

## Four Principles for a Buddhist Life

**Gil Fronsdal**

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Hello, everyone, and welcome. So this is the first Hybrid Dharma talk here at M C. Some of you are here, twenty-five of you today. Thank you for coming, and for the people online, thank you for being here—appreciated very much. We're still in our county, which has a mask mandate, and also, out of caution, it's over. Even giving the talk will be with a mask.

I find it kind of cozy to meditate with the mask on. Actually, I keep my mouth slightly open, and the humidity of my mind feels kind of cozy for me. Each person has a unique response to this mask thing in meditating with it. On the whole, we're beginning to shift here. Hopefully, this shift in this direction will continue, and we'll slowly open up more and more. Here it is, and I see, and I'll first start offering some of the programs we offered before, and new programs and some.

For those of you online, it means that some of the format will shift, probably a little bit. We'll see how much guided meditation I do. It used to be before the pandemic that we didn't do on Sunday morning, and now we'll see how we continue or don't continue with it. The other thing is that I felt like during the—when it was all on TV or on YouTube—it felt too long to speak for the full time we used to do Sunday morning. I just felt it was more appropriate to talk less, and so it was half an hour on Sunday. But the old format was closer to forty-five minutes or forty minutes or something; it was more variable.

We were scheduled to go until ten forty-five. So for those of you who are on YouTube, that'll shift. We'll go back to the ten forty-five ending, and whether the talk will be that long or not, or whether we talk for a shorter time and have a period for Q&A, it's variable depending on the situation. For today, in the talk I want to give, I'll tell you what I want to try to do. I wanted first to recite a four-line verse that captures what the Buddha had to teach in a kind of nutshell, and it kind of sets the stage for the talk. Then I want to just name this whole period

from March seventh or something like that until now that we've been closed, and what a big impact it's been for individuals, for society.

Here we're coming together after we've all been through this thing that people will be talking about for decades. You know, what were you doing back then? It was like when I was younger, and people said, "Where were you when John F. K. died? When he was killed, John F. Kennedy?" People would talk about, "Oh, I was there," or "nine eleven, where were you? What happened then?" People will be talking, "What were you doing during that pandemic?" and it'll be kind of like a reference point.

Then I want to talk a little bit about one of the little subsections of our society, or big subsection of society, that has its own impact around the pandemic, which is the medical field, but with particular harm inspired by medical ethics, and what we can maybe tap into and learn from that as Buddhist practitioners. Also, as we open up about how we can be as a community, perhaps that will give us a kind of a different orientation for how maybe we can be as a new opportunity. Opening up can open up in a fresh way, in a new way, with a new perspective. So I want to borrow from that medical ethics, and see if we can maybe get a different angle on what we're doing here and at this time. Try to then apply that also to our practice and to see—so that's kind of the plan.

The verse is kind of significant, because in the last verse, the last line says, "This is the teaching of the Buddhas." It says in plural, though, in Buddhas—some idea that there have been Buddhas periodically down through the eons. The Buddhas appear in the cosmos, in Buddhist cosmology, but they all have this teaching, and that's kind of—so the teaching is: Don't do any harm, very simply. It's not quite literally exactly right, but close enough for now. Don't do any harm. Do things which are wholesome. Purify the mind. This is the teaching of the Buddha. That's it. I should memorize that. I don't do any harm. Do what's wholesome. Purify the mind. And this is the teaching of the Buddha. If you want, you can forget about memorizing the last line. So that's kind of the background for this today.

I think that we shouldn't underestimate how big this whole pandemic time has been and continues to be for probably all of us. Some of us have been in more fortunate circumstances during this time, and some people have not. Even the people in fortunate circumstances, I think it's probably a much bigger impact on the psyche, on the heart, than most of us can realize. If you have been impacted by it in all kinds of ways, you should probably also assume it's a bigger impact than you actually realize at this point. It's remarkable to me that just in the United States, one in five hundred—no, that's right—I think one in five hundred Americans have died from COVID. It's quite something. It's quite a large amount of people, seven

hundred thousand people. In the world, it's almost five million people who have died. And that's just the people who've died.

