

A Myth For Hard Times

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So good morning, everyone, and welcome to IMC. And I do have an announcement, and I think of this announcement as part of the talk. It has made me a prelude to it. For quite a while, I've been wanting our community both in person and online, out in the wider world, to be involved in a second large fundraising drive that follows the one we did right after the invasion of the Ukraine three years ago, where we raised money for Save the Children in order to support the children affected by the war there, and a lot of them became refugees going out of the country.

And Save the Children did wonderful work, supporting children and families. And they've been an organization that's been around for decades, maybe 100 years or something, doing wonderful work, one of the more reputable nonprofits around. And I've been wanting to do it for a long time, for the last year or so. And it took a while for our community to kind of get organized properly around this. And so we finally could do it now. And it's for Save the Children's emergency fund that goes for children and families in really emergency places around the world.

And things are pretty dire and risk of starvation, all kinds of things. And the primary places now are places like Gaza and Sudan and Syria and different places, Ukraine still maybe. And so we started that fundraising drive, maybe officially today. And officially it kind of was posted available on, I think, Friday. And so last time we did it, we raised \$70,000, which I thought was pretty fantastic. And so we're now launching it again, and this time, and it's an opportunity for our community to come together and feel like we're coordinating and sometimes working together, we get a kind of bigger impact in the world than if we just do it individually.

And it just seems very timely that we're doing, but it wasn't a plan that the federal government should have kind of, in a certain kind of negative way, cooperated with their efforts. Yeah. That by shutting down the USAID, the Agency for International Development, there's a huge, a bigger crisis now with international support. And so now in our small way, we're stepping into that vacuum with our ability to donate to Save the Children. And so I think in some ways we'll make more of a difference than we would have been if we'd done this some

months ago. So this is an attempt in our community to meet the need.

And one of the key people organizing it is Ram, Ramapalarajou. I saw here somewhere. He's standing all the way in the back. He has a wonderful little kind of red sweater and a hat. He's standing all the way in the back. He has a wonderful little kind of red sweater and a hat. Q-tat. So if you look for someone with a cute hat, you'll... because he's also involved with a lot of wonderful humanitarian efforts kind of connected to the outreach from the IMC orbit and our orbit is, to me, I'm quite inspired by it.

I just went down to IRC this last two days. One of the things we, where our orbit is involved in is chaplaincy training. And we, so we're training people to be spiritual caregivers in the kind of chaplaincy mode. And so once a year, the year-long training, we could do it at IRC for two days, the retreat center. And there was something very significant for me of being at the retreat center, the current climate of things, the chaos of this world, that sitting in the meditation hall there, it felt like it was one of these places of refuge of, that's protecting the good heart, protecting spiritual practice as a through line that will stay constant through the ups and downs of civilizations.

That the, like I have this idea of my image of monasteries being places deep in the woods or mountains where no matter what goes on in society, they're actually preserving spiritual practice, spiritual ideals, ethical life. in a very important way to make it continue through time. And so I felt like we were down there in this place that has that kind of role in our society and training people to offer spiritual care out into the wider world. And so I felt like we were down there in this place that has that kind of role in our society and training people to offer spiritual care out into the wider world. And I loved it.

And then I realized that coincidentally, that was last two days. The next two days, Monday and Tuesday... I'm training one of the other chaplaincy programs coming out of our orbit of IMC, which is the Buddhist eco-chaplaincy training, people wanting to offer spiritual care in the context of the environment, environmental crisis. And so that's pretty wonderful, a wonderful group of 36 people. And they all have to do a project for the year and a half program. And so last night I read all the project proposals. And I was so inspired. Wow. We created this program out of thin air.

And now these people have, out of the air, doing these wonderful projects in the world having to do with eco-chaplaincy. It's like, wow, that's pretty cool that we have this. And then, and coincidentally, Friday and Saturday, we have kind of a third kind of spiritual care chaplaincy-informed program called Anurcompa, which is bringing some of those ways that we do in

chaplancy, some of the orientations there for personal growth, for people who are not necessarily going to offer spiritual care, but want to touch into that world and grow from it. And so it just kind of represents how much that this orbit of IMC is doing is doing a lot of things that here and there are usually not publicized. And so it just kind of represents how much that this orbit of IMC is doing is doing a lot of things that here and there are usually not publicized.

