

## Friday Dharma Talk

**Gil Fronsdal**

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So, good afternoon. And for the Saṅgha online, I regret that I'm so far away from you. Somehow the camera that we have to zoom in is not working. So, when I look at myself here and I'm just like a little ant. But hopefully my voice is... I know I have a low voice, but hopefully the voice picks up for the distance.

Some years ago, a man came to do our chaplaincy program, year-long training, basic introduction to Buddhist chaplaincy. And I probably asked him, like, you know, what brought you here? How did you come here? He had an engineering background, I believe, business background. And he said that he went to volunteer at the local hospital. He wanted to do some volunteer work, and so he went there and to do what they might need him to do.

And they sent him to the ward where they care for premies, premature babies. And they assigned him the job, the very complicated job, of holding the premies for a few hours during his volunteer hours. Because, you know, these little beings that grow in the womb, I imagine that's kind of what they know is, and that's life they have there, is human contact, human warmth, skin against skin. And... beating hearts of the mother and all kinds of things. Voice, they respond to it. At some point you can, the embryo responds to voice.

And so they're out of that before they're ready. And so it turns out that that's really good for the healthy development of a preemie to be held. So that's what he did. He did it for about, I think he did it for about a year. He would go every week and hold some preemie, just hold it. And he said that that changed him. That changed his heart, softened him, opened him.

And that's what set him on the course to do chaplaincy training. And then with that kind of, I don't know if that, what the pathways of the heart are, but he then went to do jail chaplaincy, jail work with inmates. And if we're lucky, and... manage to survive this wonderful environment of our mother's womb and come out. We, some of us then, can come in, come out to a

second womb, the womb of our family and immediate community. And that can, that womb can be healthy and it can be unhealthy.

But it's so important, it's as important for the development of human being to have that human community that provides warmth, contact, meaning, purpose, safety, love, or not. But if those are provided, then there's something really wonderful can grow. It's the second womb that people grow in. And then, I don't know if this works, you know, once you become more or less an adult, like we ever do. The, I, like for me, my third womb, I see it as that important, was my Buddhist communities that I lived with.

And the contact, the modeling, the seeing, the supporting, the helping, the interactions, the conflicts, the tensions that existed, all those were kind of a really rich environment that was kind of like living in a womb, because I lived in, I lived it in a community, I probably lived in a Buddhist community center, monastery, retreat center for 10 years. Or they hardly leaving that environment. So that was a powerful womb for me and it shaped me. And that also was part of my growth, part of my development, and very important part of it. And this place, coming here, maybe living here for a week, it's a one-week womb.

It would be nice, then, in this kind of way, that for one week, maybe we shouldn't call it a one-week retreat. One week, womb. Because there's a lot of care, a lot of love, a lot of safety, a lot of commonality, shared life, shared care for each other with all the works, all the jobs, everyone has a job of some sort or other. And that makes all of us possible to live here, be here together. And then at some point in practice, as the practice goes along, we become our own womb.

We become our own care, care lover. We have the, we learn an attitude, a way of being with ourselves that has kindness in it, or support, or care, or compassion, or support, warmth. And I wasn't looking for that when, I didn't know anything about this when I was just bumbling along. But in retrospect, both the communities I lived in, but also the meditation practice that I did in places like this, was amazing. Without even knowing it, I was just busy suffering.

I had good suffering to do. So why would I notice that? How could I even have noticed that? At the same time, there was something shifting and changing. And partly because I allowed myself to suffer, I'd never really stopped to feel, be with my suffering.

I'd never allowed it to tenderize me. Suffering usually gets a bad rap. Most people wanted not to have it. Certainly I didn't want to have it. But the way that Zen practice was taught to me, we were kind of supposed to just... accept everything.

My understanding of sitting in Zen meditation was unconditional acceptance of the present

moment. And I was, well, okay. So I suffered. But, you know, I wasn't fighting it or struggling with it. I learned to kind of just be with it.

