

# 2019-11-25 Nibbana

Tue, 8/11 12:38PM • 41:14

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

nirvana, mindfulness, people, life, suffering, unconditioned, fire, attachment, buddhism, fist, teach, world, clinging, metaphor, important, buddha, experience, quenching, called, thorn

## SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

So Good evening everyone and is it the volume Okay, everyone. Great.

So in considering what to talk about this evening what was a little bit of my mind was the topics of two sets of conversations that I've had this afternoon. And they make it interesting juxtaposition. The first one was discussion about I was asked to go to a local college, talk to the person who's in charge of the religious life for the students to see what I could do about supporting the contemplative life of the students there. And I didn't know what to expect and the and it showed up to this the person in charge of religious life and on her desk where there's piles of books, kind of like on mindfulness and Buddhism and seemingly and it became clear very quickly that she was interested in having more mindfulness. She talks about the epidemic of stress, depression, suicide happening in universities around the country. And many universities are setting up wellness programs. And part of these wellness programs is to teach mindfulness meditation. And her college was a little bit behind the curve with doing this, I think. So she was looking for ways especially since she's responsible for religious life for the communities out to bring mindfulness in. And she said there's a lot of interest in the students. And I reflected that. Yeah, there's, I said, I've noticed unusual, unusual, I've noticed something has changed in our for us in recent years. Last few years. When I do you know, retreats regularly, standard length is seven day silent retreats. And so for people come all kinds of ages come And sometimes we have a lot of young people. In fact, last year, we had a retreat that I helped teach for people in their 20s and 30s. And I was honored remember, and, and a lot of CPAP machines, a lot of people coming here and young who are coming in sitting a meditation group for the first time. And what stands out compared to what I'm used to for many years ago, is how well they sit. That they sit very, very still, they're very disciplined. They're rather unruly, they're just like they're do the practice, like I seem to know they seem to know how to be on retreat. 20 years ago, someone who's never said to retreat who's in their 20s would have had not a clue what to do and they would have been stiff and not so easy to sit down and they would have been restless. Kind of questioning what was going on? And so I commented, I think that maybe that there's been a shift in our culture. And that a lot more younger people are getting mindfulness growing up. And this person that was talking to that, yes, they're getting it in elementary school in high school and just kind of all over the country, she said. And that was kind of remarkable to hear. I mean, I kind of know there's a, you know, this national kind of movement for mindfulness everywhere. It was kind of interesting to see it, you know, talked about that way. And what a change that's been in some 15, 16 years. About 16 years ago, maybe 17. We had meetings in little room on the side here, where we dreamt up and planned and organized and then put on the first conference probably in the world, certainly United States on mindfulness and education. Some of us got the idea that this was a nice thing to promote. And, and so there were people around the country who did a little bit of this, but not a lot. And there was one teacher in Salt Lake City who was kind of famous for teaching mindfulness in her her classroom, like fifth grade classroom or something. And, and so,

so we know, there was a little bit happening, but it was very little. And so we were a little bit, I don't know, in the forefront of kind of trying to support this whole mindfulness movement in an education in schools and we had rented a big auditorium in San Francisco and Jon Kabat Zinn came and gave the keynote speech and people who are doing it from all over the country came because it never been anything like this. And now, it's everywhere. It's everywhere, but it's a lot of different places. So my son's home from college. This evening. So I told him this and he said, Oh, yeah. Lots of kids know about it. In fact, we have a meditation group in my fraternity. Now, when I was in college

