

2017-11-27 Preparing For Death

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SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

So now you can record I think we don't want people audio dhrama to hear all that. I've heard from the audio dhamra world say, you know, these comments about the sound. Okay.

So, this evening, I would like to read some passages from an ancient discourse from the time of the Buddha and involves a what I think is a quite tender conversation between a husband and a wife, mostly the wife is speaking to the husband. And it's partly tender, I think, because he is so gravely sick, that it seems that he's about to die. And so she is giving him some advice or teaching him a little bit. And it's also kind of meaningful because the woman who's talking to her husband is a very mature Buddhist practitioner, she has attained the first level of awakening and so here we have a lay woman who is mature, quite matures, and in her in practice, and talking to her husband at a time, that might be the last time she'll speak to him, perhaps. And so this is what she says to him.

This is how it goes. The they're both named after their son, their son is an Nakula. And so the, the husband is the father of Nakula, which in Pali is Nakulapitā, and the mother is Nakulamātā, the mother of Nakula.

Now on that occasion, the householder Nakulapitā was sick, afflicted, gravely ill. Then the housewife Nakulamātā said this to him, do not die full of worry. To die full of worry, is painful. To die full of worry, has been criticized by the Buddha. It may be Oh husband, that you think thus after I'm gone, you won't be able to support our children and maintain a household. But you should not look at the matter in this way. I am skilled at weaving cotton and knitting wool. After you are gone, I'll be able to support the children and maintain the household. Therefore, do not die full of worry. To die full of worry is painful to die full of worry has been criticized by the Buddha. It may be that you think this after I'm gone Nakulamātā will take another husband. But you should not look at the matter in this way. You know, husband and so do I, that for the last 16 years, we have laid a lay persons celebrate life. Therefore householder, do not die full of worry. Do not die full of worry to die full of worry is painful. To die full of worry has been criticized by the Buddha. It may be that you may think this after I'm gone Nakulamātā won't want to see the bus at one Buddha and the Sangha of monastics. But you should not look at the matter in this way. after you're gone, husband, I will be even keener to see the Buddha and the community of monastics. Therefore, husband, do not die full of worry. To die full of worry is painful, to die full of worry has been criticized by the Buddha. It may be spend that you may think this Nakulamātā does not fulfill virtuous behavior but you should not look at the matter in this way. I am one of the Buddha's white robed female lay disciples who fulfilled virtuous behavior. If anyone has any doubt or uncertainty about this, the Buddha is dwelling nearby. They can go and ask him, it may be house husband, that you think this Nakulamātā does not obtain internal serenity of mind. But you should not look at the matter in this way. I am one of the Buddha's white robe, female lay disciples who obtain who

obtain internal serenity of mind. If anyone has any doubt or uncertainty about this, the Buddha is dwelling nearby, they can go and ask him, therefore, do not die for the worry. It may be husband that you think this Nakulamātā has not attained a foothold, of firm stand, assurance in the Dhamma and discipline. She's not crossed over a doubt, gotten rid of bewilderment attain self confidence and become independent of others in the teachers teaching, which shouldn't you should not look at the matter in this way. I am one of the Buddha's white robe, female lay disciples, who have attained a foothold, affirm stand assurance in this Dhamma and discipline. I am one of those who have crossed over doubt gotten rid of bewilderment attain self confidence and become independent of others and the teachers teaching. If anyone has any doubt or uncertainty about this, the Buddha dwells nearby they can go ask him then, well Nakulapitā was being exhorted in this way by his wife, Nakulamātā. His ailment subsided on the spot. Nakulapitā recovered from that illness, and that is how his illness was abandoned. Then Not long after he had recovered. Nakulapitā leaning on a staff approached the bless the Buddha, he paid homage the Buddha and sat down to one side. The Buddha then said to him, it is truly your good fortune and gain. That your house your wife Nakulamātā has compassion for you. Desires are good and exhorts and instructs you. Nakulamātā is one of my white robe female lay disciples who fulfill virtuous behavior. She's one of my white robe, female lay disciples, who obtain eternal serenity of mind. She is one of my white robe, female lay disciples who have attained a foothold affirm stand assurance in this Dhamma and discipline, who has crossed over doubt, gotten rid of the belt bewilderment and attained self confidence as become independent of others in the teachers teaching.

