

Non Harming is the Dharma

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Okay. So I'm going to tell you a tale about a monk. And I want to dedicate the tale to a wonderful monk that I met many years ago named Yusul Ananda. And he was the monk responsible for the Burmese temple in, back then, back in Daly City. Eventually he moved down and built the temple that's now in, just south of Half Moon Bay. And back then, the so-called temple was just a small house in Daly City. A regular looking house in Daly City. And when I was going to go to practice in Burma, I heard about this monk and so I went to, I called him up and said, "Can I come visit you?" And he said, "Sure."

So I think I took some bus and walked some way into the neighborhood and I knocked on the door and he answered the door. And the remarkable thing about how he received me, I immediately felt like I'd been his friend for decades. Like we were like old friends. Old friends was the best way I could describe how he received me. He'd never met me. And he brought me in and we sat and talked. It was the kindness and warmth and friendship and friendliness that he offered was kind of outstanding given that we were strangers. So the tale is dedicated to Yusul Ananda and hopefully he will approve.

So there was this monk, Buddhist monk, who was traveling around and he came to a town where there'd never been any Buddhists there before. People kind of hardly knew what Buddhism was. And he stayed there for some while, some days, and the people in the town kind of liked him. And he seemed to be remarkably calm and peaceful. And people felt really safe with him. And so actually some people started telling him their life story, what was going on with him, their challenges. And it was just so nice. And he didn't seem to have a lot to tell them. But they left those encounters with him, kind of changed, just because he was so, so friendly and kind and receptive to what they had to say. So that was nice.

And so then a local professor of religion heard about the monk, and was interested in Buddhism. What is this Buddhism? Never met a Buddhist before. And so there was a chance maybe to learn something about Buddhism. So she came to visit him. And you know she wanted to find out what Buddhism is. So she asked maybe for her what seemed like the obvious questions. She asked him, "What do you believe?" And he answered, "Long ago I believed, but now I act." She was a little confused by this answer. Doesn't all the religions have beliefs? And couldn't he just have told her?

So she asked again a different way, "What teachings do you rely on?" "Long ago I relied on teachings. Now I rely on what I know." What? But of course he was a Buddhist monk, right? So she tried again. "Aren't you devoted to the Buddha?" Because he's a follower of the Buddha, right? "Aren't you devoted to the Buddha?" "Long ago I was devoted to the Buddha, but now I am devoted to non-harming." "But what do you have faith in?" she said, us trying again. There are all the ways in which she understood

what religion is. "What do you have faith in?" "I don't have faith. I have confidence in non-harming action."

"But, what is your ultimate truth?" "The end of doing harm, end of doing any harm to myself or to others." "But, this is nothing like religion to her mind." But then you are left with no desire for a good life hereafter. Many religions, that's an important part of their religion. "But then are you left with no desire for a good life hereafter? I have no desire for a life hereafter. I desire a good life now. The rest will take care of itself." But what is the good life now? "A life lived without any deliberate act of body, speech, or mind that harms self or others."

But then she had heard, you know, in Buddhism you're not supposed to have any desires. So she thought she would ask, you know, finally ask kind of a Buddhist question. She was so confused by this time. "Do you have no desires?" "No. I desire a world committed to non-harming." And he answered her questions so kindly and calmly and without any sense that she was wrong or any hostility. She didn't, she was left confused. Didn't fit any of her ideas of what religion is. But she left transformed in some way, changed.

So I offer that tale as a way of suggesting that Buddhism has a radically different orientation than what most people think about as religion. And that this idea of non-harming lays at the center of what Buddhism is. And maybe as and the ultimate goal, to non-harm. And some people feel that's not good enough because religions have ultimate truths, ultimate purposes, ultimate goals, ultimate experiences of enlightenment. Wouldn't that be nice to be enlightened? What is enlightenment? So transformed, so fully transformed, that a person will have no deliberate attempts to harm anyone in the world, including themselves. That's what enlightenment is.

But we don't usually say that because I don't think you get so much... people don't get so excited by non-harming. You know, even if you said, you know, the ultimate goal is to realize the truth. Well that gets... that seems pretty good. You know, or the ultimate, the ultimate enlightenment is to realize the highest possible human realization of liberation. Then I get liberated. That's really great, isn't it? Don't you want to be liberated? So that's exciting. But to realize non-harming, that is a transformation. It is a liberation. It's a liberation for doing anything at all that causes harm.

