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SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

So, in a few weeks, United States will celebrate its independence day, the Fourth of July, which I've often thought of as a nice Buddhist holiday Liberation Day, since, since that's what, you know, Buddhism is a lot about. But America has a second Independence Day that is growing in recognition. And now something like 40. Some states, some have some recognition of it. Some states like Texas have it as a national as a state holiday. And this, it's called Juneteenth day, for today, June 19, June Juneteenth thing, and it's America's second Independence Day. And in some ways it completes part of the first one, because it's very strange this first, you know, America declared independence, United States declared independence from England in July 4, 1776. And that's recognized as the beginning of United States, independence, freedom. But their freedom that was claimed, with that, fuck that Declaration was for people of European descent, mostly for white people. And with the beginning of freedom for white people, the United States simultaneously instituted slavery for people of African descent in the United States. It's quite a remarkable thing to think about, that this day that we celebrate independence is the very day this country sanctioned slavery for big part of the population. So what kind of freedom is that, and then they had this, they stay stated, all men are created equal. But there's this big butt, right? And I guess they met men, since they were the ones who were given the vote, the males, but all men, but then they had all these mostly African American slaves, but slaves, a few, a few other ethnicities that, you know, were they really equal in being slaves. So it became a kind of a paradox and kind of a problem, I think, for the health of the country, that they had to kind of negotiate this idea that all men are created equal. But we we have to justify why or apologize for explain why some people don't fit that criteria. So it became a kind of strange, ethical negotiation that many people in this country had to live. Many of the white people had to kind of figure this out, you know what to do. And I must have been, you know, I imagine that for the white people had to figure out this ethical issue. I hope it wasn't easy for them. Because I can imagine that it can't be easy to shut down and close down and treat the whole population of human beings this way. Especially when the foundation of the country is a certain kind of creed, a certain kind of dedication to something. So then, June 19, almost, you know, 100 years later, 90 years later, June 19 1865, was when they think we people historians thinks that the last slaves United States were finally freed. And that was two and a half years after the Emancipation Proclamation proclamation that Lincoln signed declaring that all slaves would be free. And that day, there was a, I think, general or something. Army officer came to Galveston, Texas and made the announcement that all the slaves there, were now free. And so it celebrated as a holiday in Texas, and other places. Nowadays, think in 1980. I think it became a holiday in Texas. And so it's used to celebrate African American accomplishments, African American contributions to United States is used to celebrate the freedom to independence of African Americans. And I think that's great, really wonderful.

But I also think that there's a tendency to, especially among the majority, dominant white population, United States, to kind of look the other way too often, and kind of say, What's them? their freedom, their independence? That's nice. Isn't that great? But isn't it also kind of a freedom for the white people? When the when everything when there's no more slavery when they're not having enforced slavery in this country? Isn't there some kind of problem for the people who were slave owners? What kind of ethics is that? What kind of life was that what what ways that they had to close their hearts down to be part of that system. They were also in a certain kind of way in slaved in their attachments to that system, and the attitudes they had to the slaves. They also were kind of caught in this horrible system. And there was a moment there where they were freed from that a moment. Because here's a, I think, a quote from one of the great African American historians of the United States, web Dubois. He was the first African American get a doctorate from Harvard University, and was one of the great not only historian and sociologists of America, but also he studied the African American situation in America, the United States. And just like Martin Luther King, by the end of his life, he started noticing that poverty was a big issue in the country. And he became an activist to try to deal with poverty. And just like Martin Luther King realized, you know, actually, this whole idea of war and the war machine and global war is a big issue. And he became a, a anti war activists. And, in fact, he became one of the first people probably United States to be tried, had to go to court for opposing nuclear weapons. In 1951, I don't know if he went to jail, but he had his passport taken away. Because it's kind of you know, it wasn't quite right to be opposed to nuclear weapons in 1951. So he was a great American. And he wrote this about referring to, you know, this, in the, the, you know, when slaves were freed and United States, in 1860. This, the slave went free, stood for a brief moment in the sun, then moved back again, towards slavery, towards like, say slavery. So we feel as if you don't know that in United States, many states, especially in the south, that instituted Jim Crow laws, all kinds of laws that limited the rights, the voting rights, the owning property rights, rights of congregation of coming together, all kinds of things were, were put in place. And some of these laws are still kind of a little bit in the books, still kind of struggling with. But you know, it's kind of remarkable that the right for African Americans to marry anybody they wanted to at least have the opposite gender was only granted in 1965. That's just about you know, 50 years ago, I think 65 or 67. Levin's versus Virginia was a famous case in the Supreme Court 50 years ago. So here's an interest I, for me, you know, reflecting on this and reflecting on the humanity and would like to be present for in this life as a human being and pay attention to what's going on. When I was, my, my, my father in law, died three years ago. He was a Dutch to, was born in 1926. And he, as a Dutch to him and his family went to the concentration German concentration camps. And he spent a number of years in there. And he was a relatively privileged prisoner. And he the people, he was in fifth special group, so something only like half of his group died in prison, that included his parents, and in a lot of people he knew, but he survived. And, and, you know, it probably damaged him in some ways. For the rest of his life. He did a lot of work to heal himself and he had a he had a great life after he came out of the concentration camp after he made their way out of the war and all that.

