

The Five Remembrances

Gil Fronsdal

November 24, 2024

Keywords: five remembrances, Buddha, mindfulness, autonomy, kamma, non-clinging, King Aśoka, Four Sights, non-reactivity, Thanissarabhikkhu

Thanks, gratitude, but that's not what I have on my mind. And I will, you know, somewhat, you know, amusingly defend myself by telling you a little story. That Joseph Goldstein, who's one of the founding teachers of this Western Insight movement, still alive, very senior teacher now, and brilliant man, great practitioner. He said once that the first time he was asked to officiate a wedding, he was expected or asked to give a little Dharma talk as part of that. And the Dharma talk he gave was a talk on death. So, that gives me a little bit of license here for what you're going to hear.

So, the topic is the five remembrances. And I'll tell you what they are as we go along. Some of you know, they're kind of a famous set of things to reflect on. And the Buddha said, when he taught them, he said, this is something that all people, whether they're lay or monastic, should regularly reflect on these five remembrances. But I'll start with a first little personal anecdote and lead to a little story about the Buddha. And this kind of points to one way in which these five remembrances carry a certain kind of value for me or emotional association or meanings, meaning.

When I was 11, I was with my parents visiting Nepal. Which back then, I visited again 20 years later, and I was amazed how radically it had changed. I don't think there were any asphalted roads in Kathmandu. It was like a small town almost. But one day we were walking around town near a river, and we saw some people carrying a stretcher with a body wrapped in blankets. And the body was small enough that it was certainly that of a small child.

And they were bringing it down to the river, as far as I could tell, to cremate the baby. It was a baby, I think it was a small child, to cremate it. And that was my first encounter with someone who had died. I couldn't actually see the person because of the blanket. And it did make an impression on me. It didn't, it wasn't like an unfavorable impression or a frightening impression, but there was something in retrospect, like I think about it these days, I was witnessing

something that had been going on in the ancient world, maybe ancient Indian subcontinent for thousands of years.

Later, 20 years later, I did go to Vārāṇasī and where they do have the famous burning pyres where they cremate people. And I was there and saw some of that. But there was something kind of almost like natural, almost like part of the natural world. As unnatural as we might say it is the death of a child. There was something very simple and natural about what they were doing. It just seemed like it was a timeless kind of event.

So I never thought about it too much, but it was something that kind of was in the back of my mind or in my heart, this event as a child. And then when I came to Buddhism, I learned about the Buddha before he was enlightened. And he also had grown up, as maybe this young person had, in what is now Nepal, in the foothills of the Himalayas. So it was nearby where he grew up. And there's a story that Buddhists tell about his upbringing. And that is that he had been predicted at his birth that he might become a renunciant, go off and be a monk, a religious wanderer who has no possessions and engage in spiritual practice.

But this was not to the liking of his father, who was the king, who needed and wanted to have his son follow in the family business. And so the father did what he could to prevent his son from encountering a suffering in the world, keep him entertained or engaged with education, with entertainment, with sports, with probably all kinds of warrior trainings that was important for the royalty at that time. So the young Buddha-to-be was quite engaged. And so he lived inside the royal compounds. And there were apparently three of them. So between different seasons he could be moved between the different places, kept distracted from fundamental human experiences of suffering.

And he wasn't as 11 year old out there in Kathmandu seeing the child being carried down to the pyres. And not until he was 27 that he began getting restless. And it was a little bit like the Truman Show, those of you who know the movie. So at some point he felt like he had to kind of go beyond the walls. And he did. He went at night, or early in the morning, with his charioteer.

And they went driving through town, around. And the first time they went, they saw an old person. And somehow the Buddha had never seen a really old person before. And so he asked the charioteer, what is that? And the charioteer said something like, well, that's an old person. And it's the nature of all of us to become old.

And the story doesn't say this, but I can almost imagine the Buddha said, really? And then the next day they did it again. And this time they saw a sick person. Quite sick. And the Buddha

asked again, what is that? And the charioteer said, well, that's a sick person. It's the nature of all of us to become ill. Really?