"But, that's not about me. Isn't enlightenment about something for me?" Well, you stop causing harm to yourself. Isn't that pretty good? "You know, I don't harm myself that much. I just suffer." So then the monk would say, "Well in that case you should look more deeply. See what you're doing." Because the core teachings of Buddhism, it's often called the Four Noble Truths, it doesn't have the word harm in it. It has the word dukkha, which is usually translated to English as suffering, it literally means pain.

But the causes of that suffering, the causes of that pain, are activities that what we're focusing on is not what the world does to us, but what we do to ourselves. So if the world does something unfortunate to us, that's unfortunate and that we have to do our best to figure out what to do. But if because of that we now want to hate, and because of that we want to now harm others because of that, in that

momentum we're harming ourselves. Hate always harms the hater. Violence, intentional violence always harms the one who is violent. It can't not. Because, but they're not, often we're not paying attention that way.

So that's why study yourself, see what's going on deeply. And if you go really deep, you also see that the suffering that we can have some role in changing and transforming is the ones that arise from our own attachments. To cling is to harm ourselves. It's not necessarily an ethical thing. Like, often we think of harming others as being unethical. But being attached is not an ethical issue, but it is a issue of whether you are happy or whether you suffer. And there's a way in which attachment is the root way in which we harm ourselves. And chances are it's the roots for why we harm others.

And so, so that but at the heart of what I said, the Dharma is this non-harming instinct, this movement towards this. But is it ultimate. Shouldn't religion be about ultimate things? That you can't really know for yourself, but you take it on faith because it comes from your scriptures, it comes from the Buddha, it comes from your teachers, now I know what's ultimate. People involved in religion like ultimate things. And partly it's because people, religious people tend to put a lot of themselves into the religious life. There's a kind of a commitment to something that's maybe bigger than themselves or something other.

And for that level of a commitment, people really want to know that this is really the best. This is really good. This is ultimate. In the earliest teachings of the Buddha, he explicitly was not interested in having ultimate truths. So now this professor is even more confused. The pursuit of ultimate truths was a detour. What the task was, he said, was to let go of clinging, let go of craving, let go of attachments. And to have ultimate truths for some people is just another attachment. It's another detour, it's a from doing this deep work.

But that's not, you know, just letting go of my attachments. I mean, that's kind of like, isn't that kind of like a small thing? Isn't that like, that's not so... how can that be so great and wonderful and ultimate? And I don't get a lot of credit among my religious friends when I tell them, 'Well, our ultimate is just letting go of clinging.' That doesn't seem very good." So I think the best thing to do is to grant them that. That is not that good. It's not that ultimate. And however, it might not be ultimate, it might be the greatest thing you can do with your life. However, it's fundamental thing we should do in our life.

It's the beginning of what we should do in our life. We should at least live a life of non-harming. At least find a way not to cause harm to ourselves and others. At least do that important work. Our world will be transformed if we did that. We'll be transformed if we do that. And once we learn, once we discover how to live without causing harm to self and other, once we learn to live without clinging and craving, once we have that level of liberation, well then if you're still interested in ultimate truths, help yourself. Please. That's good. And maybe you have some wonderful ones that are inspiring and wonderful and poetic and fun to read about and listen to and be amazed by.

Yes, but let's do this first thing. And what not a few Buddhists have discovered, that doing the deep

work, the inner work of becoming free in this way, is pretty ultimate, pretty fantastic. The level of peace, the level of well-being, the level of safety that that provides is astounding. And on the way to there, there starts to begin becoming an appreciation of how difficult and deep this at work is. It's a task of a lifetime to really settle and find and come to what I would like to suggest, that what I'd like to believe is a really good fundamental place for all of us to be, all of us to begin everything from. The Buddha said that if you cling and you crave, you can't really see what's really true. And so if you're in a religion and you're craving and clinging as part of it, it might obscure your ability to really understand even what your religion is talking about.

And some people will say that once we say, once, and there's not, Buddhism is not the only religion that talks about non-clinging, non-attachment. And a lot of the mystics and religions of all kinds, the beautiful teachings by a Catholic mystic named Master Eckhart, is that his name? Who talked explicitly about the value of non-attachment, non-clinging, in ways that completely would be a home in Buddhism. And it's not a surprise because the way we can see clearly, see something beautiful here in this world is so fantastic when we do this inner work.