Then, you know, there's a ripple effect—those people who lost someone. If you didn't lose someone you loved and cared for, probably you know someone who has, and you know it's not so far steps away. Then there's other effects of the pandemic that ripple out that have been difficult just in terms of health. Certainly, just COVID has been hard for people who didn't die. But there's all kinds of other things. I had several family members in hospitals—not from COVID—during this time, and it was hard to have them in hospitals, because you couldn't visit sometimes. Then there was a certain kind of fear around, like, what does it mean to be in hospital this time, especially before the vaccine came out, and then not going to the doctor, or not having access to the doctors.

I had to have a tooth extracted, and it turned out it was hard to find someone who would do it, because everyone had put off—I did, I put it off, put off things. Other people put off things. So then finally, when I got around to it, everyone had been getting back in the summer and doing things. This has been the biggest recession in the United States since the 1930s. So people economically have been impacted hugely. People have lost their jobs, and some people their homes, and all kinds of things. So just that—the pandemic's been huge.

In addition to that, maybe compounded by it, the tension of it all is on some of the social challenges of these last years—the tremendous focus on racism, and the pain of that, and the disparities that exist in this country that have become more and more evident. The tension between different political factions has gone out much more dramatically, and so much has been politicized in the way that maybe was never before. Regardless of which side of a political divide we sit on, we feel the tension and the challenge of it. Then there's here, California, and other places—all these fires, like fire after fire after fire. Now it's quite impressive. In other places, there's floods and hurricanes and all these challenges, and then just the challenge of getting supplies, supply chains being disrupted, and, you know, like, what does that mean? We can't get the things we usually want. There was a time in the pandemic that some people were kind of frightened about getting just basic goods. So these are all challenging times.

One of the places those challenges were huge was in the medical field before the vaccine, and hospitals, and even after the vaccine. It's been quite challenging. There was a time a hundred—well, a year ago, that feels like a long time—when there was real emphasis on the medical workers being heroes, superheroes. I think they deserve that name because it was quite a dedication to show up at the hospital and work before the vaccine, for example, just

do what it took to try to meet the people who came, who were dying and very sick, and offer the best care they could. Now, in some places in the country, they're still doing that, and there are surges. But now they're also dealing with hostility from people who don't believe in vaccinations or don't believe in the medical establishment, feel excluded, or feel criticized, or feel somehow they're going to be abandoned by it. So they are angry.

One friend of mine who works in a hospital in some state said they have to go to work just to go through a protest outside the hospital and say, "There are people who hate us, and we're just going to try to save lives, and we're hated for what we're doing." Some of them say, I've read, that some of them will take off their uniforms and their badge when they go shopping in a grocery store in some communities because if they're seen as a medical worker, people express hostility to them. That makes the job of offering medical care much more difficult when, you know, they were heroes a year ago. Now, in some communities, there's the opposite.

I've had some conversations with people, and I'm on an ethics committee for a local hospital, so I hear a little bit of this as well. One of the things that inspires me is how often the medical people I've talked to evoke medical ethics. One way they've talked about it is they're committed to care for anyone who comes in through the door to the emergency, and anybody who comes—they're going to offer the best care they can, and they're committed to that, to offer equal care. One of the people said explicitly, it means that if someone has been a rapist or murdered someone, our job is to offer the best care we can. We don't turn anyone away. Everyone's treated equally. Whether they're vaccinated or not vaccinated, we're committed to caring for them best we can. It's not our job to distinguish who should get or should not be getting care. This kind of complete willingness and commitment to just be available for everyone equally and to care in these challenging circumstances, I think it's quite inspiring to me.

In the field of medical ethics, there are four principles for medical care, and they have a kind of Latin-ish kind of big-name words in that field. I'll tell you the big words. They are—because medical folks will use these big words because it's part of their understanding. So the first is autonomy, the second is beneficence, the third is nonmaleficence, and the fourth is justice. Autonomy means, as I understand it, refers to the idea that every patient has a right to make their own decisions unless they have something like dementia or something—they can't. But then, if someone can't make a decision themselves, it usually evokes the ethics committee of the hospital to really consider that that's really the case, and make sure that it's not the whim of someone, that they're really caring for that sense of autonomy that people have. So

that's kind of a fundamental value, at least in this country, around medical ethics.

