

2016-10-02 For A Future To Be Possible

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SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdaal

Morning, everyone. And as I think, a little bit a little bit louder than on, let's see, is that a little better? Great. Good morning. So the custom here at IMC is to celebrate Earth care week, which happens the first week of October. And so I thought I would give a talk a little bit that's focused on caring for our environment for our earth. And I tentatively titled the talk, for a future to be possible. There was a great title that there was an anthology written some 20 years ago, edited by Tick, not Han, about Buddhist ethics that had that title. And, of course, there'll be a future. But I think the word future here is used in the sense that we might say, some, someone has a great future, someone has a future in that person, and usually has a positive connotation, like, they'll thrive, they'll do great things. So in that sense, for a future that's possible for the people on this planet to thrive, and is a big question for some people. One of the big things to be aware of, is the idea that of environmental justice, that it's the people who are usually the poorest around the planet, who suffer the most from environmental degradation, degradation. And so it's easy to live in so many times in an affluent area of society, and not really be cognizant of how much is happening far away. But it's happening partly because of our consumption, because of our patterns of how we live our lives. Today's news had an article about cobalt, that is in cell phones, computers, and electric cars, and the cobalt in the batteries. And that's mined in places like the Congo and Uganda under terrible conditions for the people there who get just, you know, penance, the very green great poverty, great dangerous conditions and child labor. And I wonder, you know, reading about this, but they say, electric cars have 10 to 20 pounds of cobalt in the batteries? And seems like electric cars are a good idea. But what about where the batteries come from? And how does that weigh into the equation? So how do we care for the environment means how do we care for other people as well? How do we care for humans is how we care for the environment. And in thinking about it as a Buddhist teacher, and a Buddhist center, I believe that one of the important stepping stones to caring for the world, for the environment for nature, is to appreciate it. And without appreciation for it, there's not going to be that easy to find motivation to do something unless the motivation is fear, fear that is going to be big problems if we don't take care of things. But if there's appreciation, we tend to want to take care and care for things we appreciate. And it becomes an act of love and generosity, rather than an act of fear and the Buddhist tradition has a long tradition of appreciating nature, that goes back to the time of the Buddha. The it said that the Buddha was born under a tree was enlightened under a tree, taught under a tree and died under trees. And one of the potent symbols for Buddhism is the Bodhi tree and the Ficus religiosa. The kind of this religious fig tree that that the Buddha sent sat under and, and the body leaf is used just the leaf of it sometimes is used as a symbol. We use it here at IMC as an art stationery and things and other groups use it. And when I was married, Jack Kornfield came to the wedding and his wedding gift was a Bodhi tree, and then which we still have at home.

And so the idea that there's a living tree, which is a symbol of the Buddha's enlightenment and Buddhism itself, I think it's kind of beautiful that you know, this direct connection to the action to nature.

