

2017-01-29 Choosing Where We Sit

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SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

Good morning, everyone. And I just returned yesterday from teaching a seven day retreat at our retreat center in Santa Cruz. And so there was a lot of teaching and a lot of immersion in the practice in a wonderful way. And I looked at the calendar and saw that I was supposed to give a talk today here, the day after the end of the tree, and so I feel quite happy. And but I don't really feel like I have anything to say. I've kind of been, you know, set it all. And so, and that's how it occurred to me that we could use two questions, and I could try to respond and have a discussion. And maybe we'll do that at some point. But I thought, well, maybe also, I should say something, somebody who kind of expected something. And if I didn't come from far away from Dubai, now some people look at that. Alright, I'm see calendar and see who's speaking and come a long way just so the pressure is on. And then I know very well that and thinking about today that now, a little over a week into the new administration, here, and many people, it's quite concerning for many people, and many people are quite consumed and disturbed, and it's difficult for them. And so they're not gonna Well, you know, this is an important time and so forth. And time to say something addresses that in some way. But I feel kind of, you know, I just kind of emptied myself. And to come and kind of come here and then address the times and some effective way, is not really, you know, it's not that happening isn't there, coherent way. But I do want to say a few words that they may be kind of brings all these currents of thoughts what's going on in me. And together here at this point, this time, and hopefully in doing so, it's relevant for enough of you as well. When I was a young Zen student, the Zen teacher, the abbot of San Francisco Zen Center, he remember very well he gave a talk Dharma talk. And I don't remember much of the talk, but he said something very significant for me. He said, Gandhi's contribution, Mahatma Gandhi's contribution to humanity, is the importance of sitting. And, you know, meditations. And that was kind of like a very spoken was almost symbolic way of saying something, you know, maybe that the Buddhist contribution was to humanity was to sit and do a deep introspection and look at the roots of suffering and hate and fear in ourselves, and see through it to the possibility of awakening to freedom to providing peace, inner peace. So he said, you know, the Buddha's contribution, knowing when I say, the Buddhist contribution is to sit, Mahatma Gandhi's contribution is to humanity is that it matters where you sit. So the Buddha's contribution is to sit. And so you know, it's one thing to go sit at a, you know, nice retreat center in Scotts Valley, and sit and meditate. It's another thing to sit in, you know, in South Side of Chicago. Where do you sit or, you know, remember, in the 1980s, friends of mine would sit on the railroad railroad tracks, where they brought material to make nuclear weapons, or research over in Livermore, and so they would block the trains, then they sit peacefully meditating, they're minding their own business, you know, focusing on their breathing and I just happen to be doing it on the train tracks. And so, you know, so that's, you know, so this idea of where we sit, where we bring our practice is something is very, very poignant kind of topic. And so, in the Buddhist time, there's two stories. And chances are they're mythic stories, but I think some of these myths, you know, represents something

One of them has to do with a neighboring king who was a neighbor, from neighboring country next to the home country of the Buddha. And he had this king had certain animosity against the people of the country that shock young people when the Buddha was a shotgun. So he had some animosity, he had been slighted by them, apparently insulted. And so he wanted to have revenge. And so he set out with his army to conquer this neighboring country, destroy it, goodies revenge. And when the Buddha heard that this was happening, the Buddha went out, and to a road, just on the road, he sat just inside the border of his own country. And he sat in the middle of the road in the full sun set and meditated. And the king of his army comes along the road, and there's this monk sitting there, blocking the road when you're sitting there. And so, apparently, there's a tradition, you don't just kind of march ahead when the monk is sitting there March over the monk or something out of respect. So the king got down and went over and said, You know, I saw you know, your, what do you what are you doing meditating here in the full sun? Just over there very close by, there's a big tree with beautiful cool shade. Why shouldn't you shouldn't you be sitting over there. And the Buddha said, I'm sitting, I get all the cool shade I need from my, my fellow cleanse, cleanse people, my people of my clan people in my country, my fellow country, people, they provide me my shade. And the king understood. And so he turned around my phone for the army. So the idea that we get support, we get shade, we get nourished, we get something from our people. And that human connection is what the Buddha evoked that we have you had this connectedness that he felt, and maybe the king kind of recognized the human connection, basic connection that people have with each other.