So a little bit long passage to read. But I find it kind of remarkable that passage of conversation of husband and wife from 2500 years ago and perhaps it seems that the husband is dying, and she teaches them about how to die not worrying about her. And to this day, we find in the hospice movement and places that the instructions when someone is dying, a close relative is dying friend, that sometimes it's helpful helps them if you can reassure them, that they don't have to worry that the family is going to be okay. And that it's okay for you to go. You have permission to go and sometimes not kind of in certain circumstances and people are dying. People repeat repeatedly say that you can go It's okay, we'll be fine. We'll take care of the kids, it won't be good. And only when they hear that, is it easier when people start letting go because they're clinging and worrying about what might happen. So we have this example here. This idea of the Buddha saying that, you know, don't die with worry, it's painful, is goes on with that kind of long standing Buddhist idea that it's really good to die peacefully. That it's that's kind of the goal and one of the purposes of my mindfulness practice is to prepare for dying. It turns out that if you prepare for a death, you're pretty well prepared to live also, to kind of go hand in hand. But traditionally that mindfulness practice, the four foundations of mindfulness practice was a practice supporting people preparing people for the, for dying for a number of reasons.

One is that it strengthens the mind. So that that time of dying, which some people are afraid of, they're strong enough in their mind that they can stay present. Not only can they stay present, but they don't get swept away by their fears, they don't get swept away by their worries and concerns and angers or whatever it might be. And so there's a much better chance to die with serenity, as it talks about here that could love Nakulamātā had serenity of mind. The you know, and then, part of the reasons why people are encouraged in Buddhism to cultivate and develop mindfulness while they can, is that a little bit too late to start doing it on our deathbed. But the idea is to prepare for that occasion. And when I came, one of the first reasons that I came to Buddhism, was because I was afraid of dying. And I didn't like that. And, you know, I was pretty young. I was 20. But I was a little bit precocious, a little precocious that way. That thinking ahead, I guess. And so I was looking about for something that would help me deal with his fear of death, and eventually landed upon Buddhism. And one of the remarkable things that happened was that in the course of my mindfulness practice, my meditation practice, that I had experiences of letting go, experiences of peace, that the best of my guess, is comparable to the kind of

letting go that I would like to have when I die. In fact, the deep letting go that I've experienced in meditation has led me now to in a certain kind of way to look forward to dying. If I'm lucky enough to die slow enough to unconscious enough to be there for watching it. I don't have no idea what that is going to be like, I don't know, I can't, I don't idealize it. I don't know if I'll be able to die peacefully a year. You know, I don't know how it's going to be. But what I do know is that I have this very strong association now, with dying, with the idea of dying, the first, very strongly associate dying, with what happens in deep meditation, which feel feels only good, the only feels really fantastic, wonderful. And if, if that's the time, if I could kind of continue that process of letting go as I'm dying, then it just, so it has to be good. That's to be one of the great things to go through. So whether that's the case or not, I don't know. But I can't recognize in myself anymore, if any fear of that that I had when I was young. And not enough just not going to have fear of it. But but there's a positive association about the whole process where that's so that's kind of interesting, I thought so this no i tribute that this practice that we do here the it's a you know, so then Nakulamātā gave her husband a gift, the gift of saying you don't have to worry, I'm capable. It's quite a quite a confident woman. I'm capable, I can, I can manage fine with him. You know, I can I have a livelihood, I can live and take care of the family myself. I am. This idea of her being virtuous, I think has a lot to do with not so much that you know, she's supposed to be pure or something, but rather, when in ancient in the Buddhist tradition, if you live a virtuous life, then you're kind of taken care of spiritually. That was one of the ways you're taking care of so also so is that in this ancient nurse understanding is that if you live a virtuous life, then you won't be reborn in a bad rebirth. So this was a high kind of value in ancient world. So the husband didn't have to worry not only about the wife's livelihood or life this lifetime, but also future lifetimes.

And then that she had serenity of mind, maybe he was concerned about how she was gonna die. And I have, I have discovered peace in some deep way. She said, and then, and then this amazing passage in the end, that she's independent in the Dharma, that she has self confidence. The whole description that I read, there is a description of her being an awakened person. And wouldn't you want to have someone who's awakened minister to you, and you're dying, pretty cool, that is your what your wife or your spouse that does that? So

So I also thought it was kind of touched by this passage, because it's, it's a woman. And it's a woman who is a model for a certain level of spiritual attainment in Buddhism. It's also a model of a woman. This in the context of the ancient world, where not only is she teaching her husband, but the Buddha praises her. For doing so, you are truly It is truly your good fortune and gain. That your wife Nakulamātā has compassion for your desires your good and exhorts and instructs you. I kind of love it. Because in the ancient world, mostly we think of it's being patriarchal and women are not usually held up examples of being teachers. And here you know, she's kind of even the Buddha champions or as a capable teacher and instructor for husband.