And the story is that the Buddha said under the Bodhi tree, and the great canopy of that tree, protected him, supported him in his quest for awakening. So much so the myths tell us that after his awakening, he stood up And walk some steps away from the tree. And then stood gazing at it in gratitude for seven days and seven nights. So, not sure what to make of standing there seven days and seven nights. But the idea that someone would have that level of gratitude towards a tree, I think is quite beautiful. Because to have gratitude, appreciation for what supports us, supports our lives, is I think, as a pretty fairly natural thing. If we understand how we're supported by others, and by the natural world. If we don't see that connection, and we take the support we have for our lives for granted, then there's not much opportunity to be grateful and appreciative for what sustains our lives. The Buddha died under two trees. And he did that out of choice. He was wondering, he knew he was dying. And there was a choice to go to a small town nearby. And he said, No, I'm going to, he was going to die under the trees. And he found a place under the two majestic trees that were in bloom, and lay down peacefully, and peacefully and mindfully, he passed away under this open setting under the trees. And here to I think it was we know how religious leaders die is a very potent symbol for religion. And here this is very symbolic, I think that the Buddha chose to die in nature under living trees, supported by them, and a very peaceful and mindful and on troubled state. And then in between his enlightenment and his death, he spent most of his time living in forest woodlands, wilderness in park like settings, as they call them parks. I think there were kind of big areas that were kind of connected to some of the towns, maybe the royalty had, where the Buddha set up his monasteries and lived there and in the woods, and the wooded area. And people would come to visit him there. And that's where they'd receive the teachings sitting on the ground probably. And the Buddha sitting, sometimes under a tree, or sometimes a little pavilion, and he would teach there's a kind of a poignant story of, of a vicious King, vicious because he had killed his own father to become king, who kind of was having a bad, bad night, a bad conscious night. And so one of his ministers said, Why don't you go visit the Buddha he's nearby in the woods. So he got together his, his army, you know, he talks about his back then, that the equivalent of Bradley tank was war elephants. So he got together all this war elephants and soldiers and marched into towards the forest, and you couldn't go into the forest with all your soldiers and elephants. So they got off and started walking in. And it was nighttime. And they were supposed to be some like, you know, many, many monks, nuns living there with the Buddha. And here was his king, you know, who's probably afraid of his safety was afraid of his safety, walking into a forest at night, and expecting to see the Buddha and this big entourage of monastics. And it was completely silent. And his story says that his hair stood on end, he turned to his minister, is this going to be an ambush? No, no, no. And he said, pointed off in the distance see over there against that trunk or that tree either. That's the Buddha and he saw a Buddha sitting there and around him was this entourage of monks and nuns, who were sitting there very peacefully. And I think it's a literary maybe it's a literary kind of working, this man who fights wars and kills people, encountering people sitting peacefully in the forest, very silent and still quite a contrast.

I spent time with a teacher in Thailand, who are the famous 20th century teachers, meditation teachers named Buddhadasa. And he had a monastery in southern Thailand, where they had little cabins, huts, cooties that people lived in, but almost everything happened outdoors. And he would he spend much of his time living outdoors. And he would, you'd see him sitting under the trees. You could approach him he'd be sitting there under a tree and you talk to him. And if he gave teachings, it would also be outdoors under trees and there was amphitheaters of Grove, where he would sit then, and we would come sit next to him near him and he would hold forth and so the context of the teaching in the time of the Buddha And into the modern world, the context was the natural world. And it's sometimes difficult to get that sense of the importance of the natural world in Buddhism, if you read modern books on Buddhism, where it's so easy to write about them, as in psychological Buddha's about Buddhism, psychologically, therapeutically, philosophically, without ever mentioning a tree without ever mentioning

the natural world, or the forest. But I believe that when you when you practice Buddhism, in the natural setting, if you hear teachings in a natural setting, the natural setting has an influence on how we hear the teaching, and how we receive them. And the impact that has on us, it's kind of like creates a context for it. And one of the more dramatic stories of this account, I think, or when not inspiring for me, is the Buddha had a son. And at some point, his son became a monk. And at some point, in his training, the Buddha said, discerned that he was ready to get teachings on liberation, he was prepared. And so he invited him to go for a walk with Him, a deep into the woods, they're already already living in the woods, you know, with the other monks. But he took him deep into the woods where there can be alone, in a in a grove of great majestic trees, there's some really great trees like the redwoods of in northern India. And they started at the base of these trees, and just father and sons, the tranquility of the forest, the greenery, their life, the vitality of the forest all around them. And the Buddha taught him not to cling to self, not to cling to oneself. And I think those teachings and not cling to oneself have a very different meaning. If they're given in a kind of, you know, in urban High School, you know, where, you know, people are struggling socially and you know, trying to figure out who they are with each other. And that's kind of like the name of the game is, you know, from it, some of the high school students what's going on socially, trying to figure out who they are, versus someone going off into the redwoods on the coast here. And sitting quietly in tranquilly. In these huge redwoods and the beautiful forest, kind of many people evoke a sense of awe or a sense of tranquility, a sense of being in harmony, and a sense of who they are, or who they're not in relationship to the world around them. Often in the majestic, beautiful natural settings. A lot of self preoccupation falls away, it's like puts us in context. Help wants us to make live more in harmony. And we feel like we doesn't really matter so much. Some of the social dramas that people often get caught up in are some of the personal issues of identity, that seems so important in one setting. But in you know, in the context of a beautiful natural environment. There's a kind of release that goes on relaxing, contextualizing of ourselves, that some people say they feel very small, and this vast world, but it's not a small where they feel insignificant. It's small, where they feel somehow peaceful at harmony, like they have their place in the world like this is right here now. So in that kind of setting, and someone says, gives teachings about not clinging to self, you know, half the works already been already been done for you. You know, it's already you kind of like yes, of course, you know, because the somehow the natural setting supports that. So the Buddha encouraged people to go and meditate at the foot of trees, in the forest, in the mountains, in the jungles. And you'll find him repeatedly saying this go to the fruit of trees go into the forest and meditate there. Partly there were no meditation centers back in ancient India. These were people were gathered together to meditate in a in a safe place.