And to my surprise, it tenderized me. Even suffering can be a womb. Even suffering, the way we hold it and the way we receive it and tend it or allow it to touch something really deep inside. So many of our deepest areas of the heart, of deep inside, even what's deeper than the heart, is hopefully being touched in this practice. Hopefully being... cared for, opening and allowing to relax, so that it in return can support you.

The heart, the deep mind, the deep womb-like place inside that we have, can really, has a lot of wisdom, has a tremendous capacity for growth and freedom and wisdom and intelligence. So as we kind of allow ourselves to be felt, feel this life that we live, feel it deeply, allow us to feel the joys and happinesses, the well-being that's possible, and allow us to feel the opposite of it, the suffering that's possible. It's how we experience it, how we allow ourselves to really trust it, trust our experience deeply, that allows some other conditioning, some other... unfolding some other growth to happen. If we hold our suffering the way my friend held those premies, what would our suffering do? Maybe our suffering is just an embryo waiting to be held and something that wants to grow in some way.

There's a famous quote by Ajahn Chah. Maybe it was someone, Adrian, someone said it already, someone said it recently, that he was walking around with some young monk students, and he pointed to a big boulder, and he said, is that boulder heavy? Did Adrian say that? Yeah, okay. Thank you, Adrian. And so, and the student said, yeah, that's heavy.

And I guess Ajahn Chah said, well, no, no, only if you lift it. So to extend that story, is a rock painful? Only if you stub your toe. Is the beautiful garden stone suffering? It's only suffering if you get attached to it.

It's only suffering if you make a story about, wow, if I have that in my home, I'll have the best garden in my block. And I'll get praised, I'll get the Block Party Award for Best Garden. I wonder how I could sneak it out of IRC. No one will kid. I mean, these people are supposed to be non-attached, and you know, and they just want the best for me anyway.

And so maybe in the middle of the night, I'll kind of, you know, take it, and, you know, but then, you know, but how do I do it? And then I start, well, you know, will it fit in the back of my car, and should I go out and measure it? Will I have to measure it in the middle of the night? And so, you know, it's just my mind goes into stories. I have to have it.

And then my whole future depends on my status as the best rock garden in town. And then I say, well, no, everyone's watching me. Ah, this is terrible. What an impressive place. These

Buddhists, they're so mindful.

So the mind makes stories. Is the rock garden, the stone in the garden? Is it suffering? Not by itself. It's suffering if I pick it up with my mind, my attachments make a story out of it, and those stories can be really elaborate and involved, and we can stuck in it.

So there's a very famous chant. It was a chant that was chanted when the Buddha died by the great god Brahmā. Chanted, it's also called the saying of the arahants, kind of the axiom of the arahants. It goes something in Pāli, it goes, *aniccā vata saṅkhārā uppāda-vaya-dhammino, uppajjivitā nirujjhanti, tesam vūpasamo sukho.*

All constructs of the mind are impermanent. They arise and they cease. Those who see this are happy. All constructs of the mind, all stories of the mind, all attachments of the mind, come and they go.

So that what we're learning to see here is how we suffer through these constructs, these activities of the mind that tighten down, get constricted, get resistance, get discouraged, get great shame, guilt, anger, rage, blame. This mind of ours does a lot of things. It's pretty creative, because a lot of part of what the mind is, is a creation factory that constructs. There's a whole construction crew in there that's making up all complicated worlds that we live in, worlds that we project ourselves in. And sometimes the world that we create have been shared by our society and we think it's real.

Some years ago I saw the play by the *Don Quixote* play, the play of the book *Don Quixote*. And it was clear the way the play was presented that Don Quixote appears to be the crazy one living in a fantasy world of being a knight and attacking windmills with his lance and everyone else is normal. By the end of the play, it's clear everyone else is crazy. All the normal people are actually living in a bigger mental construct, imaginary world than Don Quixote. Don Quixote is the one who's kind, honest, supportive.