In teaching in Mahayana Buddhism, in Zen Buddhism, is something like this. When your mind is pure, the world is pure. When the mind is pure, you see the world in a certain kind of purity. And so this work on your own heart, your own mind, understanding it, seeing how it is, doing that work of really recognizing where the harming is, how we harm ourselves. And finding a way not to do it. And for many of us, part of that work is to deal with all the lawyers in the mind. There are some really clever lawyers in there who will make a really good case that it's okay to harm. Sometimes it's to harm other people. They deserve it. How else am I gonna take care of myself? What other choice do we have?

And sometimes the lawyers represent you. Of course I have to harm myself. I'm such a terrible person. You know, I deserve it. So part of the task in this practice is to question the lawyers. But when the lawyers come, remember, don't harm them. Receive them as old friends. Receive them calmly, kindly. Listen to them, but don't believe them. Believe in non-harming.

And then finally what I'd like to offer around this thing believing. How many of us believe things that maybe we shouldn't be believing. Recently I talked to someone who said, "I don't believe I'm capable of doing something that needs to be done. I don't think I'm capable. That's my belief." And instead of, when that occurs to you, change your language. Don't say, "This is what I believe." Say, "This is what I'm believing." Oh, and if you want to get extra credit, (audience laughing) you say, "For right now, this is what I'm believing." The difference is huge. If you say, "I believe," it's like, now it's a solid, truthful statement, like this is how it is, and like, who's gonna find a way out of that?

But if it's just an act of believing, right now, this is what I'm believing. Then it's not so solid. It's like, well, it's just right now, it's just an act, and it's an activity of the mind. And the focus on Buddhism is not so much on belief, or at all on belief, but rather on the activity the mind is doing. And it turns out that when there's a belief, there's an activity of the mind happening. And that is called believing.

And that puts the mirror back on, the mindfulness back on. What's the nature, what's the quality, the characteristic of that act? The act of believing.

And so, what do you believe? Long ago I believed, now I act. We're always acting. There's always action. And so what's the, so then, what teachings do you rely on now? Long ago, I relied on teachings. Now, I rely on what I know. So, and what do you, what can you know? Maybe you don't know ultimate truths. But if you pay attention you can know the actions that you're involved in. And if the action has to do with thinking, then you know I'm thinking something. I'm thinking about an ultimate truth. I'm thinking that I believe that this is ultimately true. The action of thinking is happening. And we often overlook the action because we get caught up in what we're thinking about. We overlook the fact that I'm believing, because we're caught in the belief, this is what's true.

Oh, now I'm believing this. Now I'm reacting to this. Now I'm feeling this. Now I'm wanting this to happen. There's always an action. So what teachings do you rely on? I rely on what I know. And what you can know is you can know the activities we're involved in. That is a core, central activity that we mindfulness brings attention to. Aren't you devoted to the Buddha? Long ago I was devoted to the Buddha. Now I am devoted to non-harming.

Once you start tracking the activities of the mind and speech and body, then you can start noticing, oh this hurts, there's an ouch in this, there's harm in this, there's harm for me and maybe there's harm for others. And then we can question, "Is this how I want to live my life? Is this the activity that I want to be part of?" Well then the lawyer comes and says, "It has to be this way. There can't be any other way." Oh, that's a clever lawyer. But the lawyer is not the judge. Who has to decide? Don't let the lawyers decide.

But what do you have faith in? I don't have faith. I have confidence in non-harming action. What is your ultimate truth? The end of doing any harm to myself or others. What is the good life now? "A life lived without deliberate act, any deliberate act of body, speech, and mind that harms self or others." Do you have no desires? No, I do have desires. I desire a world committed to non-harming. It's fine to have desires in Buddhism. But the desires have to be... then you're desiring.

So as you're desiring, desire in a way that doesn't cause harm. Find a way to have desires that actually can be nourishing and supportive and helpful for you. Some desires are actually helpful, healing, beneficial, inspiring. And any desire that has to do with living a life of not causing harm, living a life that does the opposite, that lives with love and care and respect for self and others. Those desires, desire them in ways that are inspiring, that don't cause more harm.

Someone can have the desire to be non-harming. I have to get on with it here, I'm such a lousy person, I need to, I have to desire non-harming. You know, and not to be the best non-harming person on my block. The very act of wanting to non-harm is now harming you. So we're always looking, in what way am I "inging"? What way am I acting here? What way am I thinking here? What way am I intending here? Is the very way in which I'm intending, wanting, thinking, does that inspire the inner beauty of

non-harming? We're always tracking this, looking at it.