But I think there's more than just that I think that the natural world is very supportive and a wonderful place to be to practice. I've talked to a number of so in Buddhism, there's a whole class of monastics that are called forest monastics. And their lifestyle is very simple. And they live much of their time in the forest. Sometimes the little cabins that they have, but basically they're kind of in the forest, that's where they live. And these are the monastics that tend to live much more simply, with fewer possessions than urban monastics who sometimes can live in big monasteries and big compounds. And we have examples here in California, Buddhist forest monastics, then nuns who are now in Placerville and under Bodhi in Santa citta and the monks are up in Ukiah, John Pacino and people like him like him. And they talk a lot about how the nature is a teacher for them, and how time nature teaches to them about impermanence in a way that's supportive of them, teaches them about cause and effect, teaches them how to work or their fear. It's not easy sometimes to live in the forest. And especially in Thailand, they still have wild animals that can be quite dangerous if you're out by yourself. And there's wonderful stories of monastics sitting in the forest. And Tigers coming by sitting at night, and a tiger walks by or, you know, roars and wild elephants, Cobras, all kinds of stories of Cobras suddenly appearing for these forest monks and having to deal with that. And so the stories that you're there are told about his encounters with wild animals, often are told as, as the monastic side as their chance to confront their

fear, and to cultivate some kind of inner strength, where fear didn't have the upper hand. And so they taught there, and so what, not only the totality be concentrated and stay calm, but sometimes, because of Buddhist teachings, they would cultivate loving kindness.

And there's a very strong idea in Buddhism, that if you generate a lot of goodwill, the natural world of wild animals will treat you better than if you have ill will. So there's stories of these monks sitting there doing their loving kindness practice or doing their concentration practice trying to overcome or not give in to that their fear. And, and, you know, the only ones we hear about the ones who survive the so you know, for some people, it works out well. But I remember there was a woman who was part of our community here many years ago, when we used to teach it in Boulder Creek near in the woods there. We had at the center we rented called Vajrapani. And many of the people who came to the boot camp out in the woods. And she came to me in an interview and said, You know, I'm not sleeping very well at night. my tent. So that's what I want you and so where are you? Where are you from your tent, I'm over on the other side of the hill all by myself. And I said, Oh, why don't you move in towards the where the buildings are, and other people are attending? So that, you know, because she was she said, she was afraid, being up by herself and the animals walking at night, and they would crunch the ground. And, you know, in your mind your bed. You know, might be a squirrel, but it sounds like you know, it sounds like Bigfoot is coming. And so I said, Why don't you move closer? I said, No, this is my chance to confront my fear. Oh, so I wasn't okay, please. So she didn't get much sleep, but she worked with her fear that there was quite a quite a worthwhile endeavor. And so, nature as a teacher, nature, something to appreciate something to value. And nature also, as a source of teachings, the Buddha used a lot of metaphors that came from nature. And he talked about, you know, the, the path of practice, like a mountain stream flowing down river. And it's kind of a very, I think, provocative idea that the path is like a stream flowing downhill, as opposed to some classic idea of a spiritual practice, being a trail that goes up the mountain. And, you know, I think it's very different image of straight stream is going kind of home in a sense, going downhill. If you go to the top of the mountain, you're not home. You know, it's a lot of work to get up there. And so it's a very different image of spiritual life. There's one story kind of a myth that's told, and someday I'll tell the full story. But the heart of the story is about a tree and mythic tree. A fig tree banyan tree, that is humongous. You know, it's really really big. And it has this canopy and branches that spread out something like 100 miles in all directions. It's that big. So it's like, you know, it's and, and it has these big, like, basket sized fruit, maybe figs. They're hanging from it and the people ariya would, would go and pick a fig and eat it and come back another day, there's always fixed there, there's an endless source of food for the people there. And one day, a stranger came in man came, who was greedy. And so he grabbed as many things as he could and stuffed himself. And when he was full, he went and broke one of the branches off. And with that, the tree stopped making fruit. It's kind of like the story of the golden goose. And so I think it's a very provocative story, that if we don't take care of if we harm that, which supports us, we can't expect it to be around to take care of us anymore.