I think partly I wanted to read this today because of this idea of dying. The talk to someone today I talked to series of people today, who were involved in the field of death and dying and training to support people in their dying process. One person who was training to become a death doula. Someone who is like an aka, a doula, as someone who's a midwife kind of supports people in their in their birth process. But now there's a field of death, doulas people who support people in the dying process. And having these conversations today kind of caused me to kind of review all the people I've sat next to in their bedside as they were dying. And what a profound experience, it has been most of those for me to sit there and attend to people. There's something very precious something very poignant and vibrant and alive. Sacred, reverent, in the sitting at the bedside of somewhere can be sitting in the bedside side of someone who's dying or someone who's just died. Partly because it focuses the mind, partly because everyone involved is kind of right there. Most people's minds don't

wander off, or very far away, and don't start don't start wondering what's on TV and, you know, what's going on with sports or anything else is just like, kind of there in a very full way. And that concentrated presence of people at that time, I think, is a very powerful and to be together to company, someone in that tenderness and intimacy of this very powerful transition is I know it's kind of a privilege to be be along for it. So today, I was thinking about this and recalling it and that's kind of like a little bit touched inside. And all the people I've sat with and been with and whatever. You know, what a significant thing it is to be able to come along. And I thought about some of the people I've counseled. You know, it's one thing to tell the person who's That, you don't have to worry, it's okay for you to go, Okay, I, I love you, I don't want you to go, I'd like you to stay. But now that you're dying, I want to let you know that yes, it's okay for you to let go, it's safe to let go. And we'll be okay. You can go. That's what that's one side. The other side is the, when the dying person does that. And the other direction, that the dying person, that how they die is a gift to others. One of the really touching gifts is, you know, unfortunately, sometimes parents die when they have still young children. And remember one young woman who was I knew or mostly from teaching retreats, you'd come on retreats with me and go over a series of years. And at one point, she came and she had breast cancer. And so she was very determined strong woman and die, she was going to, you know, beat this and herself and get over it. And it's partly because they're mostly because she had a young son, he was young son, who I think was maybe like eight or nine years old. And so I saw our period of time, and she was working with us. And then at some point, at one point, she came to a retreat with me and said, well, it doesn't look like there's a cure anymore. And I don't think I have that much longer. And I'm angry. I'm really angry. So I told her that, that how you die, is going to be one of the big influences on the life of your child. She was angry because of the sake of her child. That's why she was angry. If you die angry, that's going to set the course of your son's life, the whole life, perhaps it'll have a huge impact. But if you can die peacefully, that's a whole different impact that you can have. So

So then she left the retreat. And then a few months later, I got a phone message phone call from her husband, who said that she had died. And she died at home in bed. And that when she had died, died peacefully, and when she had died. The father and the son went up in the garden and got a flower came back in with a flower and put it on their chest. And then I knew that she had I kind of figured from that that, yes, she had died in a way that was a gift for her child. I mean, it's tragic, right to have a child loses mother at a young age. So to say it's a gift is probably, you know, could sound kind of strange. But But if those if a parent is going to die before the child, could it be a gift, could it be something that's given? Certainly, it can be the opposite of gift. If a child watches the parent die, miserable and angry and frightened and anxious. I mean, that's a you know, it's a powerful lesson powerful example. But to have a parent die peacefully, maybe contentedly or with you know, a certain kind of way, willing to let go, just be there says something about a very different lesson not only for about dying, but also for, for how to live as well. So my day was made up of a lot of thoughts and a lot of heartfelt feelings of these conversations I had and reminders of these things. And so that I thought of this story, and it has kind of inspired me. So in Buddhism, there's a tradition that there are many, many different kinds of meditation practices a person can do. And many of these practices are appropriate for different sorts of different circumstances. However, in this tradition that says that there are two meditation practices, which are universally useful for everyone, no matter what, and one of the universally useful meditation process offices is the practice on loving kindness. So it's nice kindness, compassion, it's nice that that's considered universal. The other one is recollection of death, death and dying, to spend time recollecting or considering or meditating on that topic of that. And so rather than ignoring it, and keeping it at arm's distance, this encouraged to spend time contemplating and reflecting and being present for this whole inevitable destination, we're all going to are dying. The end, it's considered to be universally useful. It and it's specifically said that that shouldn't be done in a way it's contemplation of that is not to be done in a way that is grim, or morbid, or depressing. So look out for that. But rather, just somehow the