And over time, it has phenomenal results. Over time, it creates so much inner well-being and peace and space and goodness that maybe you'll be the person, the Buddhist, so-called Buddhist, that goes into a town where there's never been any Buddhists, and the religious professor will come to you. What do you believe in? I believe it's important to notice how I'm believing. Now you understand why that's an important answer? I believe it's important to study how I'm believing so that I believe in a way that doesn't cause any harm. Does the opposite. It's nourishing, it's supporting, it's liberating.

So those are my thoughts for today. So now, what do the lawyers say? Or what questions do you have or comments might you have? Yes, please.

Question: This topic was spot on for something I'm struggling with right now. I realized that I'm harming myself through perpetuating suffering over a loss I've experienced.

Gil Fronsda: So you harm yourself by perpetuating the suffering?

Question : Yes, and so I realize it's coming from clinging. A wonderful friendship I had and it's not wonderful at all anymore. And I keep clinging to what it was. So the Buddha was so wonderful at giving us lists, But I don't find a list for how to let go. I think that's just the hardest thing for me.

Gil Fronsda: Oh, there's a really good list.

Question: Which one? (laughing)

Gil Fronsda: It's a list that has only one item in it.

Question: Yeah, I need steps. You need steps. I need 12 steps to learn to let go. It's repeatedly my biggest problem.

Gil Fronsda: Well, then I'll give you four steps. Be mindful of your body. Be mindful of your feelings. Be mindful of your mind states. And be mindful of the activities of your mind. The four foundations of mindfulness. So when you when you have the particular suffering that you have, go through the checklist of those four.

And if you haven't, if you're not really recently familiar with the four foundations of mindfulness, really kind of study them a little bit. And then, you know, that's a checklist. It just, it takes a lot of familiarity, a lot of mindfulness, a lot of looking at it and seeing what's going on here. Not analytically, but what's the "inging"? What's the activities that are happening now in the body, in the mind, in the heart? And you have to spend a lot of time just being mindful of it.

And so also remember that mindfulness is also not quite a good word. We're mindfulness-ing. We're doing mindfulness, we're practicing the activity of mindfulness. And then the question is, how are you being mindful? Are you doing it holding on for dear life? Are you holding on? Are you doing it with greed, with aversion to into what's happening and do the mindfulness thing in a way that feels good.

Question: I must be missing something because I'm actually doing a practice so similar. I mean, it's like almost dead on. My coach was taking me through. I catch myself, I wake up almost every morning with these thoughts.

So I catch myself, oh, I wish I had said that or oh, it hurt so much when she said this "Oh my gosh, that was so wonderful "when we were friends like that." - It's possible. - But then I stop, I look, I say, "Oh, I'm saying this." And then I rub my fingers together, I check in with my body, my breathing. Every damn morning it comes back.

Gil Fronsdaal: So I don't know you that well in this regard, but I suspect that you're doing all this from the neck up. And that do it once your belly is really relaxed. Find a way, good posture, really find your, let your belly be deeply relaxed, and then do the work, do the practice.

Question: I will try that.

Gil Fronsdaal: From the bottom up rather than the top down.

Question: Yeah, yeah, I think you're right. I'm doing it as a mental construct. I'm going step one, step two, step three. Yeah, yeah. Okay, that'll be weird. Thank you. (audience laughing)

Question: Isn't having expectations of others, always harming them and harming yourself? And if you have no expectations, then you are all alone?

Gil Fronsdaal: Hmm. I think having expectations when there's been an agreement is reasonable. You know, so if someone promises something and you agreed like together, like this is what we're going to do, I think that's one of the functions of an agreement, is now we can expect that something will happen, we can trust something will happen in a particular way. And then if the agreement is broken, we feel kind of hurt.

But if there has been no agreement between the people, then we have to be very careful about the expectation. Because then we're projecting something on the situation. And that might not, other people don't agree, haven't agreed to. We're bringing our values and putting it on other people. And now there might be implicit agreements have in our society. You know, like, when the traffic light is red, we don't drive through it. We have that expectation that that's how we all agreed to drive. But you never asked the other driver, you promised not to drive. You know, we kind of have all kinds of things, implicit agreements.

So I think that when there's an agreement, it's reasonable to have some expectation. And then people are accountable to the agreements. They say, I expected that. What happened? What was going on? You can have something you can talk about. But expectation on oneself and expectations on others are also a source of a lot of suffering. Other people suffer, we suffer. We have standards we hold ourselves to, standards we hold other people to, that's much higher than they can actually live by. And it can be oppressive, it can be harmful to have expectations of self and others which are unreasonable.