Yes, he has a little kind of odd idea. But it turns out... that everyone else has other ideas that are living in, other constructs. It just is shared by everyone. So it just seems like this is real or this is the right thing.

So we create all kinds of constructs, including constructs of happiness. One of the clearest positive goals, the two most clearest positive statements in Buddhism for what the goal is, is peace and happiness. Peace and happiness. But what kind of happiness? It's not the happiness of winning a lottery ticket number.

That might look like you're happy, but it's not really the kind of deep, embodied, kind of

happiness, it almost feels like it's a womb for you. It almost feels like this is creating this wonderful conditioning, environment that feels so good to live in. What we mean by happiness is kind of like the word love that has so many different meanings. One interesting way of understanding happiness was there was a monk in Thailand maybe 50 years ago or 60 years ago. And he died 50 or 60 years ago.

And he lived, I think, on the edges of a very famous monastery where a very progressive and wonderful teacher was, Ajahn Buddhadāsa. And he lived in a cave. I don't think he was exactly a hermit, but he lived for decades in this cave. And no one ever visited him in the cave, but then he died. And they went into the cave.

And he died in an old age. And he had written graffiti on the wall. And the part of the graffiti was this very happy monk who's jumping up in the air and kicking his heels, you know, and his arms go out. And he exclaimed, and it's like, you know, cartoon-like, and then there's a caption. And the monk is saying, oh, what joy that there is no true happiness.

Maybe. I don't know the story behind that, but I can imagine he was chasing happiness. And he had all these societal ideas of what it would take to become happy. And then there's the happiness ever after kind of dream. Never be unhappy again.

When I was 20 or something, I had a really ecstatic summer and I told myself I'll never be depressed again. That lasted about a month. And that fall, I was the most depressed I've ever been in my life. And part of the challenge was probably I thought, this is it, this is true happiness. This is how it is.

So there is a well, so when we talked about the cultivation, we use the word stability, and the second one was well-being. I like using that expression well-being because it's a kind of, for me, it's not a higher, it's kind of like a general idea of something that feels good or feels warm, feels tender or caring or wellness. That doesn't have all the baggage around the word happiness and joy. It's just kind of a simple, ordinary kind of word, well-being. And so anyway, that's why I kind of like using that word to refer to what we're cultivating here.

And sometimes there's a much more well-being available than we avail ourselves of. I mean, we have all these good stories to tell ourselves. We're so entertaining. Stories that tell, you know, that are... depressing. They say that one of the leading causes of depression is rumination.

And when we tell ourselves the same thing over and over and over again, and it has a mood, mood music in it, that is angry or depressing or discouraging, and we play the same tune over and over again, it's going to affect us deeply. It's going to really sink in deep and be,

you know, and that's what rumination is. We're saying the same thing over and over again, and we don't even know how deeply it's affecting us. None, but it affects us so deeply, and it shades or kind of colors what we think is true. Because it becomes a feeling we have, the feeling then seems to be how we see the world through the eyes of that feeling, and then it seems like it's true.

I feel really lousy, I feel like a failure. I say it once, it's okay. If I say it a hundred times, I'm beginning to feel kind of like my energy is draining from me. And as I feel kind of lousy, then I see through those lens of lousiness. And you know, so then everything's lousy.

Of course it's lousy. But is the stone in the garden suffering only if you're attached to it? If your breathing in meditation is uncomfortable, is it suffering? Only if you have an attachment around it. Only if you have a story around it.

We're very close to Esalen, retreat center. So, you know, we better breathe well. And then, you know, there's a real, real way to breathe. You know, this is humanistic psychology, the whole human growth potential movement. It taught us a lot of people how to breathe.

I don't know how they, I don't know how it's done, but I'm certainly doing it wrong. Here I'm a failure in California. I shouldn't have come to California so close to Esalen. I've been with them. You know, maybe your mind isn't as crazy as mine, but... But, you know, it's kind of...