those two didn't go together. Not not in the universe I live in. Unless there was lots of drugs involved or something. But you know, no. I mean, in my universe, when I went to college, I never dropped my son would have been his fraternity and that was, but anyway, that's besides the point. And so that was one set of conversations. So that was nice. And but I'm reflecting on this net. What is imcs role? What is My role as a Buddhist teacher in the shifting movement of mindfulness in our society. When I first started teaching introduction to mindfulness classes, mindfulness meditation was probably in 1992 was my guess. First time I started to turn a class, I had no models for how to teach a class. And so I made it up. And then we're still live still kind of dealing with how I made it up. And it's kind of become a standard way here at IMC. But I didn't have any real models for how it's done. And I had never taken a introduction to mindfulness class. You know, they heard the I don't know if you know where they hardly existed, right. And I learned my posts on retreat. And, and one of the concerns we had back then was to prison The power power of mindfulness, the benefits of mindfulness without, for people who had no interest in Buddhism. And so to offer it in somewhat secular fashion, you know, and so I called it Buddhism light. But what we did, because Buddhism part is not that important, it was mostly to teach this practice. But now that, you know is mindfulness is kind of swept over secular mindfulness. And it's easy to get, you always just get an app, you know, and there's lots and lots of, you know, guided meditations, lots of teachings. I mean, it's just, there's an epidemic of this mindfulness and secular mindfulness. So there's no need for IMC or for me as a Buddhist teacher, to be a mindfulness teacher in that kind of secular way. Because other people do, it's probably people that do it better than I do. And so and so you know, that's the Really? So what is it that we specialize in? What is it that, you know that we have that as a Buddhist teacher, Buddha center? That's a little different is one of the questions and should we now, since society has changed so much? Should we really kind of now turn towards what we specialize in? It might not be as popular but still is what we know and, and better and this, you know, the spread of mindfulness. Other people are doing it now. And it's, you know, it's, it's here established. So those are some of the thoughts in this first set of conversation. The second conversation and also a little bit my, my reading and things I was doing was a topic of Nirvana. So it's kind of coincidence, right? That these two, these two kind of concerns come together. So it's the word Nirvana is a Sanskrit word within our in our tradition, we call it Nibbana. Instead of Nirvana, same word, just different If slightly different language and, and Nirvana or Nirvana is considered to be, you know, the highest goal, the ultimate goal of Buddhism and the path of Buddhism path, the practice ghost or to Nibbana to Nirvana. And I remember in 19, probably 1994 95 going to the city group in San Jose, and said, I'm going to talk about Nibbana. But before I do you have any questions? Well, we never got to Nirvana. Because mostly what they wanted to talk about was how to deal with anger. There was a good conversation who was great, but, you know, that was the interest you know, the binos kind of abstract, it's kind of a distant goal and, you know, it's, you know, maybe to ultimate it's to kind of seems like more like a fairy tale or something, and, and so on. You know, it's who wants something that's relevant for our lives and what's here and there now. So then I've been thinking about today about Nirvana and Nirvana and so I wanted to share some thoughts about that. And as well.