experience is meaningful, in a certain kind of way, I don't know if inspiring is the right word. But perhaps encouraging, encouraging us to practice encouraging us to stay present encourage us encouraging us to really take this life of ours seriously, and from a Buddhist point of view, get to work. You know, we don't know when death is coming. And there's a wonderful work to be done in our practice, the Buddhist practice of liberation, the pack practice of mindfulness practice of loving kindness, and for no other reason, because it prepares us for the inevitable death that comes. And if that doesn't motivate us the possibility of death, to really value the life that we have to really enter into it in a deep, strong way. And the way that mindfulness practice helps us to enter into it and touch it in some deep way, is also part of the one of the consequences, reflection of death and dying.

So when I was I spent a year of my life, doing this contemplation of death practice, and it was very helpful for me. And I did it in variety of ways. But the one that the way that I did it every day, kind of like a regular practice, was I contemplated in the morning, when, soon after I woke up that, if I was going to, if I knew I was going to die that evening, how would I live the day? What was most important for me, and I did that for a year. And it was fascinating to watch how my Power BI priorities change over time to watch and see the different things that I would do. And eventually, what I kept coming back to though, what I eventually came to the most common place, my mind would go, if I only had one day left was I'd meditate. You know, set my art fairs in order to talk to people do the things I had to do. But there was something about the meditation sitting still and quiet and myself, that seemed like the most precious, most kind of poignant or most intimate, or most connected, most valuable thing, most valuable way to be to, you know, in the last hours that I have. And I think one of the reasons for that is that in meditation, not only do I sometimes feel more alive than do any other time, but the it's a kind of feeling alive in a way that feels deeply intimately connected to a way of being or kind of reality or kind of way of being that, you know, it's probably could be called sacred or it could be called sacred. They know. If I'm gonna die, it's nice to be in the place that's most sacred, maybe, at least for me. So, meditation is that place. So to contemplate that, to consider it. I've heard of Christian monks who live their life in a cell monastic cell, where they have their coffin that they're going to be put in when they get buried. And that's my wake up and there it is. I always imagined that the coffin was open. When they have it in their cell. I don't know if you know and In Buddhist monks, and also when I went to Thailand, one of the things I encountered there was how many of the Buddhist monks that I had there did contemplation of death practice, they often had photographs of dead people, on their walls of their little rooms. And so it's a frequent reflection thinking about it a lot. Once a year, once a year, I take a group of people to an anatomy lab, and spend time with a corpse. group of usually about 15 or so 20 Buddhist practitioners, and it's quite touching, to go and some people, some of the people go, I've never been with a corpse and anatomy lab is particularly interesting, because, you know, you get to see the inside of the corpse. And that's quite something to see, you know, the whole inner innards. And most of the people who do it, feel, leave that leave the anatomy lab, feeling they've been someplace that's a sacred place very irreverent and beautiful to sit there, the woman who guides us gives a kind of a sense of being there, the way that's very respectful to the people who died. And these are people who've donated their bodies to, to medicine. And it's quite a wonderful thing. To kind of the stillness, the quiet the care, the reverence, and the kind of contemplation consideration of this is me, this is what will happen to me someday, is like most people who do go along on the trip, feel like they're a better person because of it. So maybe, when it's your time to die, someone will be next to you and tell you don't worry. Or perhaps when it's your time to die. Maybe you have the occasion to let someone sitting near you. Don't worry, I'm okay. And maybe no one will worry, you or your people when you're dying.

Perhaps you'll feel that this is the time of your life. Maybe not in the way we usually say that maybe not in the usual way. We mean that in English time, my life. But boy, it will be a time in your life. And hopefully, it's a time that's quite special, meaningful. And for those of you know, for those of you who do

regular mindfulness practice, I hope that you do it well and consistently and deeply in such a way that it does prepare you for your death when the time comes. So we have about 10 minutes. And if any of you have any questions, concerns, comments about this testimonials, we can take a few moments.

Thank you for that talk. As you know, we live in an area that's quite obsessed with extending human life.

extended life extending human life. And there's an app for that. And there is almost certainly is I think.

And so I was just curious to hear your thoughts about that. There's a lot of research that's being done around cancer and reversing aging and etc. How do you how do you think about about this, these concepts?