And there's another story where a piece of same two countries, but they shared a river called Rohini. And this Rohini river, there was a drought. And the farmers on either side of the river, dependent on the river to water their crops. So the river water level, the water drops so much, that there was just enough water to water the crops on one side or the other. And so each side wanted to have the water. So they wouldn't, you know, some you know, and so they made I think they started trying to dig irrigation canals or do something. And there was always conflict between these two sides about this water. And the conflict between the farmers escalated. And they got their local village involved in local village got their local country involved, who got their local armies involved, who got their local generals involved a lot cut the local war ministers involved. So it escalated, right. And so the armies got armed and started marching toward each other to have this battle. And so the Buddha heard about this. So he went and put himself right between the two armies. And they and he said, What are you doing? And they said, well, we're going to work. And what's the cause of this war? And he asked the Minister of Defense. Oh, I don't know you have to ask the general. And then general. So I don't know you have to ask, you know, someone else down the line. I don't know draw somebody else down the line is that the Buddha went down the line. And finally it came to the local farmers. And they said, Well, did you show the water and there's not enough water for both sides. And we want the waters because we're going to suffer if we don't get this water. And so then the Buddha addressed them all. And he gets particularly interesting story says he addressed maybe the minister or the people in charge of the army general or something and he said how much is a water worth? I noticed the value of water buying water. He hadn't been to American supermarkets.

Water is more expensive than milk now. There, but and the answer the general gave was, oh waters itself is not so valuable, you know, it's not caught doesn't cost that much. And then the Buddha said, well, what's the worth of the blood of a warrior? And a dentist, that's worth a lot are you going to sacrifice the blood of a warrior for something that's, you know, has very little value from the water. And so that stopped the war. So, you know, it's a little mythic story, maybe symbolic, and you can probably, you know, criticize it or come up with reasons why it's doesn't make a whole bunch of sense. But, but I think, in both these stories, it's example of the Buddha stepping in to conflict right into the middle of it, not hiding in the forest, but stepping right in the middle, and then somehow having something to do with

it. The where he sits, where you are, is important where you stand. In both situations, the Buddha was committed to himself to being non violent. And so, you know, in those situations, and it certainly in the fairy tales like that, that's what it was, you know, it worked out pretty well for him. There's another tale. I don't know if it's, we still don't know if it's true, but have that I think is meaningful for me in the same regard. About maybe about 200 years after the Buddha and 5200 years, there was a king in India named Ashoka. And Ashoka was one of the first kings of India to unify much of India, he went out and conquered huge swaths of India and created a big Empire. And apparently, he was pretty ruthless. And the ancient history is to describe his battles and what he did describe, you know, that there were, you know, huge armies that met on battlefields and, and, you know, 100,000 people were killed and left dead and dying on these battlefields and so, one morning after one of these battles that King one, he was walking across the bat, the battlefield, where all these corpses and wounded people were gore and blood and everything was the remnants of it was leftover. So these the way it's written the stories, it's kind of a graphic picture of something. And I don't think the story's history counts, you know, say much about what the king was feeling. But then, lo and behold, walking across the field through the carnage was a lone, monastic and Buddhist monastic, the robes. It was walking very steadily and slowly, across, calmly, peacefully. And there was something about the peacefulness and the calm of this monastic that in me know, in contrast to the carnage in the violence, the war that the king was familiar with, that got his attention. And so he went over to ask the monk something, you know, you know, why are you so calm? Or what's what teaching Do you follow or what's going on for you here, something was curious. And the monk said something like, hate is never overcome by hate, by love alone is love overcome, this is the eternal truth. And that got the king's attention. And so then he became known, he kick I made it, he was kind of radically reformed. And then he became known for being one of the great peaceful kings of India, who did it, who created started taking care of the people created animal hospitals and hospitals for people and dug irrigation canals for his people and kind of really supportive people and it was a promoted peacefulness in his in his in his world. And he became known after that conversion experience, as one of the more peaceful kings have mentioned India. Maybe it's easier to be peaceful King after you've conquered everyone. There's no more no, no one left to conquer. But, but anyway, the idea is, this is a story that's told of his conversion, seeing this monastic. And so again, this idea of where you go, where you are, what you do is important.

