, this tremendous disparity and opportunities and, and exists in our society. And so how do we stay present for that and open to it and aware of it? And certainly shouldn't kind of acceptance of it, even if there's ways in which has played itself out, which is difficult for some of us to maybe witness or see some of the anger, for example, how do we stay present and open to that and see it clearly for what it is and keep our hearts open. And then we had the police who got killed, and police who it's easy to vilify the police. When I was in middle school, who actually was called junior high school, then, in 1968. You know, there were riots, and I lived in Los Angeles, then and there were riots there and, and a police officer came to class one day to kind of, I guess, to kind of public service to let us know what the police were people or something and their situation. And I remember raising my hand, and I had all kinds of intense questions for this man, I wasn't gonna, you know, I was kind of bought into some of the vilification of the police that existed at that time. And then, I don't know how far you read about Dallas, but it's kind of remarkable. There's a remarkable police chief of Dallas, named David Brown, who is African American. And apparently, he's

been one of the more most progressive police chiefs and police departments in the country, in terms of dealing with the minority issues, African American issues. shootings, by police, they've gone down dramatically in Dallas over that, since he's his tenure, six years ago. And, you know, it's kind of a kind of, I don't know what to say, quick, powerful, poignant thing that the shooting should happen in his, you know, in his district, you know, where he was super, he's done so much for it. And so all this, you know, all this good that he did. So now he's now he's contending with this. And so certainly, we could say that the blue Lives Matter, the blue uniform of police. And all lives matter. They say that people say that, but when we say all lives matter, it's too easy to ignore the tremendous disadvantage that blacks have in our society, and kind of keep lose the focus on that. So I like to think that, yes, Black Lives Matters and blue lives matter. But if you combine them you still get black, the colors till you know the color blue and color black, if you mind usually becomes black. So let's not forget about the disadvantaged people. Let's not forget about the police that sort of forget about anybody. So what does it mean? Or what how is it that we can wisely

sit like the Buddha, in the middle of this world of ours, sit with our with confidence, not despair, not turn away, not be overwhelmed, but sit and be open? And present in maybe in a confident way to be a witness and what's here and to keep the walls from going up? be interested, curious, what is it what is it and I think that one of the ways we do it that we have to do it is we have to also do it for ourselves. We have to also learn to sit and be do that deep gazing, keep looking at ourselves, to see how we put our power walls how we react, how we pull back how we close up We get to come to anger in weeks to come to fear week to come to alarmism, we succumb to over or going too quickly to try to fix the problem. I think a lot of people, in the conversations I have with people, it's amazing how quickly people are looking at them as either the problem, or then as the ones who have to fix it, they have to do something. And I think that in my kind of understanding of Buddhist practice, we don't do them very well, would you find out to do them, it's us, first and foremost, we're all in it together. And we try to live in a world of us as best we can. So we, our attention, awareness is open to inclusive. But also, if we're waiting for someone else, to be the solution, you'll be waiting for a long time. But you can be the solution, not to the big issues of our of our life, or our society. But we all have, we're all fortunate enough to be born at a time, or we're fortunate enough to know, I think all of us who know what's going on in our society are fortunate enough, then to have the ability to do something about it. And that's a fortunate thing to be able to be in. It might mean that doesn't mean that you go to Louisiana, and doesn't mean you go to Minnesota and to do something there. But it means that perhaps you go and you take time to learn more fully what's going on. So you understand people better understand what's happening. Not so come to the quick, simple responses. You know, I find it very troublesome, how much are we all of us, succumb to anecdotes, anecdotes, as being the proof of everything. And, you know, his latest anecdote is just you know, is and, and so to kind of study and look more deeply into what's really going on here. And there's all kinds of ways easy ways in the web, within 15 minutes, you can get, you know, a lot of information about any topic at all. And that's worth getting, that's you don't get from you even reading the news in a simple way. So that's part of our job, you know, if you want to step forward and learn more, but it could be that you're kinder to people at work, maybe that's your response, that's your way you respond, it might mean that you take more interest in some of the people around you, it might be in your have particular cause or area that you you respond to in your world, it might mean that you take time to learn about yourself more. And I think we all there's lots of room for us to learn about ourselves, and what makes us tick. And it's been a things very frustrating for people of color in the United States. To know all too well, to experience and see all too well. All the advantages, many of the advantages that white people get, that are invisible to the white people. And, you know, it's just like, they don't stay there see that, you know, how, how easy it is, you know, that, you know, just going walking down the street, you know, is kind of, you know, feel peaceful and at ease and untroubled and safe is a, you know, is an advantage to have it's, you know, it's an but it seems like of course, it's

obvious why you have to think about that. But you know, it's so much as so much as easier for you, if you can walk down the street and have that ease.

And there are people, lots of people in our society don't have that sense of ease and comfort. And so their life is a little bit harder. But you know, it goes on and on. You know, there's ways in which so much of what we have elements of our population is probably all of us in our ways, even people of color, get it in certain areas have invisible ways in which we have advantages, which which are kind of the flip side of the discrimination. If there's discrimination someone is looking for an advantage. I don't know what the opposite word for discrimination is. But you know, is claiming advantage or claiming something special for me. So and that's often invisible, we don't see it. So learning about ourselves, looking at ourselves, understanding ourselves, but all along and this is this. I hope this mindfulness meditation practice can be a Buddhist practice can do is to be able to are each in our own way, not to point out we have to look like the statue. But we find a way to be rooted here and ourselves in the present, we found a way to kind of metaphorically, least, be upright, and straight, not shrink, not turn away, keep the chest open, keep the heart open, don't shrink, don't turn away. Don't forget, keep the eyes open, keep the mind open. But learn to do it in this way where we're, we don't succumb to the reactive mind, to the anger, the fear, the hate the confusion, we don't get into that we know ourselves so well. We can hold our place upright and straight. So that we can look calmly and clearly and be present for our world, and hopefully know how to respond in an appropriate way. And if the appropriate way is to sew back this button on a shirt 10,000 times, then we do that without being impatient. If the appropriate way is to step forward towards a fight you see on the street, then we step forward, if we appropriate way is to stay present. When a police is going to arrest someone, or approaches someone, stay present, present without judging anyone, but stay present and be a witness. Because apparently, it's a good idea to have witnesses. And present, if we're in Dallas, then perhaps the appropriate thing is to as some people have done is they put roses on the motorcycle. So the police officers, they come out and find the motorcycle with a rose on it. I think that's given what happened there and they're suffering. So to stay present, very simple. So as I began to talk, and Buddhism began, with a man who had nothing, the clothes on his body, and a robe in which people gave him food, and he had no house, and no possessions besides those two things. And he sat and meditated outdoors, and an open place under a tree with a river nearby. And that's all he needed to change the world. And the world has been different because the Buddha was there. And so we too, we can discover that simplicity of being that ability to be need, in a sense needs so little to be dignified, upright, awake in the world, in that simplicity. Hopefully we too, can shake the world. Hopefully we too can improve and benefit the world for all of us. Because I believe that it's just us here on this planet. So may Black Lives Matter. Thank you