And, uh, Rom, who just announced, he's connected to a lot of it. And so some of you are interested in learning more on what we do. You can talk to him at the tea time. So in this world of chaos that we have seemingly, and, and it's quite amazing. We were planning yesterday, met the planning meeting, the faculty of this eco-chaplancy program, which starts, which is well continuing with a two-day session Monday and Tuesday, as I said. And we had planned some weeks ago what we were going to do, and we realized, wait a minute, the world has changed so much in the last two weeks.

We have to kind of rethink the whole thing. We can't just kind of, we didn't know two weeks ago, three weeks ago, that the world would look like it is now. So we have now kind of reorganized it to try to better meet the circumstance we're in, especially for people offering one spiritual care to the world. When the world has changed, we should, and probably a lot of them are dismayed by what's happened. And so how do we support them and care for them? Sometimes you have to care for the caregivers before they can go out into the world.

And I was very moved to know after the fact, I wish I'd known while it happened, that this week, this class week twice, students from the high school, which is one block away, marched through the streets, marched down to the city courtyard, and in order to protest the way in which the ICE, the immigration police, is coming and taking students out of high school, coming and taking them, or maybe here undocumented. And I don't know if they've done that in local high schools right here, but it's happened in San Jose. and where they've gone into the high school. And to me, from what I understand of it, it's kind of a horrendous thing to do because to take a student out of high school, because they're undocumented, as bait to get their parents to come and get them, means now the parents are also in that mix.

And to have that kind of dynamic between that kind of tension and that kind of challenge for a family, it must be absolutely awful. There was a movie many years ago called Sophie's Choice. And I wondered, you know, wow, what kind of thing are we doing to families? And so they had to walk out in that high school in East San Jose for the students protesting that. So we have high school students and other students perhaps in this country now who are afraid. And afraid for themselves or afraid for their fellow students. And so we live with a lot

of people now afraid.

Maybe some of you are afraid. Some of you are quite concerned. Maybe some of you are in danger because of this. Some of you are, know people who are. And some of you might know people in the wider world whose community is there. And now their aid, their food supplies have been cut off because aid has been cut off. and medicine supplies have been cut off, and medical care has been stopped, and people are starting to die because of what this, the very quick way in which the administration has decided to make this change without a care planning and consideration for the impact.

So these actions that are happening, that are dismaying and frightening, alarming for many people, Certainly we should name it, the name that recognized how difficult it is for some people. And some people are finding it as that it's the medicine they've been waiting for for a long time, the change they've been hoping for. And that's also happening. And so how do we find our way with all these, what's happening in our society? So that was a long prelude to my talk. So I want to tell you a Buddhist myth. Okay. And it might be in the context of all that, telling you this amazing, you know, strange myth is, it will seem like maybe diminishing or underplaying what's going on in the response to it.

But it's how the Buddha responded to similar things happen in his time. You know, we have, some of us have this image of the Buddha sitting quietly in the forest peacefully and he's probably just all serene and wonderful. But periodically through his lifetime, societies fell apart around him. There was war that he was not in the middle of necessarily, but the places where he lived and traveled for 40 years, 80 years between. There was warfare and war and famine and all kinds of things, society falling apart. The representative of that is that he died peacefully, and we tell this wonderful story of him laying down on the ground between two flowering trees, and to die very peacefully and serenely in a deep meditation practice.

And it was nice for him. And around him, his societies were falling apart. Right? and around him war drums were being beaten, and kings were being, thrones were being usurped and taken over. And there was a lot of his followers, some of his prime, kind of one of his prime disciples had been murdered just a few months before he died. So even though he died peacefully, the context was one of great upheaval. And there was no courts to go to, to say, you know, please stop. There was no check and balances for these monarchs who were basically dictators who could just tell people to, you know, offer their head at a moment's notice.