The Buddha has this quote where he says, the holy life, the life of practice, Buddhist practice, is grounded upon Nibbana culminates in Nibbana ends in Nirvana and ends in Nibbana. It is for the sake of Nirvana, that the holy life is lived under the blessing one. Nibbana is the greatest happiness. Sometimes it's called the state of supplying peace. So this idea is nearby. What is it? And what is it that can be inspiring for us what is it can make it a kind of a Northstar or, or even a presence in our lives so that it's something that actually feels relevant feels important, something that's worthwhile to set. You know, set as a orientation for one's life. There are some people who make it the central purpose of their life, to really follow this path to its culmination and experience Nibbana experienced this, to have this experience of awakening this transformation that this tradition talks about. And it's considered to be a very noble, dignified, worthwhile endeavor, to go experience this. This Nibbana sometimes it's called the greatest form of health, the greatest bliss, the greatest happiness, the greatest peace. Sometimes it's understood to be the greatest insight If you really want to understand what it you know what that essence is possible for human being, or to have whole different eyes with which to see the world in a new radically transformative way. So you're not seeing the world or seeing yourself or seeing others through the usual eyes that we just kind of grew up with. That Nibbana is, is the means to have this radical change and transformation in the tradition that I kind of grew up with and within Buddhism, what Nibbana is what Nirvana is, is actually less important than how it functions. And so the simile I like for this analogy is that if a person is thirsty, dying of thirst, learning what the medical molecular structure of water is, before taking a drink of water is problematic. It's not interesting. thing, what water is is less interesting and drinking the water. So what Nibbana is, it's actually less important than how it functions as medicine, how it functions as a transformative experience. So we can go through and the transformation, the primary transformation that this Nibbana is meant for, is to free a human being you if you're interested in this, from suffering, really to kind of empty yourself of all this kind of mental psychological stress, contraction, despair, fear, anger that lives within human beings. It's a pretty radical promise that this can be done. Many people have no sense of how radical It is really, until you go through it until you got through that experience, I don't know what the good analogy would be, but it's maybe it's a kind of, you know, pretty insignificant one comparison. But you know, I've been in my kitchen and didn't know how quiet the kitchen could be until their refrigerator stopped humming. Wow, that's nice. I didn't even know there was a stress of hearing that hum that goes on all the time. Or I've had shoes that I slowly over time didn't fit me anymore. were uncomfortable. But I just kind of went along with it and didn't think about it too much until I put new shoes on. Oh, wow. What was I doing all that time wearing those shoes that were so uncomfortable. Sometimes it's only only when we go through the transformation of really this, this Nibbana Can we look back and see what we've been living with with the way we've been living with the level of stress that level of attachment that we've been living with. So the function of Nibbana is to release us from all of the minds, attachments, it's clings. Some people will protest at this point, what's wrong with attachment?

Well, you know, maybe in some fundamental existential metaphysical way, maybe nothing. It just means you're suffer. And, you know, that's maybe if you ask your thing you know, that's okay. But, but it's clearly you know, from Buddhist point of view, it'd be like having a thorn in your foot and just keep walking. You know, what's wrong with having a thorn in your foot? You know, it's just that's what happens to human beings. You woke up barefoot sooner or later you have a thorn in your foot and you You know, it's just part of life and, and why should I be concerned about taking it out? It's just, you know, there's not, doesn't hurt that much and, you know, and there's important places to walk. So why should I stop to take it out? or whatever, you know, which is kind of silly, right? He pulled out the thorn. The Buddha talked about a thorn or a dart that are in people's hearts. And he Dennett, he claims that he, he recognized he had a dart or arrow or whatever the word is a thorn in his heart. And he was looking for a solution looking how to pull it out. And then experiencing the Barna was pulling that Thorn out. And then people who have the experience of this transformation, this freedom of suffering, then

they know something about suffering and know something about alternative suffering, which is unparalleled, something which is a gift to the world. Because, you know, it's, you know, it's you can certainly get relief from suffering. And some people who are fortunate maybe live relatively comfortable lives and don't suffer that much. But, but you know, that maybe their refrigerator hasn't stopped yet. And so they don't really see what they're actually living with. Some people are distracted from their suffering, by the pursuits of life. If they're, you know, there's so many things to gain, get and have, especially here in Silicon Valley area. You know, there's cars to get, there's jobs to get there's pleasures to have, there's all kinds of things, you know, new, new devices to get. And I've known people who have lived a life of anticipation of the next thing they're going to do next job vacation device. remodel, something people I'm thinking about are pretty privileged. And they just kind of went from one. And so they would talk about it and kind of, you know, think about getting it. And then they got it. And then you know, then they're on to the next thing. And the next thing and the next thing, which maybe is okay, but it's a distraction, from really turning in and looking deep inside, what is really going on here. What's really, really happening within some people are not interested in Nirvana. But they're very interested in really checking out what's really going on in here. What is this human being? What is it to be a human? What's going on in this heart in this mind, let's get to the bottom of what's happening here. And that's what puts them on the path to have that knowledge. Some people are on the path because their suffering is intolerable. And then there's no other alternative for them in their lives. There's nothing else that makes sense. Some people, some there are a few people every once in a while you meet someone, they have no choice really, but to be on the path to freedom, because anything else for them, the suffering, they've inherited the suffering, they've been grew up with the challenges the inner conflicts that somehow they have their society family, their life situation created for them, the trauma they've had or something was so great that they don't want to live with this. And so they knew really need to do some radical medicine. And so they take the path of liberation. This is the way I'm going to do this. And so, the path to Nirvana is a path to something pretty fantastic. And what is Nirvana? So I said that what it does is less important and what it is, but it's a little bit interesting to talk about what Nibbana is. And the first thing is that is not something that is If if the his word refers to a thing, so it's not understood, it's not really a state. It's not