And so here, the monk, the monastic when Tina is walking across the field so the question is For people who are practitioners, Buddhist practitioners do the practice is are you ready for the performance? It's kind of one of the oddities of the English language that could escape talking about practicing, practicing, practicing. When we practicing for, you know, we're only going to practice. So when do we perform? And when do we step out from our meditation meditating in the privacy of our homes or meditation centers like this? And when do we bring our practice, or meditation or peace or into the battlefield or into the public world in a way that can make a difference? And then how do we do it? I think that one of the great important aspects of the practice that we do is the emphasis its emphasis is to put a tremendous emphasis on how we are. And maybe you could almost say how er is more important than what we do. And so that's how we are meaning. This context I'm talking about, do we do is to how peaceful there are people who have advocated for peace, and they've done it violently. There are people who have devoted themselves to non violent work. But then they've had bitter fights and conflict with people within their own communities, you know, their own can organize the organizers and stuff. And I knew people who have in the 60s who were involved in the anti Vietnam War demonstrations back then, who were so dismayed by how much anger how much violence, how much authoritarianism there was, and how much sexism there was, among these people who are organizing these anti Vietnam War movements, that they left the movements, or they went to look for something else, that they could put their energy into, that would make some make a difference rather than perpetuating some of the or unhealthy dynamics that could exist in our culture, even in the pursuit of peace. So how are we? You know, do we? Do we? Do we have a way of living with love? Do we have a

way of living with in a peaceful way? Do we have way of living where we respect each other and care for each other? Do we have a way of living that we don't get caught by fear? Don't get caught by hostility? Don't be you know, we don't get discouraged. So we can meet to step forward into the world we can sit on that road when the armies come, we can walk into the battlefield when it's necessary, and we can take with us our sense of stability and clarity and peacefulness, and the absence of fear, the absence of discouragement, the absence of you know, cowardness how do how are we? And so, the practice that we do, is a practice to touch in, in ourselves, a certain way of being how avoiding some house we are, and cultivating other house. So, no longer cultivating fear, no longer cultivating hostility within us and supporting it and reinforcing it. No, not not cultivating, giving up and pulling back. Not cultivating agitation and preoccupation, but rather cultivating courage, peacefulness, confidence, and ability to stay present. without being afraid, an ability to not avoid conflict, not avoid conflict, but also not cause conflict. But perhaps step towards it, so we can feel it and be with it directly. The pinata continue the conflict. So the I think I said this recently that you know, the, if someone attacks you, verbally or physically, I think the ideal in Buddhism is not to walk away that you didn't know to turn the other cheek, not to. Also not to attack and return.

But rather to stand there confident and strong, and look the person right in the eye. And here I am, you have to take me into account. And we can talk, we can engage. But I'm here, I'm not going to give, I'm not going to back off, I'm not going to attack. I'm just here, kind of in a symbolic way, that's kind of like the ideal in Buddhism, how that actually plays out in different situations just you know, situational and the spirit, but the practice is preparing us for that the practice of being able to have the stability, deep abiding stability and kind of confidence and that peacefulness, that is how we step forward. And that's my certainly my wish, that was one of the things that people who do this kind of practice, offer the world that we can go and offer a how. And so when other people are involved in actions, political actions, or peaceful actions, whatever, that that that how saying calm, cow saying peaceful, is contagious, show something that is supportive for other people and maybe keeps keeps things in a peaceful way. So, when the story I told you have in the fight over the river, and the water, and then, you know, when the Buddha said, you know, what is it what's more valuable water or the plight of a warrior, when the when the fighter is backed off and just decided not to fight? It said, The Buddha recited these verses. Ah, that's part of the poem.

So happily, we live without hate among those with hate. among people with hate, we live without hate. So happily, we live without misery, among those in misery among people in misery, we live without misery. So happily, we live without ambition among those with ambition. among people with ambition, we live without ambition. So happily, we live, we have no attachments, we shall feast on joy, as do the radiant God's victory gives birth to hate. The defeated sleep and anguish giving up both victory and defeat those who have attained peace, sleep happily.