And so this is why this mindfulness where we're looking at how, again, not the expectations, expectations are important to look at, but the what's going on for you when you're expecting, when you're doing the action of expecting, expectation. What do you want? What are you attached to? What are you hoping for? What are you afraid of? This gives you enough to think about? Thank you.

Question: This is a kind of complicated situation. So I'm thinking of an example. Let's say I have a pond and I have some fish in it and then there's an invasive species that now live in the pond that's killing my fish. So if I don't harm that species of some sort my fish will all die. Then what should I do in that case?

Gil Fronsda: There's all kinds of things. First of all, I love it when people ask the question, I have this problem, invasive fish, I don't want to kill them, but what can I do?

That people that ask that question, I welcome so much. This is fantastic that they're asking, rather than immediately go get the poison to kill the fish. And then the question, well let's think about it. Maybe let's do some research and find out what we can do. And maybe there's something can be done. Maybe there are traps you can put in that can trap the fish and take them where they belong. Which is maybe expensive, but maybe that's nicer than just killing them. So maybe there's something can be done.

Maybe your fish are really small and that's a really big fish. And if you take a big net, fishing net, through the pond pond, you get all the bad fish on one side and all the small fish stay on the other side of the net. And then you can kind of say, "Let's figure out what we can do now." Maybe that's a good way of living. Maybe they can just kind of share the pond together that way.

Or maybe you realize the reason why the big fish are eating the small ones is because they're hungry, but they actually have, where they came from, they have a preferred diet. And so let's bring in the preferred diet, and they'll leave the small fish alone. So I'm just making up ideas, but it's possible by thinking about it and exploring, but sometimes it takes a while. Sometimes just killing them seems like it takes care of it really quickly. But then because killed them, the other, your fish now think, "Oh, killing is right."

And so they start killing each other for the slightest little thing. They've learned that killing was possible in this pond. And you don't know the repercussions that killing has. And then there's also, it could also be that the invasive species was coming. Like the person didn't read the news and didn't read that if you bring in this particular kind of feed, it has this fish eggs in it. And you have to be really careful. Oh, but it's so much work, who cares about doing that?

And I don't believe in it anyway. And so then there's no preventive work done. So if you have the equivalent today of a pond with fish in it, think ahead, notice what's happening, set up a situation so in the future there's not that problem. So if people who want to live a non-harming life, they also need to be proactive. They need to set the conditions in now so that in five, ten, twenty years, fifty years, that there's not any problems. And to only look at the present moment is very myopic when it comes to living a life of non-harming. So does that give you some ideas?

Question: Yes.

Gil Fronsdal: That was not an ultimate answer. But it's a beginning.

Maybe the last one.

Question: So when I'm thinking about invasive fish and a fish pond, I'm thinking about Israel and Gaza. And I'm wondering, I don't know how to think about it, and I wonder if you have any suggestions.

Gil Fronsdal: Yes, I mean, the talk today was partly a response to that without mentioning it explicitly. And one of the reasons not to mention explicitly is I'll tell you a story about Thich Nhat Hanh.

Thich Nhat Hanh lived in Vietnam during the war between northern Vietnam and southern Vietnam. He lived right in the area where the conflict was most active, battles back and forth and fields nearby. And he was dedicated to doing it a different way, not fighting. He was dedicated to non harming. And he had a whole group of monastics and women and men who were out there trying to support everyone in both sides of the conflict and offer a different approach to it all. And because of that, both, neither side trusted him.

Because he was supporting the Vietnamese, trying to help them and maybe even offer medical care. The southern Vietnamese didn't trust him and vice versa. And so the situation in Gaza and Israel is awful. So much pain. But to take the middle view, the middle way, that really wants the best for both sides, It's kind of difficult to say because one way or the other, people on either side gets upset that you don't understand how terrible it is for us and how much we've been violated and how much we've been kind of forgotten by the world.

All kinds of things. And so I didn't want to talk about it directly. And not talking about it is also very difficult because then you're ignoring, you know, people say, "You're ignoring my people. I don't feel safe." But when there's both people who feel that way, then it's a very difficult thing to have that middle. So the middle for me is not being aloof or indifferent, but is having a heart that's really concerned for everyone involved. and is dedicated to finding, best we can, a way of non-harming without, I don't know, without maybe giving the question earlier today, without projecting expectations on what people do.

Thank you.