There was no check and balances for these monarchs who were basically dictators who could just tell people to, you know, offer their head at a moment's notice. And there was no check

and balance except, unless the neighboring country attacked you. That was a check and balance. And so it was, you know, in some ways it was an awful time. And the Buddha responded with myth, maybe because that was the safest way. It was kind of, and there was not a, it was oral culture back then. So there was, you couldn't write a manifesto and post it on doors or get it, you know, put it on the news or something.

The way that things traveled was through people speaking. And so a good myth, a good story, probably traveled a lot more by someone standing in a soapbox and said, you know, it's not a good idea to have war. And so the Buddha supposedly composed these myths, and this particular myth is designed in a classic literary form. If you know about literature, I call it Kaismas. And that's a ritual way that's done in the Bible and Homer in many places, where the literature, the writing is done as a journey into a pivotal point, and then the journey is going out, kind of in the mere image of going in.

And so this myth is kind of, you know, so people in the ancient world, they knew this kind of form of ritual... myth-telling or Mitchell storytelling, so they kind of knew to kind of be carried along by it and dip down into it and then come out of it, maybe in an inspired way. And I don't think I can tell it that way, but, you know, maybe you'll follow along, you'll understand how it is. And so, it's a, you know, I think it's a myth because it starts off at a time long, long ago, when people lived for 80,000 years. That's a lifetime. That's a long time.

And it describes how society devolves. And as society devolves, it affects how long people live. Almost biologically, people get bored and their lives get shorter and shorter and shorter. And so it goes through, you know, from 80 to 40, I think to 20 to 10,000 years. And eventually you get to seven days. And that's pretty bad. And I think that's the worst that it evolves to society and the world. And people just become just horrible to each other. Absolutely terrible. And that's when things change. And then it comes out. And then the life, as over the centuries, I guess, or millennia, the lifetimes increase back until the glorious time when we can live for 80,000 years.

And the pivot point of the story has to do with people going into the forest. Leaving the ordinary constructed world of human beings, where we have institutions and government and all these things that we create and try to make sense of our social life, they actually leave, they go into the forest. And there's a, the turn, what has to happen, to turn society around, happens there in the forest. And there's other places that Buddha tells kind of a story. This is not a myth, it's just kind of a metaphor he uses. The same thing, that when he discovered the path to awakening, he likened it to a person who goes into the woods, someone who works

in the woods, a woodworker or something, goes into the woods and finds an overgrown path, but he sees the traces of the path.

And then he comes back to the monarchs of the realm and tells them, I found the traces of an ancient path. And they say, oh, okay. And they go into the forest and they clear the path. And they found the path takes them to some glorious, overgrown Aztec city that's been covered over for a long time. And so here again, the idea is something in the forest. So the forest here represents some other dimension of life. That is outside of the ordinary, constructed, imagined, synthetic world that we live in, of, you know, building up our ego, building up our concept of self, building up our concept of the world that we have, the cathedrals and the edifices we have of abstract, constructed, engineered society, which is both good and challenging to live in.

And now, you know, we have to deal with Twitter. No, and I was just thinking about how it's this imagined, constructed, unnatural world, doesn't exist in the natural world whatsoever, is now the source of the wealthiest people in the world. That is not because they're really good farmers and they produce things people need and that makes them wealthy. It's they're making these things that just a few decades didn't exist. And so, you know, it's a part of a build, comes out of this constructed, imagined world of the human mind. And that's kind of the world that's taking over in some ways and dominating and has the power.

And so here the Buddha is offering another way going back into the natural world. It's represented by going into the forest. So in this myth, the, I'm going to tell you, it's the myth of the wheel-turning monarchs. And wheel-turning monarchs are kind of like this universal monarchs who own in the mythic times a huge area of the world. So they're very powerful. And for many generations, the monarchs know how to live and how to rule ethically. And this is a description of how they rule.

Rulers honor, respect, and venerate the truth.

Have truth as their banner and guide.