It was a four bit of experience. So about just before he died 3 4 3 years ago, a few weeks before we kind of knew he was passing away. My son who was then fifth 15, I think, do you think was three years ago, 4 3 4 years ago, for seven to 15. And my son loved loves videos and documentaries. So he brought his video camera with him. And we sat into his in his living room, and my son videoed him with various stories of being in the war and being in the camps. And what that experience was like, and I've had conversations my father a lot about this before. And he gave a little bit of a toned down story to my, my son, about what that was like in those camps and the experience of it. But still, it was the first time my son really heard those stories. And, you know, I think I made a big impression on him, formative time in his life to hear the stories of his grandfather. So he started, he heard my 15 year old son heard stories that took place, about 70 years before. There's a good possibility that if my son lives for 70 years, until he's 85, he'll remember those stories. They'll still be I think there's a fair chance that he's

gonna look back at those stories and be formative and shaping him and his understanding of life and all that. This means that some 140 years after the end of World War Two, there is someone for him, World War Two still lives as an important impact in the formation of who they are and how they see the world. I think that's remarkable. And so yeah, the last retreat I was teaching, there was someone who was a descendent of people who were part of their Armenian genocide. And it was still very much present for her. And the idea that world that the Civil War, and slavery was, you know, hundred and about 150 years ago. It's kind of close enough in time, that there are people who are still very much affected by it hasn't gone away. And then if you think of people who are released from slavery, the trauma of slavery, you know, they were released, and they, they were penniless. Some of them were homeless. That's traumatic, and they had to figure out with no help, how to make their life and how to go forward. And then to start having these limitations put on them and restrictions put on them and all this. One of the restrictions in Texas was that they started celebrating pretty quickly, in Galveston, the Juneteenth day, their independence, but then they were they were prohibited from congregating anywhere, to get together to celebrate. Wow. So then they got they banded together and raised money, and they bought their own land to make a park. And that then they were allowed to celebrate their own their their freedom. But what why would it why I wanted to talk about all this today, there is a kind of Buddhist reason to practice reason. I don't know, I didn't want to just give you a history lesson probably wouldn't be welcomed. If it was just that is the idea that, you know, what is freedom for any individual? And what are we blind to? When we think we become free? I think the white people thought they were free. But were they really a big impact on me on this whole idea of racism and experiences of different races here and slavery in the United States? was a conversation I had with Ruth King, an African American Dharma teacher, a great teacher, and who's given a lot of attention, these issues. And now I'm writing a book on mindfulness of race. And we're having a conversation, and I was asking her about the relationship between really is very personal in my relationship to African Americans and how that kind of says something about it. And she said, she kind of turned to me and said, you know, in America, we're all kin.