There's a mutual relationship between us and the environment, nature that supports us. And if we completely oblivious and unconcerned with what goes on in the world, then and just destroy it, take everything we want out of it, then we will destroy our own culture and society. And this has happened many, many times, in human history, I grew up in Italy, I know we would go down the coast of Yugoslavia back then, kind of on vacation sometimes. And it was the islands there, the coast there was quite beautiful, and inspiring to see. But then we learned about the history of that coastline. And how I in 2000 years ago, it was heavily forested, and had lots of soil. But there was clear cut for harvest for wood to build Rome, the kind of farming they did, and all the soil got washed into the, into the sea. And he became their rock, certain kind of beauty, but no longer able to able to sustain people. And there's many civilizations in the history of humankind, where they over over extended their, their, their clarity, cutting their farming, cutting down trees, and it changed the local environment in such a way that no

longer sustained life. And now we come to a time in our in our human history, where that's happening in a bigger and bigger scale.

And so we're in a sense, we're cutting the branch of the great tree. This in the mythic story of the great tree, that fig tree, the Buddha said its name is good support, good support. And so. So you've killed that which supports you Well, if you break it or harm it, watch out, it might no longer take care of you and support you. So I think it's probably pointless to tell people, you know, take care of our planet to take care of our Mother Earth as an admonition. But I think that if we can learn how to love it more, appreciate it more. And feel it really that it's that it's us worth caring for us as, as human society, human human family, and that we're all in it together. That there's not a real separation between the well being of our planet, and the well being of ourselves. We take care of ourselves, when we take care of the planet, we take care of the planet when we take care of ourselves well. And that and until we do it out of love, we do it out of appreciation, not out of greed, not out of strategy, of how to get the best possible life for ourselves and kind of, you know, you know, strategize around how to care for the environment. So we can get the most possible, you know, goods or the highest possible lifestyle, but I have I put my most hope in in appreciation and love for each other. And love for our world that we live in, and then the care will come out of it. The final thing I want to say is that Buddhism is kind of one of the core words for Buddhism is the word dharma. And Dharma is often it just translated as teaching. Sometimes it's translated as truth. And, but it could also be translated as a nature and the truth, the nature kind of, you know, it's kind of interesting, all these kind of come together into the same word. And the Dharma that we see inside of ourselves is the same Dharma that exists out there, that the nature that's in us is out there, the nature is out there is in us and, and then in a wonderful way, it can be said that if we Care for the natural world. We are nature, caring for nature. If the natural world supports us, its nature supporting nature. It's that it's that closely connected and intimate, this world. And I think if we feel that intimacy and feel that connection, just like you'd feel the connection between your right hand and your left hand, when you wash your hands, mutually supportive, that if you feel really feel that kind of connection, then I think that it becomes a delight and a joy, to live a lifestyle that is caring for the world around us. It's not an obligation. So I will encourage you all, to go sit at the foot of a tree. Go and meditate in the forest. Even if it means simply going to your local park and sitting and meditating on the bench are going up here to the local hills where they have the open space preserves. And some of those have benches along the trails. And you're not to go very far to find one. And beautiful places to go sit and quietly meditate and see if it's true. Find out if it's true that the trees and the forests do in fact, create a context and a support for Buddhist practice meditation, for experiencing peace, well being letting go of clinging to self, letting go of clinging, cultivating love and sensitivity to the world around us see if it's true. And if it's true, then I think that you'll love this world, you'll love the planet, you'll love the nature. And you'll just want to take care of it. And I hope that we all do that. So that's my talk for Earth carry week. And we have a few minutes if anyone would like to