They provide just protection, protection in a justice way.

They provide just protection and security for their court, troops, aristocrats, assistants, Brahmins, and householders, townspeople and country people, religious practitioners, animals, and birds.

They do not let injustice prevail in the country.

They provide support to the poor.

This was written 25,000 years ago, in the Bronze Age. I love saying that. And, you know, this was relevant that long ago for human societies, for someone to say that to describe monarchs, the ideal monarch, the mythic monarch. However, so that went on for about six generations. And seventh generation is somehow, seven is a good number. And the seventh generation, one of the monarchs stopped doing some of this. And it says, he governed the country according to his own ideas.

So governed, the country people did not prosper like before. As they had when former kings proceeded in the noble duty of a monarch. So the noble duty of the first one I read. But then the ministers came to the person and said, hey, you know, you're not doing it right. And the people are suffering now. And so they said to him, they said, people are suffering. You should ask us. They weren't going to tell them something. Maybe you don't tell the monarchs what to do.

He said, you should ask us about the noble duty of a monarch. We will answer you. And so he asked. And they explained it to them. And after listening to them, he provided justice and security for his people. But he did not supply, he did not provide support for the penniless in their realm. And so poverty grew widespread. When poverty was widespread, a certain person stole from others. Makes sense, right? You're starving. With the intention to commit theft, so intentionally stole.

He was arrested, and they presented him to the king, saying, Your Majesty, this person stole from others with intention to commit theft. And the king said to him, Is it really true? You stole? And the man said, yes, it's true. Remember this back in the ideal time when everyone was living ethically and honestly, yes, nice. What was the reason, said the king. Sire, I couldn't survive otherwise. I was born in Bergen, Norway. And they have there still on the wall of the old castle that was living back there. Supposedly one of the first rules of the land that it says explicitly, if someone's starving, it's not a crime to steal.

So he said, I can't survive. And so the king provided him with some support, material support, saying, with this support... Keep yourself alive and provide for your mother and father, partners and children, work for a living, and provide an inspiring donation for religious practitioners that's conducive to happiness. So maybe it's a little bit self-serving for the Buddha to. To say that. But still, this idea, here's support, to get started with a career and support your people and thrive with it. So that's kind of nice.

And so the guy said, yes, but then, another person stole something from other people and was arrested, present to the king. And same thing happened. Is it true? Yes. Why? To survive.

And so the king provided... that person with material support, in order to build a career and support the people. But then people heard about this, and they thought, it seems the king is providing support to anyone who steals from others. It occurred to them, why don't we steal from others?

So then another man stole something from others, and that person was arrested, presented to the king. Did you steal? Yes. Why? Because I couldn't survive. Then the king thought, if I provide support to anyone who steals from others, it will only increase the stealing. I'd better make an end to this person, finish him off and chop off his head. He's a decisive person, strong and decisive. He's going to, you know, so he orders men to do so.

But people heard about this. It seems the king is chopping the heads off anyone who steals from others. So it occurred to them, we better have sharp swords made. Then when we steal from others, we'll make an end of them. Finish them off and chop off their heads. And so they did that. And so, the Buddha points out, And so, from not providing material support to the penniless, poverty became widespread. When poverty was widespread, theft became widespread. When theft was widespread, swords became widespread. When swords were widespread, killing living beings became widespread.

And for the sentient beings among whom killing was widespread, their lifespan and beauty declined. These people lived for 80,000 years, but their children lived for only 40,000 years. So now we're beginning to see the devolving, not just a society, but in Buddhism, there's kind of a direct kind of correlation between our lived life because of the karma that we live. And so the karma affects us in a dramatic way. And here it's being passed on to the next generation. And what are we passing on to our next generation?

Among the people who lived for 40,000 years, a certain person stole something from others. The person was arrested and presented to the king. Your Majesty, this person stole from others. The king said, is this true? No, sir. He deliberately lied. And so... from not providing support to the penniless, poverty, theft, swords, and killing became widespread. When killing was widespread, lying became widespread. And for the sentient beings among whom lying was widespread, their lifetime and beauty declined.