These things sneak in, and who knows where these beliefs comes from? Some of the reasons we get attached is for good reason. We cling because we're trying to be safe. We cling because people, society has taught us that that's the way to survive and to make a life for ourselves. So it's not only a personal thing that we cling, that we get attached, that we have these stories that we're stuck in.

You know, to a great degree we live in a sick society. And some of us are the canary in the mine shaft of our society, very sensitive. And then we take it so personally that we suffer because... But some of the suffering we have is societally produced. So it's very helpful not to take it so personally.

It's very helpful not to kind of keep picking at the wound, to make it worse and worse. But to avail ourselves of the well-being that is possible, it is here, to somehow lift yourself out of the stories that you're living in, to see the goodness that's here too. Not to deny how you feel. But to have enough sense of well-being, reassurance, sense of being able to hold this in a caring way, that you're ready to feel and sense and know your suffering, to hold it like the preemie, to be willing to have unconditional acceptance of this difficult human life.

I met someone once many years ago who had met the... Zen master Suzuki Roshi who started at San Francisco Zen Center. So this is like maybe 1963 or 1964, maybe 64, I think, because LSD was on the scene in California. And she was a high school student, pretty young. And so people were getting, you know, take, you know, going on these trips, acid trips.

And... She was from Menlo Park, and Menlo Park is one of the epicenters for the whole thing. Ken Kesey and Grateful Dead were all there in Menlo Park. And so, but they heard that in San Francisco there was a Zen master who knew how to get high without drugs. So they got excited.

So they took, they tracked all the way up to San Francisco and found him in Japan Town at the Japanese temple. And they told him, you know, we've heard that you can, you know how to get high without drugs. And he smiled and said, come, come. And he sat down with them and he proceeded to give the Dharma talk on the *Four Noble Truths*. Suffering.

The cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering and the way to end suffering. And so this was not what they'd come to hear about. But what this woman told me, she said, the way he talked about it, the joy, the delight in which he talked about suffering, that made a difference for me. I thought, wow, this is, you can address, you can meet suffering this way. Is this possible?

And she became a lifelong Zen student from that. Suffering is not bad news. Don't be afraid to suffer. Please, be brave, be kind, be open, be brave. Tap into the well-being that's deep inside, that can hold your suffering as if you're providing the womb-like environment for it to be there.

Some of it might just melt away. Some of it might grow into something different. Maybe all suffering is ready to grow into something beautiful. Who knows? Don't treat suffering as an enemy.

But in this second insight, is to really slow down enough, settle enough, be comfortable enough to just be able to see that any clinging, any attachment, any mental construct that we get caught in is suffering. And as Adrian said, since so beautifully yesterday, that as everything is coming and going, everything's inconstant, in a profound way, if we cling to any of that, well, it hurts. Craving, clinging, compulsion hurts. There's stress in that.

So the Pāli word for suffering is *dukkha*. And *dukkha* turns out to be the very ordinary ancient word that has exactly the same meaning as the English word pain. But the Buddha uses it to refer to emotional pain, certain kind of emotional pain, existential pain, psychological pain, not physical pain, even though sometimes the word *dukkha* is used for physical pain. But it's

the pain that comes from how we relate to our experience, what we contribute. So not all the emotional pain is a problem.

Some emotional pain is part of a healthy human heart, but some emotional pain has this extra twist or angle on it that is grating, is kind of like it's stabbing or debilitating. The Zen master I studied with wanted to translate *dukkha* as anguish. The... The teacher I spent a lot of, Thānissaro Bhikkhu, a monk in Southern California, is a great translator. He translates *dukkha* as stress, because he says suffering is too narrow of a word.

Stress just kind of encompasses all kinds of things. That, and even in very, very deep meditation, when there's no so-called suffering, there's ever so slight stress there. That's really important to be attuned to and see. And in deep meditation, sometimes the subtle stress that's left is the way forward, is where we find our freedom. And so he liked to use the word stress for it.