ask questions or make a comment or

I'm drinking this water. And one way to drink water is to see this year, as you know, we have you know with a water we have here in Redwood City, it comes from Hetch Hetchy in this euros and see them the mountains that used to have snow. And glaciers that are receding up in this arrows and water flowing down the hillside into these beautiful reservoirs that destroyed great valleys. And it's quite something that we're blessed with is some of the best water in the America that comes from these beautiful places up in this areas. And so to drink water and you know, kind of have a sense of where it's coming from and appreciate it to sit and meditate and speak quietly and feel your chest rising and falling the lungs expanding and contracting. And you know that your body has been created by the food that comes from all over that farmers have grown that the soil has produced, sunlight has made and to look into as we

feel ourselves to feel not just kind of me myself in mind. But see how we're made of recycled material that has been brought to us through the great support that the world gives us. We don't have to go very far to find the nature inside of us to see how much it supports us and where the connection is going out. But it does take a little bit of consideration rather than barreling ahead with you know, our usual preoccupations.

So no comments or questions? Yes.

I was, as I was very discouraged to hear that electric cars have a battery that has the kind of history behind it and the impact it has. Because I drive one and a big reason I drive one is because I thought it was so good for the environment. And

which brings me to the question.

You know, just just being on this earth, we're going to create problems for the earth and even when you're trying to not create negative impacts it it appears Oftentimes we do and I guess the answer is just to keep trying, but can you offer some some words of inspiration to keep trying, because it just seems like being human, we're going to have a negative impact on the earth.

Yeah, I think it's very hard to know all the impact of how we live our lives and take everything into account. And some of this work is happening as a society as a whole are all of us trying to figure it out to other people trying to figure it out, like with a cobalt, you know, it's, it's kind of pretty ugly, what's going on in places like Congo and Uganda, however, there are people concerned about it. And there are movements to change in so Apple Computer, for example, you know, they require a lot of cobalt for all their products, that uses batteries. And, but it is slow, steady away, apples is one of the from the forefront of trying to improve the conditions in Uganda and try to make it much more care going into the carefulness into the source of it, how it's gotten, how the workers are treated, and, and so it comes comes to us more ethically, and of course, going very slow that change, but it is people are concerned about it, I think the more we're informed, the better it can be. Or something like electric car, you know, it can be on the surface, many things can seem like, Oh, this is much more green. But you know, if we really look at all the calculations, you really consider everything goes into it starts getting a little more complex complex to really see with a cost benefit analysis of things. And it's hard to know. But I know one thing that's, that is helpful. And that is use less stuff. You know, keep your car longer, you know, it's sometimes it's better to keep the gasoline car longer in let it get old than it is to buy a new car because of you know, so it's all cut, you know, I think just trying to be careful, and everyone should do what they want to do what they can do. And my hope is that educating ourselves about the impact we have on the world, is also done out of appreciation and love. Because this idea of duty and obligation and guilt and heaviness, and hope and, you know, distress of what we're doing, I think, is counterproductive. I don't think it's necessary. But I think that we can turn it around and approach it from the lens of being inspired and saying, oh, let me educate myself. Let me understand what I do. And you know, what, what is it? What can I do? That's better? What can I do that supportive? And what what can I do to make a difference out of a certain spirit of generosity and love, as opposed to fear and distress? I think I think that that supports everyone, if we act from that positive orientation. Those are my thoughts in reply, I hope that they were relevant enough. Hi.