And then the third time they went out, they saw a dead person. Maybe the similar scene that I'd seen. Someone with a pupil carrying a stretcher with the body wrapped in shrouds and taken to the burning fires. And so the fact that Buddha saw this, you know, I imagine, you know, the scene that I had in Nepal and by the river. Kathmandu was, it wasn't a village, but it was, you know, it was dirt roads and you could just get out to the river easily. And it was, you know, it had probably closer to the ancient times than it is now. And the smog is there.

And so the same thing happened. The Buddha said, what is this? The charioteer said, it's a dead person. We all have the nature to die. So then, the Buddha went out. The Buddha went out a fourth time. And this time they saw a renunciant. They saw a religious mendicant walking through the streets calmly, in a stately way, just calmly, self-possessed, walking.

The Buddha had never seen a person in this kind of way, this kind of calm, this kind of peacefulness, this kind of stately kind of way, that being kind of mindful and present for their experience as they walked. And everyone else is running around doing things. And the Buddha said, what is that? And the charioteer explained, well, that's a religious mendicant. That's someone who has left the home life to find out what's true and to become free. And so then the Buddha, so there's these four sights that Buddha saw made a big impression on him.

And perhaps being 27, you can imagine like if he hadn't seen anything like this before, I mean, wow, this is part of life too. And then the very thing his father feared, the Buddha did. Then he jumped over the walls and went with his charioteer across to the river, I guess the border of the country, gave all his royal garb and jewels to the charioteer and crossed the river and into the woods to live a renunciant life, to find his own awakening, which it took seven years for him to find. And when he did, then he started to teach. And his teachings have continued to today. And his leaving the home life to go off and find his awakening is one of the conditions for all of us to be here today.

We wouldn't be here. We'd be doing something else today. But somehow that set in motion something that brought people here to places like IMC, that people find very meaningful and very important and supportive for them and maybe for their own seeking, their own discovery of freedom, their own kind of waking up to this life and contending and dealing with the fundamental human sufferings that we all have to approach at some point. And so that's sometimes summarized under the expression sickness, old age, and death. And there's a famous story that kind of in this theme, that a few hundred years after the Buddha, there was a king, King Aśoka, who was considered to be the first emperor of India, the first one to kind

of conquer all of India. Apparently, he was a cruel king and had a vast, vast army and, you know, in conquering the territory.

But one day, and he eventually became, the Buddhists say, the first Buddhist king, dedicated to nonviolence. But before that, he was going around having these big battles. And after one big battle that he won, he walked apparently by himself across the battlefield and walking through all the carcasses of soldiers who had died. Apparently it was pretty awful. Thousands and thousands of soldiers had died. And we don't know what impact it was for him to walk through all that death and carnage that he was responsible for.

And then lo and behold, walking through the field was a Buddhist monk. And the Buddhist monk was walking calmly, with a certain kind of self-possession, peacefully, mindfully. And the contrast between the carnage and this peacefulness of this monk made a big impression on the king. And the king went to talk to him, and the monk explained he was a disciple of the Buddha, and the king said something like, you know, what does he teach? And the monk responded, hatred never ends through hatred. By love alone does hatred end. This is the ancient truth.

And with that, the king renounced violence, renounced war. And he still stayed king and emperor, ruled this vast territory. But supposedly that was the turning point for him, to become dedicated to non-violence and supporting people and apparently created hospitals for animals and just took care of things. Made a dramatic turn. And so we come to us. We come to the five remembrances. And this is one of the teachings of the Buddha. He said, as I said, this is something to reflect on on a regular basis. So I'll read them to you and then say a few words.

Well, actually, before I read them, I wanted to introduce them in another way that creates a context maybe for hearing this. So we practice mindfulness here. That's what we're known for. The primary thing we do. And mindfulness is something only you can do for yourself. No one can do it for you.

You can't, you know, farm it out to someone, call up the local, you know, uber-like mindfulness service. You know, hire someone who comes over and does it for you and spare you the effort. That would be nice, right? You have a lot to do. Why spend time doing it when you can get someone to, I'm sure you can get people to come to your house to meditate for you. I might even come. And so, but it doesn't, it's not really going to do any good for you in a deep way.