Nice. In principle, I think it's good to do medical research and you know, and be able to cure illnesses and things like that. That's good. I suppose it's good to have a life full of energy and, you know, but it does make me a little sad, this kind of stuff because I think that there's something very meaningful and important about getting old. In the way nature wanted us to get old and then sometime It's painful, sometimes difficult and the ravages of old age can be pretty hard for people. So don't want to say it too flippantly. But you know, if we are, if we just stay forever young, some people's idea of a good time is to stay forever young and then just die, you know, just rather than fade away into the sunset. But there's something very profound I think about the process of dying, the process of getting all the process of beginning to lose our faculties not be as strong or energetics we have to have our faculties begin to go. There's something there's very important lessons in it, that some people don't learn the other way. lessons of letting go lessons of what's important lessons of settling in. One of the very important people in my life was my great grandmother. And I didn't know her hardly at all. But for a three month period of time, when I was about 20, I kind of lived on her apartment, it was a little tenement apartment building a very narrow, small little place. And there was a stairwell went up to second floor and the second floor consisted of her teeny kitchen, rotini living room in her teeny bedroom. And that was the whole second floor of this tenement that whole thing. And, but then, of the stairwell was a little room. And I was given that room. And every once in a while I go visit her and a little living room. And she mostly we just sat in silence together. And at least the way I interpreted what how she was, she was very peaceful, like that sit in this room, the room was quiet and peaceful. There was a sense of, of love care, sitting there with her, I felt that she was content and not afraid. And there was a peacefulness through her that hadn't done anybody else in my life up into that time, anything like that. And I'd sit there and have Darshan with her sit there and just kind of feel it be with her. And it gave me a real sense of lesson in how to be alive in a certain peaceful, contented, silent way that was kind of sacred kind of special. And I attribute it to her letting go into her old age, living alone. Not being very mobile, that somehow she had learned how to let go, she would learn how to just kind of, you know, she's gone through a lot of a lot of difficulties in our lives. And so I think the process of aging is for many people, part of the process of maturing. And if we stay forever young, we might have fun. But the thing is more important things than fun. And there's this whole maturing process. And that goes on. So you know, so maybe we can take the sting out of getting old, maybe so you know, somebody more horrible parts of it that really are debilitating. So maybe that research can kind of can help that. But but I think it's important to get old, for those of us who are lucky enough to get old. And to kind of embrace it. The

I think it's the occasion for a lot of letting go. And every faculty you lose just it's another occasion to let go. It's kind of like you're being handed like oh this to like, Oh, this this too. It's you know, as opposed to sitting in meditation, what do I let go of now? Yeah, let go. But, you know, I'm, you know, when I was young, I thought for me had been when I was young and meditating and sitting in mind, you know, and

monasteries and you know, kind of I thought, Wow, I've let go so much why this is greatest letting go is great. I didn't know yet to what I had to let go of. I didn't know what there was to let go of. And then as I got older, I went through life walk kinds of ways. Wow, this this too? I didn't know you had to let go of this. Wow. Anyway, so is that good enough answer? Absolutely.

I agree. Thank you.

We have time for one more.

Again, thank you for this elegant talk. If he can speak to us a little bit about morning, morning, yes. In How do you comfort people who are morning? How do you comfort people every morning? You know, I don't think that I don't want to I can't answer your question the way you're asking it, I think it's a good question. And the reason I can't for myself is I don't think of myself as comforting people who are mourning. But rather what I think I do is I come I try to accompany them in a company and be with them and support them to, to be where they're at and allow whatever they're feeling whatever is happening for them, to be recognized to be seen to be expressed. Go for a walk with people, let them talk, what they want to say. But it doesn't occur to me to comfort them. Like, it's okay. Like today, it's okay, you know, it's all good. I don't think I want to, I'm not inclined to do that when someone is mourning, grieving. And I think part of the reason for that is that, I think also like aging, I think grieving is also an important part of life. And that when there has been an important loss, it's, I think it's a fairly natural thing to grieve. And that rather than comforting in a way to settle it or calm it down or make people feel better, I think it's generally wiser, to support people to go through the grieving process in a healthier way. There's there is kind of healthy grieving, even though in the middle of the worst kind of grief that you can't imagine that there's a healthy grieving and you can't tell them you know, let's, you know, sit down and I'll tell you how to grieve healthfully loss of your spouse, you know, that doesn't work either, right, but I think just accompany them, and then offer your presence spend time with them. Okay. So, thank you very much. Some of you didn't expect to come here today and hear about that dying. But this is a big part of life, an important part and the whole Buddhist thing that the Buddhist enterprise with the whole thing that Buddha set up the teachings it was, it was a big part of it was in fact to address this kind of these kinds of existential issues. It wasn't about stress reduction. So thank you