These people who lived 40,000 years, had children who lived for 20,000 years. And then the people who lived 20,000 years, they did it even worse, because not only they lie, but then behind the king's back, they disparaged him. So they kind of backbiting started to happen. And so that reduced lifespan to 10,000 years. Among the people who lived 10,000 years, some were beautiful and some were ugly. The ugly beings, coveting the beautiful ones, committed

adultery with the partners of others. And so, from not providing support to the penniless, poverty, theft, swords, killing, lying, and backbiting became widespread.

When backbiting is widespread, sexual misconduct became widespread. And so then the lifespan reduced to 5,000 years. And this process continued. The next thing that happened was harsh speech came into play, divisive and harsh speech, the how people spoke. And then the lifespan reduced to 2,000 years. Or actually it says 2,500 years. And then those people had ill will. Ill will became widespread. And then the lifespans reduced to 1,000. And then a wrong view. The wrong view is the view that you can do whatever you want. It has no impact.

But the right view is that if you do things which are unwholesome, unethical, it'll have a negative impact on the world, on yourself. There's consequences to it. And having the wrong view, not believing in that, and more likely people are going to do unethical things because there's no repercussions anywhere. So people had wrong view. The lifetime declined to 500 years. Then greed and a harmful culture, kind of spread into the culture of just harm and hate and things like that. And then it reduced to 250 years.

And from that, respect for mother and father, religious practitioners decreased. and also for elders. And so, with that lack of respect, a lifespan went down to, I think, 50 years, and then just all this stuff, and then all the killing and everything's going on at the same time, right? It's getting more and more terrible. And the next thing is the people who live, I guess, anyway, 50, I don't know what's going on here, but... They lived for 10 years. And among the people who live for 10 years, I don't know if this, you know, maybe I should not read this, but it says, girls became marriageable at five years.

Maybe that was very significant back then. And the following, and then the following flavors disappeared. Butter, oil, honey, molasses, and salt. Things are getting worse. And then people started doing more and more unwholesome and ethical things. And the lifespan went down to... Oh, and there was no recognition of the status of mother, aunts, or wives, partners, tutors, students, and other respected people. The world became desolate like goats and sheep, chickens and pigs, dogs and jackals. Everyone was full of hostility towards each other with acute ill-willed male evidence and thoughts of murder.

Even a mother will feel like this for her child and a child for its mother, father for child, child for father, brother for sister, sister for brothers. They'll be just like a deer hunter when a deer, a deer full of hostility, ill will, malevolence, and thoughts of killing. Among the people who lived for 10 years, there was a middle period, this limbo period. This is a turning point, it'll be

a turning point. It's called the inter-period of swords that lasted for seven days. So imagine lifetimes of seven days, and also that period of the seven days. Sharp swords will appear in their hands.

It's kind of like a science fiction thing, like just born with swords or something, which will take each other's lives, crying and calling everybody else, it's a beast, a beast. Everyone's called beasts. So this is the worst. If we come to the end of the worst. But then some of those beings thought, let us neither kill nor be killed. Right? Why don't we hide in thick grass, thick jungles, thick trees, inaccessible riverlands, or rugged mountains, and survive on forest roots and fruits. So that's what they did.

So the idea of surviving on roots and fruits is that they don't have to kill any animal for food. So really, they were going to live non-violently, get away from it all. When those seven days were passed, having emerged from their hiding places... they embraced each other, maybe because they were the only ones who survived. And they come together and cry in one voice, Fantastic dear enemy, you live. Fantastic dear enemy, you live. Remember in the seven-day period, everyone was enemies. They all went away maybe individually. When they came out, they didn't see them as enemies anymore. They called, they were the dear enemy.

Then they thought, it's because we undertook unwholesome things that we suffered such an extensive loss of our relatives. We better do what's wholesome. What wholesome thing to do? Why don't we refrain from killing living beings? And so then they slowly started to, lifespan started to increase in reverse order. As they each went systematically, well, let's not kill people. Let's not steal from them. Let's not lie. Let's not involve sexual misconduct. Right. Let's have divisive speech and harsh speech. Let's respect people and slowly, slowly. And they came back eventually to live happily for quite a while because they lived for 80,000 years.