So that's what I didn't have to say today. So if you'd like to say some words or questions, so it can be about anything at all. And it's open for the floor. If you could say your name when you start to be nice. Green light, the other push the button on the side.

Hello, my name is Stephanie. It's nice to see you, girl.

So this week,

I got to really feel how strong my practices because at the beginning of the week, I had my first asthma attack, big asthma attack in 20 years.

And I had to call 911. And I had to go to the ER.

And what was really, I didn't suffer.

So my body was doing this thing where it was shutting down completely. It couldn't breathe anymore. There are reasons why I've had my first big asthma attack in 20 years. Some of you might be able to guess.

How much stress

but what was really what I felt really, really grateful for was that this practice that we do,

allowed me to observe

and be with what was happening to me as it was happening to me.

Fantastic. So there was the performance. It was

Yeah, it was the it was the performance of the practice. Now. I've been doing

Great, thank you. Thank you, Stephanie. Here in the front,

I was wondering about your most recent book, "Buddha before Buddhism", I think it's called. And it has lots and lots and lots and lots of commentary on a historic point. So I appreciate it from an academic point of view, even though I'm not interested in that part. So what are your suggestions on using these poems? As a practice? point?

Nice, nice question. So, you know, the book I translated is considered to be the, what I read from before it was from the Dhammapada also translate what I translated many years ago, then now I translated verses that are attributed to the Buddha that are considered to be at his earliest teachings. So they have a certain antiquity and certain value and get a sense of what, what the Buddha was teaching before he systematized developed this teaching into what we now call Buddhism. So it's a set of verses. And one of the things I find useful with any teaching, and sometimes easier with verses, because they have a certain rhythm to them, or kind of point equality, is to live with them for a while. And so like, I lived with those verses, for 20 years on and off, took me 20 years to do the translation, because I didn't do it that often. But, you know, I lived with it, and we came back to it and reread it. And sometimes it's nice to even memorize verses. So they, because when you memorize something, it lives in us in a different way, than if you read it and just kind of kinda remember what it says. And so to just memorize four, four lines of a verse, and then go around, reciting it yourself through the day, and have it come back, and then it pops back up unusual times. Uh, huh. It's relevant here. Why didn't I didn't think about it that way. And it kind of works as a way kind of into the subconscious mind and an interesting way when you've memorized it, so you're living with it, then reflecting on it and thinking about it. It's nice, sometimes when you have either memorize something like that, or just reading it, to read, read a few lines. After meditating, you know, if you're meditating, or particularly calm and settled through meditation, then we sometimes reflect on teachings or take them in a different way, than if we're, you know, you know, just glancing down and, you know, during a commercial on TV or something, you know, very different way of taking it in. And then, sometimes I found it nice for work, because it's so short teachings, and like verses do is to write them out, even write them out a few times, because in the writing is also something it's a different kind of engagement and kind of living in us more fully. So

there's, there's a whole cut with this whole art of contemplative reflection of sacred texts. So giving yourself content, it's not like reading, you know, the newspaper or something. And you have to kind of get yourself in a special time place. After meditation, or in a quiet time of day, you don't read it in order to read as fast as you can. This is get through it as fast as we can then move on to other things. But rather, you read short chunks, there was a time when, especially when I lived in the monasteries, where I would be the only a page a page of a Dharma book each day. And that one page would just blow me away, like, now I got a lot of work to do, this is a lot, this is a lot to handle. And then I would reread that page through the day periodically two or three or four times. And so I lived with it, I applied it, reflect on it. And then the next day, I'd read the next page. So it takes a while to get through a book then. But the point is not to get through a book, the point is not to acquire knowledge. The point is to practice with it or to be affected by it or be changed by it in some way. So I'll say one more thing about, you know, living with spiritual texts and practicing with them. And like these verses that I did was one way of actually thinking about them is to reflect about not whether you agree or disagree with what you read. That's kind of like an instinct that many people have. And because we want to be right, we want to find, you know, what's, you know, we want to have an opinion and be smart that way. All kinds of things. And you know, it's easy, it's relatively easy to decide what you like and what you don't like. And chances are you don't benefit yourself personally, by simply deciding you like or dislike something. So it's in terms of being changed and for the better, you might just put aside the tendency to like or not like, or to rule this is right or this is wrong. But rather, if there's if it's something that has been preserved for 2500 years, it's probably has some value for some people. And so to reflect in this way, in what way? In what circumstances are these teachings useful? For me?