Mindfulness is something we have to do for ourselves. And there has to be done out of free

will. It has to be done with your own capacity to decide, to engage, to choose. This is important. And it belongs to a family of inner mental states that only work if we choose them, only work if we self-manage them, monitor them, engage in them. That we engage the capacity of choice to track what's going on inside of us, choose what to participate in and what not to participate in.

The monk who was here in September, Thanissarabhikkhu, he has this teaching that he likens the mind to a corporate board. Where you're at a board meeting, and all the board members, the chair has no control over what the board members say. They say all kinds of crazy things. However, the chair has one thing that the others don't have. The chair has the veto power over anything. And he said, the mind is like that. You don't have control over what your mind thinks and does. But you do have veto power. You do have the ability to choose not to participate, not to continue that, not to invest in it, not to grant authority to whatever those things are. And that difference makes a huge difference.

And for that kind of monitoring and tracking and managing your inner life, only you can do a lot of this stuff. It's really up to you. And a lot of the practice is to learn how to better self-monitor, self-regulate, and find freedom in doing so in the autonomy of really being able to, you know, manage yourself. So that when the mind goes in a direction that's going to make it more difficult for you, you can say no. You can let go. You can choose to engage the mind, use the mind in ways that are supportive. Make things better. Make you better. Opens up to something.

And in using that ability to choose that comes from this kind of careful self-management that mindfulness provides, we find our freedom. We find our freedom to choose. The freedom to be independent from anything in terms of not being the servant of our compulsions or the victims of our feelings and ideas and thoughts. Rather, we learn to stay close to that place of freedom. And that's a remarkable thing, to learn that, to become free of greed, hatred, and delusion. Because we choose to veto power, we choose not to give into it. To find a place where we're free from attachments and clinging. That we're free from needing to have an identity or needing not to have an identity. That we're simply free in the world of having identities and not identities. Free even from thinking about it and engaging in thoughts that participate in that.

It's a remarkable journey. And part of this journey of mindfulness is a journey of growing autonomy. Just like a young child. Or a baby. The journey of a baby to adulthood, one way of understanding it is, is steps in increasing degrees of autonomy. First they maybe learn to eat for themselves, then they learn to walk, they learn to dress themselves, they learn to take

the bus to school by themselves alone. They learn how to leave home to go to college or go off to work, find a home for themselves, take care of their own finances. And so, you know, there's all this autonomy that we learn growing up to become an adult. I like to believe that as an adult, that process of maturation continues. But that sense of autonomy as an adult becomes increasingly internal.

It's increasingly, and that's why mindfulness is so helpful, increasingly be able to track ourselves, know ourselves well enough, know what our impulses are, our compulsions, know what our choices are, know our biases and our beliefs. More and more so that we're not caught by our inner life. We're not caught in our clings, our attachments, our resistance, our horrors, our fears. That we find more and more autonomy. And so that if we get angry, we don't have to act angrily. So that if we feel shy, we don't have to act shy. We have the freedom to act in spite of it. All these ways in which, as we grow up, we learn not to be caught in the things that limit us, inhibit us, that forces us to act in ways that later we regret.

And so in all kinds of ways we're learning this as we kind of, until that lesson of learning that autonomy and that freedom to track oneself and know oneself kind of comes to a culmination when we're going to die. I think of it as the last time that we have a chance to learn this lesson. No one can die for us. You can't, you know, call up the you know, the dying people and say, can you do it for me now? I'm busy, so I can't. And it's really a very personal thing. And there's some people die, people die in so many different ways. But this kind of the general kind of image I have of dying in a gradual kind of healthy way is, things start fading away. And sometimes eyesight fades away, hearing fades away. People sometimes are closing their eyes. The external world really doesn't really pull them anymore. Even if the loved ones are there, it becomes a very internal, personal world. There's no one to help at that point. And so now it becomes the last place to learn that autonomy. Can we find freedom there too? Is there freedom in dying? Or are we going to die afraid, angry, worried? What is the, you know, this whole process of autonomy can come to a final conclusion here, to learn it there as well.