a ontological reality. It's not like a plane of existence, like some transcendent place. And in a certain kind of way, it's not an experience. There are people who are experienced junkies in who are involved in Buddhism and doing Buddhist practice just to get good experiences. And Ivana would seem to be the best of them all. But that's not what it is. It is kind of the best of them all, but it's not really an experience. And this idea that Nirvana is a is some kind of transcendent place in Buddhism. Sometimes it's called the unconditioned. The life we normally live in is considered to be a conditioned life. Say it in plain English It's everything that we touch and see and think and feel, has been somehow created, causes and conditions come together to create to manifest this, whatever it is. And so the languages it's conditioned. Nibbana is said to be unconditioned. However, sometimes they add the word thought in front of it. The binah is unconditioned. Now we're getting into a thing, the thing, the unconditioned. And so it's like and so, some people will have the belief that Nibbana is some kind of higher plane of reality. That is uncreated, unconditioned, timeless, eternal, that somehow is experienced or seen in the moment of, of experiencing the binder having the binder happen. What's interesting is that the word Nirvana, or Nibbana is a noun. But in the original language, it's a verbal noun. So, you know, we can talk about, you know, Gil's walking when he walked with us shoes that didn't fit, his walking wasn't very good. And so the walking is there being used as a noun, though normally it's a verb, right? So it's a verbal noun. So in in the ancient language, Nibbana is a verbal noun, referring to an action being treated as a noun. So what is that action? The word Nibbana in Nirvana is actually a metaphor. So it's very interesting that it's not really it's originally it's a metaphor. What's a metaphor? metaphor itself is not the thing itself. And metaphor is something that's kind of public Maybe describes something or kind

of speaks about it. And then the Buddha taught a lot and metaphor. There's a very famous sutta discourse called the Fire Sutta where the Buddha has very emphatically says, the world is on fire. The eyes are in fire the ears are in fire, the nose is on fire. The tongue is on fire. The body's on fire. The mind is on fire. What we see is on fire what we hear is on fire what we taste is on fire when we smell us on fire when we feel our bodies on fire, what do you experienced in their minds on fire? It's all on fire. The whole world is on fire. So if you're a good orator, it can be much more dramatic than that. And probably have your hair standing up on end You know, so all in Fire, fire and brimstone. Put a sermon and but And then he says, What's it on fire, it's on fire with greed, hatred and delusion. Just read the newspaper. And, and you'll see there's lots of this fire going on most things we read in the newspaper, a high percentage of them, especially on the front page, involve someone's greed, hatred or delusion operating the world's on fire. And so as he's using the metaphor of fire, to talk about the suffering of the world, challenges in the world conflicts in the world. And so then he uses another metaphor for what for uses that would padana is fuel the fuel for a fire, but he also uses that word for fuel to mean clinging so the play here is that the very thing that fuels the suffering in the world is clinging. Our clinging is the fuel that perpetuates further suffering.