Meaning that the white people and the black people, I think that's what she was meaning but we're all kin And then when she said that it had a big impact on me, because what it occurred to me was that most African Americans who descended from slaves have white blood in them, many of them were descendants of rape of a plantation owner, and all kinds of things that happen there. And so there's a family connection between, you know, back this back then slave time between white people and black people. And what is it? What is it? What was it like, for a black person to know that your father was your owner? And when maybe sell you off any point away from your own parents, kind of kind of maybe disowned you? What was that like for the black people? But what was it like for the white people to do that? What was it like for the white children of the white slave owner, to know that they had siblings who were in the slave quarters? What was that like for them? I can't imagine it was easy, I can't imagine that they could make it easy. Unless they really shut down and close down parts of themselves. They couldn't be free in that system. So the idea of what is freedom? What is real freedom for anyone at all. And when is it when we are we allow ourselves to be free only in some ways. But we have blind eye to other ways in which we're not free. Or we turned a blind eye to the lack of opportunity, lack of freedom, lack of rights that other people have. Because we're busy with our life, or we kind of don't think that we're busy, we're busy with our life, we think our life is hard and difficult and return just trying to get by. But to what degree, ignoring the rest of the system that we're in the other people is their freedom there as well. So what I believe about Buddhist practice, and is that as we discover freedom through Buddhism, as we learn to recognize in our hearts and our minds, the ways that we are suffering and suffering, because we're caught in the grip of some kind of compulsion, some kind of clinging, some kind of resistance, some kind of craving, some kind of very strong desire, compulsive desire, that we can't really operate as a free agent, because that strong desire that strong fear has the upper hand.

And so we end up doing things and saying things, and feeling things, believing things, which are not really for our own well being. It causes us stress, it causes us suffering, it causes distress, depression, all kinds of things. And the function of Buddhist practice is to uproot the ways that we have our clinging and holding and resistance and all that so that we can see it clearly. And release it to really release it. And the operating word in Buddhism is release. Not relief. If we're using Buddhism for relief, we might then continue to perpetuate all kinds of ways in which we actually are caught in a system caught in our psychological inner system of clinging and holding, we just kind of made ourselves comfortable. But to discover a real release, to really be able to free ourselves to let go of something to heal something very deeply, is a function of Buddhist practice. But is that something we do? Only individually? Is it only good enough to become free yourself? I think it is if you do it thoroughly. Because if you do it thoroughly, you're going to notice what's going on around you. You're gonna not only that, but you're going to feel somehow intimately connected. You're gonna feel we're all kin. We're all family. How could it not be? Because you know, this, the, our capacity for empathy, our capacity for understanding other people. I think that that that blossoms, when there's no resistance, no holding, no tightness, no fear, no blocks to it, no blind blinders on to see.

So as we become freer with feel connected to people. This evening, my wife read an article he told me about that Didn't get the, you know, the citation or anything. But it seems to be a psychological study of people who end up in positions of power. And apparently they've done brain scans of some kind, to see what parts of the brain that get activated. And they've studied that my guess psychologically. And apparently, there is a correlation that people end up with a lot of power, develop less empathy, they have less ability to read other people, their ability to read and understand other people goes down. And it's kind of remarkable. So slave owners had a lot of power, their empathy probably went down. People who tried to keep the power, after slavery was their empathy. People are trying to keep the power now, if we know what degree of MTV do we see United States, with people who are poor, the people who are oppressed, the people who are African American, it's a huge issue right now the degree to which people understand that have empathy for each other in this country. And, anyway, but freedom to really become free, sets free the empathy. And if it doesn't set, it's free, are we? Are we really free. And if it's always something about someone else who's free, or theirs are, we kind of keep ourselves separate and distinct. I mean, we can't really be free. So the issues that are true for African Americans are true for everyone else in this country. And this is very nice. I mean, this guy is the web to the voice. He was a champion for African American rights. But as he seems to be, as he studied these issues that he had to look at, he became a champion for Native American rights, he became began understanding the issues for everyone. And, you know, I think that what's happening in this country is kind of a wake up for, you know, to the needs of other people and what it means to be free. The it was only 50 years ago that we celebrated last week, the 50 year anniversary of Stonewall, in New York City only 50 years ago. And can gay people be free? If the rest of us are not free to? Can the rest of us be free? If they're not free? Where's where do we share our freedom? Where's the intersection of it? How do we find it? So this has been what I've discovered for myself, in the years that I've done Buddhist practice, that came as a surprise, it wasn't something I was looking for. And that was that we're all kin. That is that as I grew in my capacity for freedom, as I learned to shed and drop and let go of many of things that I was caught up in, that my eyes, my heart began to open more. And I started to be more sensitive to what's going on around me and the people around me. And that process continues to this day. And maybe it's a lifelong process, maybe it never ends. I think as, as any individual keeps growing, developing, I think we all hopefully develop and grow in our whole lifetime. As our society keeps growing and developing, and maybe societies will always grow and develop. That's the nature of it. There's no static fixed state for any of us. But as we keep moving into, it's like moving into freedom all the time. We're finding freedom all the time. It's not a done deal. I don't think that we can rest and be content, or now I'm free. And feel like you know, done, what had to be done is the saying and Buddhism. I don't think it really works that