Beneficence means that the dedication is to do what's beneficial for the patient, for the person there—whatever is beneficial to support them and help them. Does it help the person? Is it to benefit the person? Nonmaleficence means do no harm. Occasionally there is a conflict between those two. Sometimes the medical ethics committee is brought in to discuss that, or we have to figure out what to do if there seems to be a conflict. Justice in this context seems to mean that everything is offered fairly to everyone. It's a fair access to the medicines, procedures—everything in the hospital especially is offered equally to everyone, with no distinction between any kind of economic status, any kind of distinction, race, whatever—everyone is treated equally.

That's sometimes a challenge, because sometimes there are limited resources in a hospital, and so how are limited resources distributed in a fair way to everyone? Again, sometimes the ethics people in the hospital have to come in and really consider this carefully and figure out how to do this. This became particularly important during COVID, at times when hospitals reached their, you know, beyond their peak limit, and how do you do—they had a triage kind of situation set up, because they had to figure out how to do this as fairly as they could. But they couldn't do everyone, because it was impossible. So how do you make this decision?

It is a little similar to that Buddhist verse: do no harm—nonmaleficence. The Buddhist teaching is do what's wholesome, which can be considered what's beneficial—do what's skillful, what's useful, helpful. The two things which are not, you know, in that verse, in the same way, are the side of autonomy and justice. I find it—this idea of, you know, one of the challenges around autonomy, especially if we take it outside of the hospital setting, is that granting everyone autonomy itself can be very supportive of a certain kind of selfishness and "whatever I want." So be autonomous and get what I want. I want what I want. There's a lot of selfishness, a lot of self-centeredness. But some of that autonomy and some of that insistence on being able to make choices for oneself is also very healthy and appropriate. How do we distinguish between that and find our way with it? I don't have a good answer in the abstract, but I think that's one of the advantages of embodied mindfulness, or really careful and settled attention, is that we can start feeling very carefully what is beneficial and what is harmful, what promotes stress and tension and undermines our well-being, and what promotes it.

It turns out that selfishness undermines our well-being. If you're really attentive, you can feel that. A healthy sense of autonomy, a healthy sense of self—you can feel and sense the difference in what one feels right. The greater the mindfulness, the more subtle and focused we are in meditation, I think that it's remarkable how the better and greater reference point

we have for finding the difference between these two modes of being. Eventually, in meditation, the sense of autonomy becomes more interesting, because in the end, it's not that we become autonomous, but that I look out—an autonomous person can be my own person in a sense. Rather, it's the awareness that becomes autonomous. It's awareness set free. Sometimes I talk about the Buddhism of the mind set free, the mind liberated through non-clinging. But I like to think that what exactly the mind is is a little complicated. But I have as clear an idea that if we understand it to be awareness, that where I say awareness is becoming autonomous. What's it becoming autonomous from? It's becoming autonomous from ourselves, any kind of baggage of self, any kind of association, beliefs we have about it.

So I give you an example from myself. At some point in my practice, I recognized that I could be aware of things—I can be mindful and be present. But I recognized that mindfulness came along with an attitude, like baggage, a kind of—kind of penetrated or kind of suffused the awareness itself. That was something like, "Whatever I'm doing, whatever I'm aware of, it's the wrong thing. Well, if it's happening to me, it's not the right thing. If it's—if being aware, not aware the right way." So it was kind of subtle, but it was kind of like a policy that mind had made up. As I got quieter and quieter, at some point I could see that I was operating through this filter of that all the time, and it kept my awareness, my mindfulness, a little tense, a little pulled back from the experience. As I started feeling this pulled-backness, this tension in how the awareness is, and the kind of contraction around it that had to do with this kind of view, then I was able to relax that. For a short time, I actually played around with kind of just assuming the opposite—you know, "It's happening to me, it's ok. If I'm aware, I'm doing it just right." That was actually useful for a little while to have that—kind of try the opposite, because it helped me stay free, helped me find a different way. Then at some point, I started to stop doing that, and it was easier for me to have this kind of awareness then be autonomous, independent from this policy, these ideas, this baggage I had about what I needed to do, what was happening to me, my judgments about things. So it became—the awareness started to become simpler and simpler. This idea of awareness becoming simpler, without any baggage, associations, judgments, even a sense of self that came along—the doer of mindfulness—was part of the wonderfulness of this kind of awareness set free. So, you know, to have the awareness be autonomous is a kind of—comes along with this liberation process in Buddhism.