And so that we want to, what we'd like to do is to snuff out quench the fire of suffering. The word Nibbana means quenching the fire. In the old days, the Buddha's days they had lights lamps, oil lamps with Filipino grill wicks and flames. And if you snuffed it out, you Nirvana, the light the word Nirvana Nirvana also refers to a horse that's been tamed or made peaceful. So you nerve eyes a horse when you've tamed it and made it peaceful So, our suffering gets extinguished with the experience of Nirvana, our inner misfire. And, and we who are the horse, you know, we're like the horse, we get peaceful and calm games in a certain way. So the Buddha is playing with these metaphors. And so Nibbana remember, is a metaphor for something. But it's a metaphor primarily of this movement towards quenching, towards releasing the fire or putting out the fire, that's there. And, and then in that sense, it's an action. It's the action of quenching or ending or destroying or terminating or letting go. And many, many times when the alternative language when the Buddha talks about the goal, the ultimate goal, he talks about it As the ending of something, sometimes in very dramatic language destruction, extinguishing or releasing, freeing, bringing something to an end, and certain that movement, it's an action of bringing something to an end. The simplest way of understanding this, I think, is that it's the movement of letting go. Something it's, we go of clinging, let go of attachments that go deeply, deeply in the mind. Nirvana is the action, of release of letting go. It's an activity of this deep, deep, letting go. It's not a thing that we attain. If it's an experience, it's not it's kind of a experience of absence. Because in the letting go, if it's thorough enough and full enough There's nothing It feels that absence. It's a radical absence, that feels like one of the best things in the world to experience because it's so peaceful. It's so absent of clinging of self preoccupation of fear of greed, agitation of the mind spinning and wanting and getting and measuring and protecting and defending itself and asserting itself, to have all that put to rest in a radical way and not be there for the experience that absent that absence. You can say in English, it's an experience of absence, but it's not an app's experience of something. But it's dramatic to have this, release this letting go. So I like to use the analogy of a fist. If I hold my hand in a fist forever for you know, My whole life and I walk around, you know, holding my hand arm up with a fist. That's going to create certain stern people, you know, where you go down the streets and people are gonna walk away from me cross cross the street. You know, I can do a few things with this this but you know. And then some good person comes along and says, you know, gala, you know, you don't have to always walk around with a fist. Really? I say, but I've done this my whole life. I really you can No, no, no, it's not possible. If you must be diluted, there's no such thing as you know, a non fisted hand. No, no, really, really? Why don't we do this? Why don't we do some practicing this a teeny bit of practice, it helps your stress. It will be stress reduction for you. And just a little bit, and why don't you take your little pinky and let's just hope in a stretch it out just a little bit. even all the way



which little bit? Doesn't that feel kind of good. Well, yeah, yeah. You know, let's try another finger. Well, it's really safe. What about the third finger? No, no, no, I need to have it. You know, who would I be if I'm not, you know, curled up like that?