So, with that as introduction, I'll read you the five remembrances. So, it's stated in the first person, meaning the Buddha saying, this is what you should be doing on a regular basis, have these remembrances. You should say to yourself,

- I am subject to aging. And I'm not free from aging.
- I am subject to illness. And I'm not free from illness, from getting ill.
- I am subject to death and I have not gone beyond death. I'm not free from dying. That's three.

- I will become different and separate from all that is dear and appealing to me. I'll become separate in some way from all the people that I love. One way or the other, that separation will happen.
- And the fifth one, I am the owner of my actions. Heir to my actions. Born from my actions, related to my actions, and have my actions as my refuge. I should be the heir of whatever deeds I do, whether beautiful or bad.” The word deeds is the same as *kamma*. Whatever *kamma* I do, whether beautiful or bad.

So these are the fundamental kind of, in a sense, truths of human life. Maybe they're unwelcome truths. Maybe we don't want to call them truths. Maybe some people would call them realities, that the Buddha was kept distracted from. Maybe because he was so acutely aware of what happened to him growing up. He gives his teachings. He says the reason he's teaching it is because it's so easy to get enamored, intoxicated, absorbed, preoccupied with youth. To get lost, lose perspective of how this world really is when we're healthy. And to get also enamored and lost and enthused by the idea of being alive. Or we forget. We're so enthused by our loved ones that we forget that sooner or later we will be separated.

Maybe that's why Joseph Goldstein talked about death. That death is part of being married. If you stay married, chances are one of you will die before the other. It can certainly be tragic. But just as I saw that child being carried down to the river to die. There's something ancient that goes back thousands of years, or more, that one part of a couple dies before the other. It's part of built into this world that we live.

So, does this evoke horror? Does this evoke protests? Does this evoke running away and finding, you know, seize the day and just let's go out and party or, you know, just ignore it, just live it up while we can? The Buddha is suggesting otherwise. He's suggesting keep this in mind, remember this. And it does a few things. One is then you're not surprised when these things come. And that can count for a lot. You're prepared, maybe.

For the Buddha, he interpreted it as a meaning or as an indication that you should really practice. You should be prepared for this. You shouldn't, and you know, it's very hard to practice freedom, non-clinging, compassion, love for all in times of crisis, unless we're prepared for it. We've built up the strength of mindfulness, the capacity, the skills of self-understanding. And so it's better to start when you're young. It's better to build and grow with that. And mindfulness will help dramatically with this process of growing autonomy, growing freedom in relationship to our inner life, which I propose is one of the important tasks of adult life.

And so to remember, I too have the nature to get old. I too have the nature to get sick. I too

have the nature to die. I too have the nature of being separated from everything that I love and even care about, one way or the other. Things change. People change. All kinds of things. So, given that, can we find autonomy, freedom, choice, decision-making about our inner life in relationship to health and sickness, youth and old age, being alive and dying, being with what we love and being separated from it?

Can we turn inward so that we're not on automatic pilot? The compulsions, the habits, the automatic impulses of our beliefs, our biases, our expectations don't have the upper hand. We have the veto power so that we don't become a victim to these things. We don't get overwhelmed by them. We don't get agitated, disturbed by them. Does that mean that we should just accept them happily? The veto power has an amazing capacity. It can both say no to rejecting something and to accepting it. What's the third option? Where is that place of neither accepting nor rejecting? I suggest that's where your freedom is found.

If you have to accept something, you're not really free. And remember, when you're accepting, you're doing something. When you're rejecting, you're doing something. Is there a place in the mind, maybe a place of awareness, mindfulness, maybe a place of stillness, quiet, calm, peace within, that does not need to accept or reject anything? It can allow it to be because that still, quiet place within is not being battered by the conditions of the world. It's not being disturbed by it. It's not afraid of it. There's no clinging associated with it. No attachment associated. We have this place of freedom. Of non-clinging. Of non-identification. Of non-reactivity. There's an autonomy, a freedom from reactivity in this place of freedom.