And then it all started over again with the monarchs of the realms knowing what to do, knowing that they had to rule with justice, protect the justice, protect everyone. That they should support people, provide them with the means for livelihood, and let no one be poor. And this idea, but you know, the central focus on poverty. And that poverty was really where the source of society devolving. And it looks like we're moving in a direction in our society, probably for a while, of increased poverty. I don't know what to predict into the future, but it looks like there's going to be some people, maybe the poorest in their society, who are going to suffer the most.

And what is our role? You know, in this kind of, if this is how direction it all goes. I don't know

what to say. It's kind of, for some of us, it's kind of a difficult time to be in a situation like this and not know how to respond. In a sense, it's a waiting game to see where it's going and where the response can be. But this kind of myth, I think, is actually extremely important because it says there is something very deeply natural. It's not part of that unnatural world that we construct of governance and things that resides in ourselves, in the natural world within.

To go into the forests, the natural world, we can do that in our own hearts. And that's why we practice. That's why we have meditation practice and these kind of spiritual teachings and ethical guidelines so that we can live in an ethical way. So that our standard of ethics is really high for ourselves and others. We don't kill, we don't steal, we don't involve sexual misconduct, we don't involved in lying, we don't involve in greed and hatred, we don't involve in disrespect, backbiting, we don't involve seeing anyone as beasts, anyone is less than human.

And so we really want to care for ourselves. And to do all those things is a way of harming ourselves. I think that's one of the message of this myth. That we harm ourselves and our descendants, our society, by how we do things. And we also harm in immediate now, others who are impacted by those behaviors of ours. And so Buddhism and the Buddha put tremendous emphasis on behavior like that. And calling out the necessity of not behaving those kinds of actions that cause harm.

And so for me to say at the beginning of this, that there were children being harmed, potentially right down the street of block away, unnecessarily is to critique behavior, action, activity, effect, without saying anything about any individual or any groups of people. But look, that kind of behavior has to stop. And I wish that I'd known that the students were out on the streets. But it wasn't announced anyway, maybe it was spontaneous. It was so, you know, one block away, I would have joined them.

And because I wanted to protest that kind of activity, that kind of action. And that might be, all of us maybe might feel called to say no to killing, say no to stealing, say no to sexual misconduct, say no to lying. Say no to specific ways in which people are being harmed. And I hope that we're not silent in speaking up. And maybe for a while until our lifespans can grow up a little bit longer rather than decrease because people hate us. That maybe we'll do it sometimes by telling myths, at least on this Sunday morning. We'll use a myth to say that, like the Buddha did long ago.

So that's my talk, trying to be relevant for the current times, and hopefully it is enough. And

so it's all a work in progress, this practice of ours, this life of ours. So we have this tea today, and it's going to start in a few minutes. But I think that... It's possible of this topic because it touches current events is a little bit tender for some of you. And it might be nice. And I evoked in the beginning that I'm doing this kind of spiritual caregiving trainings, three of them in a sense that happens that I'm involved in this week.

And maybe we can care for each other just very briefly. By turning to a couple of people next to you, make sure no one's left alone, look around. It could be four if necessary. Okay. Two or three, and say hello, and just offer some care, some respect, some appreciation, some welcome, and maybe tell each other a little bit, what it was like to hear this talk and what I aboked and what came out for you, and listen to the other person with, you know, care and respect. Don't give them advice. Okay. And don't offer your opinion about what's supposed to happen out there.

Just be human together in a very simple way. Don't tell long stories about what this talk was like. Just a few comments is to share who you are and say hello and break the ice of saying hello, especially people here the first time. And then in a few minutes, there'll be that the tea, I'll ring a bell so that, you know, it's really clear time to stop. And then you can continue talking afterwards, the bell, but then the tea will be available. And you're all welcome to stay. Thank you. Thank you.