You know, come on, it's okay. It's okay. You can do it. It's okay. So slowly, slowly, and then at some point, it's far enough that the whole hand just kind of springs open completely by itself. Wow. The absence of the fist that feels really good. I had no idea. I had no idea there was such a peace and ease and goodness of an open hand. I thought we had to keep a title assign. Not only is it nice to not have the fist anymore, But lo and behold, the sensitive Part of the hand is now available. And there's much more I can do with my hand, when I have it open. It's actually a richer life a better life with open hand. So this feels so good, really good. So something that's that good and then important, right? What should you do? You should grasp it. Hold on to it not shared with anybody. But you can't have it both ways. You can't have an open hand and grasp at it. You know, to make a fist again to hold on to it doesn't work. So Nibbana is this radical, thorough, full, letting go of clinging of attachments of all kinds. to some of the deepest seated ones, like some of them are like attachment to being alive to life itself. attachment to self, me myself in mind, so deeply kind of syndrome almost like it's in our DNA. Are marrow to have these attachments. But the fact that we can actually release the fist of the mind, it can be done and to experience that goodness of it, and people do get attached to it, but it's a little bit as soon as you get attached to Nirvana, guess what? It's gone. Because Nibbana is not something you know, it's this openness. So the hand is open. It's the absence of the fist. It's not the open hand. It's the space that's been created. It's not, you know, I don't know what to put. So Nibbana is a is a action. And in fact, if you those of you a few of you might actually read some of these translations of ancient Pali texts. Many of the translators will translate to a useless Word Nibbana. In the English translations, they forgot figure it's better. There's no real good English word to carry the meanings of Nibbana. So they just use Nibbana in the English translation. However, many times they're not translating the bonna they're translating a verb. That is the actual verb for Nibbana. Nearby Yachty. But because that would mean to say, to Nirvana eyes, and that doesn't, you know, that's really bad English. So they write, attain Nirvana and then attain Nirvana. Nirvana is now now unknown, and makes people think it's a thing. It's a state, it's an experience is something to get to. Now I find it very inspiring. That Nibbana is nothing so you're not going to get a lot of you know, you go to a party and people say what's your religion teach with the highest? Because my religion teaches you know, cosmic consciousness oneness with all things and what is your religion teach? What's the ultimate nothing nothing, you know you're not gonna get a lot of people get home they're gonna feel sorry for you. It's actually good. Because the last thing you want to do if you're going to go really all out to experience the full possibility of liberation is to create an a self in ego conceit, that you have a really hot good, best liberation better than anybody else. You know, and I'm, I used the best liberation himself that anybody has in the universe and I have it Yeah, that's crazy, right? So if people get feel like, Oh, you have nothing, Oh, I'm sorry. Just take that as a good encouragement to not cling to anything, not want anything. Just that just be, just be free.

Be free without any need for anybody to praise you because you are the highest, be free without any need. To be part of a great religion has great wonderful goals and things. If people can't understand that freedom from suffering is pretty wonderful. Then they have better goals. It's a great, okay. When I finished with my suffering, then I'll think about your goal. But first, let's deal with a spirit fundamental human issue of human suffering of attachment and if there is something after that seems important, then, you know, might be a nice hobby. But, you know, it's not really necessary from the Promote from a traditional Buddhist point of view. Because what's if anything's necessary, it's freedom from suffering. That might be seem like a selfish goal, to be freed from your suffering, but it's necessary and unnecessary Exactly. But to really be able to have compassion for other people, to wish them well wish them free of their suffering. to really do it effectively and really know what you're talking about. It really

helps if you understand how thoroughly it's possible to become free of suffering. We have much more to offer the world in terms of helping the world not suffer. If we know the full depth and full width and breadth breadth of possibility of this freedom from suffering. And, and so I don't think it is a selfish goal. In fact, selfishness is just another form of suffering. It's another form of clinging. So it that has to go even that has to be let go of in order to attain this liberation. So teaching breath meditation in schools to relax and tell the students that if you learn to meditate for 510 minutes before your tests, you'll do better in your tests. That's what some kids are told. In some places where inner cities where kids grew up with violence and killings and gunshots. Mindfulness in schools there is form of trauma therapy. That's proved very effective.

But even people who get healed from things like trauma, they'll still suffer. It's kind of built into the human condition in something powerful is needed to really get to the bottom of it and see it and really kind of pull up the very roots of it or pull out that dirt, pull out the thorn. And that's what the Buddhist path to liberation is for. So, is that our specialty? Should we teach a little bit more often about it and give some emphasis to that possibility and support people to really kind of go and as far as they can on this path? Or is it better for us to spend more time teaching mindfulness in schools, which is a very worthwhile thing. Do but is that what we should be doing? If should we be teaching? So my answer to that question is to at all. And, and hopefully there's a wise way of just kind of seeing it all at all as important part of what we're about. And different contexts, different situations, different ways. We try to support the world in whatever way we can. But without forgetting that our specialty as Buddhists, is something that as you know, very, you know, we don't want to forget, because we're busy doing other things, not only we don't want to forget it, we really want to support people to understand it, move towards it, and really appreciate the potential we all have the potential for freedom so that was my day. So thank you so much.