But the fourth medical principle of justice is unfairness—oh, how does that play out in Buddhism? I think that's one of the ones I think our society has maybe the greatest need for—as a society, community, as a community, a society that's fair, that somehow everyone seems

to have fair access to the opportunities that many times only people who are very fortunate, circumstances, have available to them. How does a community offer itself fairly to the world? How do we make it—give access to a wide circle of people so that it feels like we are just open and available? If we turn a community inside out, if we turn ourselves inside out, as I said, in meditation, as we settle, and as today, so awareness is set free, it's also setting the heart free. It's also this deeper sensitivity. As we go down out into the world, and it doesn't make sense to meditate, be settled and peaceful and calm, and become open and sensitive to what's happening, and then leave the meditation and immediately shut down, immediately get caught up in our desires and our business of stuff, and then to have a barrier to really block, to really feel and sense and be and care for this world around us. It doesn't make sense, because it's a way of not caring for ourselves. When we shut down, and we close up, and we get so pre-occupied and caught up in our thoughts, our feelings, our concerns, our business, we lose something about ourselves. This is something also that can be felt if you're mindful, but sometimes we're so distracted, we don't know that we're distracted. But if the mindfulness becomes a second habit, second nature, and you're really sensitive and aware, you feel that as we get caught up in distractions, it actually is a kind of harm, a kind of self-limiting, kind of an undermining of ourselves, of something that we discover in meditation, perhaps, or in other ways, that feels so healthy and so appropriate and so wise to be settled and peaceful and present.

Even though the social world is a complex and difficult world, part of the task of mindfulness practice is to learn how to bring this kind of presence and attention, open-heartedness perhaps, into the world with others as well, and so to turn ourselves inside out, so the part of us that's sensitive—like the hand, like walking around with a closed fist. The most sensitive part of the hand is protected. That's very nice. No one's going to harm my sensitive hand ever again because I'm going to walk around this way. But that doesn't make sense, right? But you want that sensitive part of your hand to be available. You know, if you have a cat, or if you want to touch the shoulder of someone who feels—kind of has a difficulty in their lives, and just come here with you, or hold the hand of someone you care for, like a little—maybe there's a little kid in your life, and so no kid wants to hold your hand—no, sorry, I'm keeping my sensitive part of my hand, you know, safe. But, you know, so you're available for all kinds of things. So the same thing with the heart, with the inner life. If we keep it closed up, then we limit ourselves. But if we turn ourselves inside out, like the hand turns itself, opens up, then we learn how to be stable. We learn how to not contract. We learn how to take care of ourselves from that place. We learn how to recognize and recognize all the subtle policies and attitudes that we have brought with us to being aware, to being attentive.

We realize that there's a lot of reactivity, beliefs, judgments that are sometimes quite subtle that in ordinary life most people don't see because they're so busy with, you know, too busy with doing things. But the advantage of getting quiet and still in meditation is we can start seeing these subtle ways, things, attitudes we bring along that often don't make us safe. This lack of safety that many people feel—some of it's real, the world's an unsafe place—but for many people also the greatest danger for our safety is not other people, but ourselves. So to understand how we bring our safety with us, not insisting that the world become a safe place for us, which is a little bit complicated issue. But sometimes we become less safe if we insist on other people making us safe. But how do we carry our safety with us? How do we discover that? It's a challenging thing, not easy, but it's a big, a powerful thing to discover that. Then it's easier to be open-hearted. It's easier to keep our sensitivity open, and allow ourselves to register the presence of other people, the existence of other people, and let it register in that place within where we care, where there's goodwill, where there's generosity, and not in a way that we're obligated to care, not in a way we're obligated to be generous or have goodwill, because I think that doesn't work so well. What's phenomenal, a kind of miracle, is the degree to which sometimes we can feel that it's just—it's part of our nature to have goodwill. It's part of a natural kind of flow or natural response to activity: to feel warmth, to feel care, to feel goodwill. To stay close to that place where it just seems to flow, it arises, and in a non-obligatory way. One reason to stay close to it is that that's where the freedom is. That's where this autonomy is found, the autonomy of awareness set free, the mind set free. You kind of can't have it both ways. You can't discover this radical liberation, this radical autonomy that mindfulness brings about, and stay closed, and shut out, and be distracted from being sensitive to this world. So how to discover, to do both—you know, that's the art of Buddhist practice.