It might be 99.9% of circumstances, the teachings are ridiculous. those particular ones, they just don't make any sense. But in that particular circumstance, I think it makes sense there. This is a useful thing. This is useful way approach, definitely useful approach to here. So even if it's point 1%, useful for you. That's better than the uselessness of right and wrong. And I like and I don't like. So the idea is to stretch yourself and think what ways is useful? If you discover how it's useful, then you've benefited? That makes sense. And then you're grateful. Okay, this is great. So that's a little bit. Okay, great. Someone else gets you.

Oh, when you're talking about the Buddha, turning people around. I was thinking about the people all over the country who are trying to turn around what they feel is injustice. And I am, I felt so touched and so proud to see the peace of the people. No violence at all. And many of the symbols they carried were about love. Yeah, not hate. And so having had some experience as a protester, I, I just am I have a renewed faith in people and becoming a loving force for change.

Thank you. Yes. And your name is? Oh, my name is Trudy. The Yeah, it was I think many people felt encouraged by what happened last Saturday. So I certainly did a little bit, I was worried because of the violence in Washington DC the day before. And so I was worried that that might happen again, and be counterproductive, and to see how peaceful it was all over the country. And how many people came out? I was so I was actually surprised to feel encouraged so quickly. And so happy it happened. And my hope is that no, my own my own hope for what Buddhism has to contribute is not a party and conflict, but rather as a mediating force as an ability to walk into the middle. And certainly, sometimes we want to walk in the middle and sit in the road and stop things for sure. But not to stop it is in this stuff, which we feel is wrong. in a way that's conflictive. But actually figure out a way that's mediating force between people and so that they're common humanity is found or shared values are found that we understand each other better. And we're not demonizing anyone, we're, we're understanding kind of the everyone's beginning to understand each other and deeper, deeper way. And so even if we end up with disagreements, it's comes from mutual understanding, which is often rare when there's conflict because

people kind of recoil and come into camps and so it's, you know, I don't know if it's naive, but I certainly hope that that kind of practice we do of sitting and being mindful and paying careful attention and having compassion translates to being kind of in the Buddhist get seen as people who are not neutrals of our word but but are welcomed into all circumstances, because they're seen as having everyone's interest in mind, concern for everyone, and then our mediating force, where we can kind of find our way to solutions. So one more and then we'll stop

I'm and I'm kind of confused and wondering if I'm being simplistic because taking care of yourself if you've got some kind of conflict, that you want some stability and like the first concrete step you can take is having loving kindness for people that you disagree with. I'm wondering why I haven't heard this or that's an idea that's just too simple.

Right now.

So I'm not sure I completely understand but, but part of what I understood is that definitely, we should take care of ourselves. And having inner stability is part of that, having loving kindness for oneself compassion for as part of that, and really understand extending ourselves really well. So we understand the sources of suffering inside of ourselves, how we contribute to it and how we succumb to fear, hate or succumb to how we get wrapped up in pain in a way that's not useful. And so when there's conflict with others, when there's a variety of things that are useful, and when a classic when Buddhism maybe this would be pointing to is loving kindness. And which means loving kindness here means a basic attitude of goodwill. Yeah. And so to not automatically demonize people, but to be concerned for their welfare, you know, so we disagree, but you know, you're human, I want you to be happy. And let's you know, and they feel that you're you have their, their welfare in mind, you're not just trying to roll over them getting your way or something or you're not trying to, you know, attack them in return or something. And so there's cultivating loving kindness is a very important part of Buddhist practice.

Okay, so just kind of a basic thing.

Yeah, it's really basic in our tradition of mindfulness of Buddhist there are four practices, which are the kind of the foundation for what we do. There is mindfulness. loving kindness, generosity, and ethics. Okay,