And what happens when we go to our deathbed without practice? What happens when we enter into a final phase of life and we're sitting there and we watch the mind? Sitting there, laying there in bed, maybe, watching the mind. And now we know, we're familiar. When certain attachments, certain beliefs come up, that maybe we say, no thank you. Don't have to do that. There was a woman here at IMC who died maybe 12, 14 years ago. And she died. She became amazingly equanimous and peaceful in her last weeks of her life. It was really remarkable. Maybe some of you here who knew her went. People here at IMC would go to be with her in her last weeks, partly because it was like being with a saint. It was kind of like being with this beautiful, radiant, peaceful person. It was like contagious. Darshan, almost, with her.

And I was with her in the few hours before she died. And she was agitated after these weeks of so much peace. And she said to me, the practice is no longer working. There's no idea, you know, we don't know that our strength of our practice and mindfulness is going to be there, even. So what happens when we can't even rely on practice? Is freedom still possible? Is

autonomy still to be found with that as well? So she was having a little bit of hallucinations, I think, that was part of it. And she didn't know quite the deal with these hallucinations and strange thoughts that were coming on. Because I think there were brain chemistry changes and so I told her, all you have to do is don't believe them. I said, you don't have to practice anymore. All you have to do is don't believe those delusions, those images, and things like that. And she calmed down immediately. The agitation went. And then I wasn't there, but a couple hours later she passed away. She used the veto power. Don't have to believe them. She found her peace.

And there's a remarkable peace to be had, I believe, because it's possible to become so in the moment, so present, so much no longer participating in the normal course of thinking and believing and imagining and judging and commentary and having ideas about the future and ideas about the past, where all that quiets down. There's a place inside where it's a reference point to a place that's an alternative to that. Where the past and the future disappears. Not from wherever the past is. Not from wherever the future is waiting for us. But it disappears in our mind. It disappears our active engagement and concerns. And it's possible to find this place of stillness, quiet, of awareness inside. As we're dying, where there is no dying. Of course you're dying. But thoughts of dying, concerns about the future in two minutes are irrelevant. They're not interesting. You know, how much more time do I have? Uh-oh, only two minutes? You know, I better balance my checkbook before I go. Or I need to call my credit card and complain about the extra bill I got. I have important things to do. No, no. You have a much better thing to do. You know a better things to do than checking the clock. You know you have better things to do than to imagine two minutes from now. There's a place where there is no death in the mind that doesn't think about that, in the mind that's aware and awake, that's not operating under these concepts. There is a place of no aging. There is a place or a state or a way of being that's absent of sickness, even while you're sick. And to find that place, to find that way of being, to be able to say no thank you to all the forces to take us away from that, is part of the veto power that we have, part of the letting go that we have. And to learn that autonomy, to learn that capacity for freedom and independence, I hope that that's one of the last things you do before you die. What a wonderful way to die. I hope none of us die afraid, angry, confused, I hope we die peacefully.”

And that's what the Buddha did. He learned that. He taught that. And then he did it. And the image that the Buddhist tradition provides for this is that he was walking back to his home country, because that's what you did back there, was walk across northern India. And it's kind of touching that he was walking back. But even for the Buddha, he didn't make it. He

had his last wish, I guess, to go home, but he didn't make it. And he knew he was dying. And he laid himself down between two flowering sal trees, majestic trees like the redwood trees of India, I guess. And he laid himself down there, let people come and visit him, and had the last kind of words to the monks who were there. Asked them, are you sure you don't have any more questions about the teachings? Are you sure? And they said, no, we have no more questions. And then he closed his eyes and he went into deep states of meditation. Deep states of peaceful meditation. Deep states of meditation where past and future don't exist. Life and death don't exist in terms of concepts and orientations of things. Where there's freedom and peace. And from there, he passed away. What a great reference point for how we can live our lives. To have that as a model.

So the five remembrances. And the last one is we are the heir to our actions. And this represents that what we do makes a difference. And what we do creates habits, what we do follows us, what we do shapes us, who we are. Be careful with what you do. What you say, your actions, how you live. And that care, is exercising your capacity for autonomy, your capacity for decision making for yourself. To make a decision to live a life, a better life, a good life, that brings you all the benefits of a life free of clinging, craving, and selfishness, conceit. So, the five remembrances. You might remember them, if they ever become relevant. So, we have a few minutes before the patlak.