If we're sensitive, we have this open-heartedness, then I think it's easier to figure out justice, to want justice for each other, to want to be fair in how we use our resources and our activities, and not just live for ourselves, but to live for ourselves and for others. This is one of the central principles I believe that the Buddha taught—that to live our lives for the welfare of ourselves, the welfare of others, the welfare of self and others, and the welfare for the whole world. The Buddha defined a wise person as someone who has those four concerns: concerned for the welfare of themselves, for others, for self and others, and for the whole world. It can seem like a big, heavy thing to be told that, like, "I got to get busy now. It's a lot to do." But again, it's coming from that place of freedom. It's coming from the place of autonomy, of subtleness that we hopefully discover through this practice. So it's not a duty, it's not work. It just seems to be an expression, a natural expression of what's already in there when it's been set free,



when what's here. Certainly that's OK. It was a big surprise to me when, after some years of my practice, in my early years, when there was more integrity in this psychophysical system that I am when I wasn't self-preoccupied. There was more integrity when I was just available, or the system was available to be responsive to the world around me. In that response, it seems to just arise, to surface kind of effortlessly, and then to act on that, to live lively from that.

So what does it mean for us as a community? As a community, and now a much larger community than we were before the pandemic, with all the people online. What does it mean? Not as individuals—we also come together in community. It's kind of special to be here, those of us who are here in person, and it's been special, the sense of community that's formed on YouTube over this time. So what does it mean that that's the—when the Buddha said the wise person thinks about the welfare of self, welfare of others, and the welfare of self and others? The self and others I see to be, I think of as the we, the community that we are. How do we care for this community? How do we live as a community and care for each other? How as a community do we turn ourselves inside out? So our community sensitivity is also out into the wider world, and our caring for this wider world, that we live in a wider community. How does it look for us to have these four principles available for, you know, the foundation of our community—of autonomy, and all the different things it might mean, non-harming, being dedicated to what's beneficial, to welfare for all involved, and justice, fairness? What does that mean in a social way, and for the wider communities that we're part of? What does it mean, like we're here in Redwood City? What does it mean to be part of this Redwood City community, Samita community, California community? What kind of issues come up when we think about fairness or justice as an expression, or a concern, or that we have and carry with us? I don't have good answers for that, but I would like to believe that asking that question is part of this natural expression of this autonomy, this place of subtleness being turned inside out by this practice.

So here we are in person. Here we're still very much evidence of living in pandemic times. All of us are wearing masks, but we've come together in a community in a way that, for some of you, perhaps this is the most number of people you've been together with in this kind of way, maybe for a year and a half, I think. I've been in one group that was maybe a little bigger than this in August, but that was only a couple of months ago, right? In the months before, I hardly had any contact, direct contact with people outside my family. So it's a big deal—here we are coming, and we mark this time. We're coming together in community, and I see as connected community has grown because of this, and you're contributing to that. Just being here, and

you're connected, you're contributing to that—not just for those of you here, but I think it's also a sense that people who are not here are now feeling that something is becoming embodied or something is growing again that has not been happening for many months. So in what way can we be mindful of community and what's happening in community is one of the, you know, one of the, I think, interesting and important questions at this time.

So that's what I have to say. Would any of you like to say anything? We have about six minutes or so, and anything that you'd like to ask or bring up or say? There's two ways you can do it, or three: you can try to speak loud, but then it won't be heard by the people on YouTube. If there's a mic here, we can pass it to you. Or if you wanted to have the minimal contact, the mic that's on the stand back there in your stand, hold—it's mic held by the stand. You just push the button on, and once it's on, it can stay on. So if anybody likes to say anything or ask something, there's some very nice expressions of gratitude and warmth coming from the YouTube community.

I want to say how helpful it is for me to be back here. Over the past year and a half, my discipline when it comes to meditating at home has cratered. My life is good, but my mind, you know, this state of mind isn't as equanimous as I could have been. I seem to need to have this structured setting. Great, Yamin. Community makes a big difference. Just be honest. So I love, Rebecka. Thank you. I'm great to see you and have you back.