way. If we're connected to each other. And then we keep growing. So to have freedom, Buddhist freedom to have this practice of we're doing a mindfulness lead to freedom. We can't do it alone. It's something we do together or something you find together or something we're connected together. It's not a message that some people want to hear because some people really want to just find relief for themselves. They want to just kind of find some kind of way of coping with life better for themselves. And that's fine. I think it's a wonderful thing, important thing to do. For what you should know that if you do find looking for that kind of relief, looking for the benefits of mindfulness, stress reduction, and all kinds of benefits, healing things, watch out.

Because if you do it well, the freedom is going to catch up to you. You can't not you At some point, if you do this practice, start feeling a kinship or connectedness or greater empathy to the world around you. And the momentum, the feeling inside of wanting to be free, will take precedence. And you'll discover ways like I'm still discovering ways in which I'm not totally free. There's I have beliefs, ideas, bias, attitudes, understandings, blinders, all kinds of things I have as I go about our world and our society. But But I'm confident that if I have this mindfulness thing going, that there's a kind of force for the within, that wants to move through that wants to find a way. And sometimes it's a little hard to do that. It's awkward. But that's, that's the movement of this practice. And it's one of the reasons why I have a lot of confidence in this practice of mindfulness. Because it's not something is just good for this for the individuals, it's good for our society. And I think this is one of the purposes that Buddha had when he taught this. And the reason I say that is because of one little teaching that would have had a he said repeatedly, where he defined what a wise person is. And he said that a wise person is someone who intends the welfare of oneself, the welfare of others, and the welfare of both self and others. Well, for for me, welfare for you, and for welfare for we, the whole system, in one place, the Buddha when he the last one that we said, welfare for the whole world. And I think that's the movement, that's the concern, that's the direction this practice goes. That's why the Buddha would say that we're not only concerned about ourselves, we're not only concerned about others, we're concerned with both, in addition to both, we're concerned concerned with the system, the we, how we all are together, how we're family together, how we're kin, how we work together our society. I think that's the movement of this practice. I hope that's the case. And the final final thing I say, I'll say is that in, in some Zen traditions and some Mahayana, some traditions, there's this wonderful teaching that to become, just because it's based on a logical saying, only between a Buddha and a Buddha. That if you want to become really free, you in some sense that some some people say you can't do it alone. You can only do it in relationship with other people. When Buddha meets Buddha, when a free person meets a free person it can you Are you ready to meet a free person and recognize each other? That would be that's pretty cool. would be like if you're really free, really liberated really at peace with yourself? What is it what happens when you meet someone else that way? That's pretty cool. A Buddha meets a Buddha. They happen they we all meet each other. So those are my thoughts for this day of celebration, the Juneteenth day. And I want to give you a chance to ask any questions or make any comments you'd like to do at this point.

And if there's no comments, then I'm going to then there's a risk if you don't have any comments or questions, then I might read a legal measure. Yes.