So I think it's connected a little bit with that question. But maybe on the bigger scale, but also on the smaller scale. I think about the people who perhaps don't see things this way, and are like, don't what don't see, like they have to care about the environment, for example, or that, you know, me as a person might try to do something to improve my own life. And that I think that improves like the whole

environment, for example. And when that person doesn't see that, I wonder if you have any recommendations on how to reach that person? Because you can't force something like this, I think.

But I would like to hear your thoughts if you have any.

Yeah, I don't think I have any wise thoughts to offer you about it. But how to reach a person like that. But we have to be careful for is not getting caught up in us versus them mentality. And they're the ones doing it wrong. And I'm the one who knows better. And I think environmentalism is often set up that way. There's often very strong lines that are drawn. And I read about this this weekend in a very nice way. I thought I mean, it's the verdict is still out. But you know, one of the great divides in America on the environmental issue has to do with the use of coal. And then some people say we should stop using coal because it's so dirty and bad for the environment and other people feel like it's the economy you know, and with people's jobs and have to keep them and, and so there's a man in an East Coast named Tom cook, who is doing some kind of, I don't know either magical or fent Fantasy efforts to buy up all these coal plants and cold mines and mining the mining it when it's all so cleaning them up, he bought me but also had to buy or belong with us the obligation to clean up the environment these coal mines have had. So he's doing work millions, millions of dollars to clean things up and getting it done quickly. And mining coal. And his attempt, he was inspired to do something about this. He had knew nothing about coal a few years ago. But it was a wealthy man. He was inspired when he built a hospital in Ethiopia. And he saw how the Ethiopians were how much how strongly they were impacted by global warming. And so he wanted to make a difference. So he got into coal. And so his business model is to, he wants to plant a million acres of trees in Mississippi to offset the production of coal and the use of coal. So that somehow there's you know, it's comes into a balance the carbon footprint. And, but that requires people to pay more money for the coal that he's selling, which is not a great business model in the American economy. So it's unsure exactly how it's going to work out, but he's going gangbusters to make this work. And I bring this up as an example, that, that rather than being either or, that sometimes what helps is to find the middle ground or find the alternative that maybe is a solution to go forward. And so this man, Tom cook is trying to find that, you know, an alternative, that a lot, you know, that works for both sides. So I think look for the middle, middle ground, look for the commonality, it's always good to try to understand someone else before you try to correct them, or criticize them. And because if people feel understood, then they're willing to listen to you. So I think most people have a lot of the same concerns of their own safety, their well being their care for their family. And if you kind of understand people, then sometimes there's easier to find common ground.

To one more to make it past the back up there.

Hello. I like what you said about taking what you need. I think that's key. But how do we decide what we need? We need a bike Do we need more than one pair of shoes?

Good question. It's a very good question. Especially, you know, an affluent society here, you know, you know, what, what do we need? And? And so again, I don't think I have a wise answer for you a good question. But I do bring look at it from a different angle is to really study what motivates you to buy things to understand what the motivation is, and to discover how to be at a deep sense of inner peace and contentment and well being that's not dependent on having shoes, for example. So as you brought up shoes, and so then what motivates you to buy shoes? The I talked to a friend yesterday who said that she had gone to buy shoes and at Payless, because she discovered some years ago, these shoes, they were super comfortable for her. And she wanted that those comfortable shoes and turns out they're on sale for \$10. And so she got it for comfort sake. I know, I don't know what the shoes look like. But But you know, she was she was motivated by the comfort. And then a friend of my son buys \$400

sneakers. You know, what does a teenager need \$400 sneakers for? You know, it's, you know, it's you know, what's, what's the motivation for that? Is? You know, it's an interesting question. Is it so? So anyways for us to discover? Maybe through some like meditation, how to have a deep sense of contentment, well being peace, love, happiness, that's not dependent on things, then we're not going to be buying things and using things in order to try to be happy, because we're already happy. So

I think we should stop it. You guys are a captive audience. If I stay beyond are a lot of time. So thank you all and please see if you can find ways to appreciate This world because we care for what we appreciate. Thank you