So, Harry Richard: Dear Richard, so my experience has actually been somewhat different. I had kind of wandered away from the community because you had moved one direction. I had moved away and a little farther to get here. When I found out that the daily sessions were online, I began my practice again, and it actually has helped me tremendously, and I've really enjoyed being part of the larger Saṅgha. Nevertheless, it is still wonderful to be back in person, and this is very important, and I think I am going to renew my intention to connect more or more often in person. Wonderful. But I thank you very much for creating the larger Saṅgha. Well, I certainly hope that that will continue. Great. Thank you.

Then someone over here I saw—Molly. I just want to say, Gil, that it's been a pretty easy time for me. I think it sounds strange, but Charle and I live in a senior retirement community of about two hundred people, and of course we had, you know, isolation and all that kind of stuff, and now we're able to get together in the dining room. But what I really noticed was how helpful my fifty years of meditation has been—twenty-five with you in this community. It's made a very big difference and helped me to stay pretty equanimous. That being said, there are times when I've lost it, time to time, glancing at my wife or the YouTube. Yes, that's occurred. But, you know, I feel like this has been a learning and growing experience for me.

Thank you. I appreciate your helping. Thank you. Yes, I think everyone would expect some testimonials that fifty years of practice, you know, as a New Year's would do it. Though I—the first five years, I'm thinking, "Well, my life is—things are falling in place." I think that just my mindfulness—and one of my early teachers said that it turns up the volume on your intuition. Nice. I think that was true for me.

Maybe—thank you. When you announced that you were going to be opening the centre—is it closer? Oh, when you announced that you were going to be having sessions, we could sign up once a month or whatever, I felt extremely privileged because I know that there are hundreds, if not thousands of people on the internet that would just give anything to be able to come here and experience this and to live here. I've always felt very welcomed. One of the things you said today struck me—when there have been really difficult circumstances in my life. At one point, before coming here, I felt like I was coming out of my own, and it was a terrible feeling. Then after coming here, the message that you gave to me today was that—I think it was something to the effect that your insides are turned inside out, and you feel comfortable. It's just a wonderful way to be in the world. I want to thank you for all your support, Princess. Thank you. I also feel so lucky to be here and privileged. I also really appreciate your asking the question you did at the end of the talk. It seems to me—maybe you used this phrase yourself—but it's asking how this community can turn inside out. We were at a memorial service yesterday at a Christian church, very active as a Christian church, and the talk that was given was very moving, and the kind of talk that throughout my life would have had me go right out into the streets and march, protest. I had really mixed feelings because I thought how—it was very lovingly given, but how that's dirty stuff when you have that kind of great passion. It's harder for, in a Buddhist perspective, to have the equanimity and yet to act. Sela, I really appreciate your ending with that very hard question. I don't have any answers. Thank you. Great. Thank you.

I find you there. I just want to say thank you for you and to the bigger community, which helped me get through not just last year, but many years. Unfortunately, I lost my father. I lie to prove it. Being in a different continent, I couldn't even go. But I think what kept me was your meditation, and a lot of the teachings. I would go listen to some of the, you know, the talks you had in those, like, grief or those kind of contexts. So I think all I want to say is it's been—thankful to be—even the remote, but I never felt in—I was raised because, you know, I would listen to them all the time, and the meditation every day, I think, kept me going. So once—thank you so much, and I love hearing that. So maybe that's it for one. May one of you want to say something?

Then I was said, yes, I also want to give voice to—there are people who have, during this pandemic, not had this experience, and I will never—it's only the privileged, only the privileged who have had this experience. I remember a gentleman from India being interviewed during the pandemic, and he was asked, was he worried about COVID? This is unforgettable. He said, "You kidding me? I'm worried about my next meal." So only the privileged, I think, can share this kind of sentiment. Yes, in one. So I had to call that—yes, thank you. It punctuates very much, very nicely. How do we live in this world, in community with each other? What does it mean to feel community with everyone? How do we know the whole range of joys and gifts and challenges and sufferings that this community, wide community we live in, has? How do we share with that? How do we connect to it? How do I know it? How do we contribute to the welfare of everyone? A wise person is concerned with the welfare of themselves, welfare of others, the welfare of self and others, and the welfare of the whole world. May we all become wise. So thank you very much.