Thank you for the wonderful talk. Um, does freedom necessarily goes with the happiness

with happiness? Well, yes or no. I think that in and of itself, when freedom, there's simple experience of freedom, especially when we really experience it fully for ourselves, like, you know, to clear way it often comes with happiness. But see, here's see freedom and Buddhism is, is a little different than how often freedom is thought about in the United States. I don't know if it's really fair to say it this way, with at

least maybe that principle is what I'm trying to say. Some people think of freedom, and what they think about the freedom to do something. In Buddhist practice, we're finding freedom from something from limitation from restrictions from contractions from fear from suffering. If you learn to be free, and there's your heart is open, and you no longer have those limitations, in and of itself, it might be a happy thing. But what happens if you encounter someone who's suffering? Then you're heartbreaks. You're a piece of you're heartbroken. It feels okay to have your heart broken, it feels like it's right. I mean, why not? You should, you know, if you feel empathy and someone's suffering, and, of course, you're not going to be you know, whistling happily and smiling and saying, you know, just be happy. I think that, that the freedom that we find this practice means that our emotional life is rich, actually, or connected to what's appropriate in the world around us. And we, we we feel the emotions that are appropriate from circumstances. However, we're not stuck in them. So if we had a situation, that's heartbreaking, our heart is broken, when my cry, we don't get stuck in that sadness. When you know, then we're, the next thing happens, and we're ready for the next. Is that the answer you wanted, or you want to just? Okay. So move Mike over.

So your talk and then the flag next to the Buddha reminded me of something, which was that when my daughter was very little, I used to sing to her songs from the play called free to be you and me. And for

anyone hear the name,

free to be you and me? Yes. And for those who don't know, this was a fairly revolutionary thing in the 70s, which is a series of skits and songs and poems, for children around the theme of men and women and boys and girls being equal, and also not having stereotypes around those roles. And, you know, it was like a big deal. And now that my daughter is a little older, she got interested in reading the lyrics. And we were looking at it and noticing that, even though that was revolutionary, there was no mention of gay couples at all right, it was all male female type relationships. And I was talking to her about how wow, you know, they thought that they were so cutting edge then. But no one thought about this other group of people. And I said, you know, and now, you know, there's been all these laws in the Constitution and the Supreme Court, that it's become now more mainstream, most of the time of, you know, gay relationships. And I said, but in one of the songs about different roles, it was talking about how mommies or daddies could be various different roles. But they said, but mommies can't be daddies, or grandpas. And daddies can't be mommies or grandmas. And I thought, but wait a second. Now we're talking about transgender people, right. And so actually, mommies can be daddies or grandpa's, and vice versa. And unlike that wasn't even considered in this. And I said to her, what other group of people? Are we not even considering that, you know, are feeling not part of society or feeling left out? that we haven't even thought about yet? And 17 they hadn't even gone that far.

So I think it's a it's a great comment. Because I think this idea of the theme of today, the freedom is that there hopefully, is a willingness to keep opening up and keep being receptive to what we keep discovering, and where that where that where a new rights where a new, you know, identity is new, you know, freedoms for other people are possible that we have, we don't see it currently, I think, a willingness to kind of least kind of keep stretching and that's why I think we're always growing we're always growing in freedom. And sometimes it's happening right. You know, some ways it's happening quickly. And sometimes some ways it's happening glacially for some people, but I think it's we, we want more of it. That's the direction.

So just comment about the article you mentioned. Extreme power. It was an MIT study shows correlation between with a brain scan, similar to TBI, traumatic brain injury.

So I think this is really interesting, because that just came up during their studies about how the, the traumatic experience of slavery, how that there's post, post slavery, traumatic experience of the whole experience continues down through generations, for African Americans. But in this way, maybe there was trauma for the white slave owners. Right. And so there, it's also same kind of similar thing. And so, and that trauma also continues. And maybe that explains why there's so much hate and anger and things like that, in there, some of the white population towards this whole thing, because they also are struggling with their trauma.

Yeah, the other point is this progression, not going to isolating groups and having certain judgment against groups. It exists in, in the same groups, I mean, it's, it doesn't need to be a person belongs to a certain color, or a certain behavior, or whatever it is. And that's, that's the, the these are like, I don't know what we call them, maybe bad seeds, or, you know, things could be on extreme, you know, people who abuse the power of others, or the people who are being abused. And that exist across the board amongst white only, yeah, and once, you know, black, or whatever it is. And that's, that's another thing that's always also maybe ignored or not looked at.

I agree. So I think this idea of freedom being a plant inside of us keeps wanting to grow. And our task is to keep letting it grow. So we can keep looking at all the different areas when we close our hearts, or our society closes its hearts to people in all kinds of different ways. And I agree, I agree, it's within groups, it's within individuals everywhere. It's good to know. But we're hopefully learning how to not do it so much anymore. So this is one of my hopes for an org, or a place like IMC, for a Buddhist group like ours. Is that certainly, you know, I hope that we can be inclusive here to everyone. I mean, ideally, everyone would feel welcome here. And I know it's sometimes hard to feel welcome here for many reasons. But certainly, it's my wish that that's the case that's inclusive, and their new place anybody can come and use and be part of. But I know that that's also, you know, a little bit idealistic to say that because of so many different complicated complicating factors that go on how people feel included, not included, and then the dynamics within a group. But one of the dedications that I have in our like IMC to have is that will never turn our backs on anyone. Meaning part of hardware that means is it, we're always ready to meet someone and talk about what's going on and find a way No one's ever kicked out. No one's ever, you know, said you can't be here, everyone's welcome to come. And if there's challenges and tensions and difficulties, then we're good, we'll hang in there, no one's going to be asked to leave. Unless there's some kind of, you know, physical harm being done or something. And the, the idea is, we're here to meet the challenges and beat the gentleman meet the difficulties and try to find our way through it. And I think that that, my hope, I think is that that occasion, hopefully will help us find a way to simply have the idea. We'd like to be inclusive and be welcoming, is important. But it can also be naive, because it kind of can ignore the fact that to really be inclusive, we have to deal with the difficulties, the challenges and the tensions that come up. I don't know if that responded to your statement, which

is a statement for you. I'm referencing the question maybe that I haven't asked yet is this this kinship that comes with that freedom, and a sense of family? It gets out of whack when sometimes the essence of a real family is have something that has the opposite of that has an abuse or has some where it's it shouldn't happen because it's family, but then it's happening to an extreme case inside of the family. Right. And it's causing way more damage to the family and the kinship that is part of Yes. So how do you

what do you do with that?

It's easy, you heal it? Yeah, I say that because it's a big topic, right? I mean, hopefully it can be addressed and can it be addressed on the sometimes it has to be assessed as an individual because it's hopeless to do it as a family. Sometimes a family has to address it as a whole. Sometimes it's a it's a, some of these issues of family abuse and family challenges are part of a wider systemic issues of the country, you know, of economics. You know, and discrimination and bias and oppression that goes on in this country more widely, and it's connected to not independent of that. So which of those do we look for three years do we look at? Do we help the individual? Do we help the family as a unit, we look at the social conditions? Do we do all three? Who does what? How do we do it? When's the right time? But the important things is something get done. And if the abuse is really, really strong, it hopefully someone will step in and stop it say this, this has to stop this intervention if it's too strong. That's what occurs to me. I don't have any much more wisdom than that at the moment. But I appreciate what you said in your question, and that's very good. So I will read the legal statement. And then we'll stop it this a few days, some days ago. At the California legislation legislature. There was this measure was introduced. It's called ACR 100. And it's called Juneteenth. This measure would recognize June 19 2017, as Juneteenth and would urge the people of California to join in celebrating Juneteenth is a day to honor and reflect on the significant role that African Americans have played in the history of the United States, and how they have enriched society through their steadfast commitment to promoting unity and equality. Whereas Juneteenth also known as Juneteenth Independence Day, emancipation day, emancipation celebration, and Freedom Day is the oldest African American holiday observance in the United States. So that's, I don't know if it passed that today is the state recognized recognized as a state of California students here today. But it certainly recognized in Redwood City today so thank you all.