But one way or the other, what we're looking for, what we're trying to see or understand in *vipassanā*, a deep insight, is how, if everything is inconstant, coming and going, so are our attachments. So are our stories. So are our opinions, our views, our beliefs. If you're very, and it's a very particular way in which these are seen as inconstant, if you can be quiet enough, still enough, really still, and maybe there's some days here on this retreat, some sittings, where you can kind of just kind of feel your way in to a very quiet, stable, still place.

Find the stillest, quietest place you can. And then just hang out there and watch. Until the next... story arises, the next belief arises, the next conceit arises, the next ideas of shame arise, the next feeling of anger arises. So you see that it wasn't there, and now it's there.

It wasn't there, and now it's there. And then you stay watching. Don't do anything about it. And soon enough, you'll see it's not there. Because they rang the bell to end the sitting.

Or you had an itch, and you got preoccupied with the itch, must be cancer. And that's now really preoccupied you, so, you know, whatever, the shame that you had is now like long forgotten because it's cancer. And, you know, and then, but if you're really there, you see an emotion, you see a thought, come, it wasn't there, it comes. And then one way or the other, it's not there. It might be a fleeting moment before you have the same thought again.

But because you saw the gap, you see, oh, this thought is not permanent. But if you don't see the gap, and you have the same thought over and over again, it lends itself to that this is forever. And one of the great delusions is the delusion of permanence, that this is forever. And most of us don't believe anything is forever. But the way that our minds operate, it's as if this moment is forever, this particular suffering, this challenge, it's always going to be

here.

We don't say that to ourselves, but I've seen it in myself. That's kind of the underlying attitude that we have. I saw that in my, me when we went ahead, raising the first kid. And, you know, monastery life was easy. Parenting was a whole other thing.

So we had this high-spirited kid. And there was one day we were in the hallway in that little house, the apartment, and both my wife and I were kind of over this very challenging kid situation. And my wife just looked up at me and she said, we're having one of those days. And that was all that I needed to hear to pop up my delusion of permanence. I was struggling under the weight, of unconscious weight of this is forever.

So to see a thought arise, it might be you believe something. And maybe it's even a good belief, or a true belief. Maybe it's an unfortunate belief, maybe it's still true. You see it arise, and then you see for a moment it's not there. Hey, wait a minute, where did it go?

I better be loyal to that thought and do it again quickly. We can't let a moment go by without, you know, you always want to fill a good emptiness, a good vacuum with, you know. But no, when we do this practice, we learn not to fill it. We learn to see a thought arises, and you see at some point it goes. Where's that belief?

Where's that attachment? Where's that reactivity? Where is it when it's not there? If you see a thought arise about yourself, maybe you have a new identity arises. So, you're sitting meditating, minding your own business, and you come to this very quiet place, and you see the birth of a new thought.

You see it come. I'm a good meditator. And then you see the thought goes away. Who are you when you don't have a thought to answer that question? Who are you in that space before the next thought occurs?

To watch and see that even suffering is inconstant. In one way or the other, it might be inconstant because our attention can't hold its focus on it. You're sitting, you know, just sitting comfortably with your own suffering. And then you smell delicious smells from lunch coming up into the meditation hall. And then you start smelling that, oh, you can't look forward to lunch, you have some hungry.

And you, for a few moments, you've completely forgotten that you were suffering. So, because your attention is not stable. Attention moves naturally between things. That's one reason why you see the inconstancy of suffering, of attachment, of these mental constructs we have. Another reason is because the constructs themselves are only there fleetingly, and then they go.

I think psychologists have measured how long an emotion lasts if you leave it alone. It's kind of outrageous, really short. I forget what it is, like 60 seconds or something, if you leave it alone. But who leaves it alone? Why would you leave it alone?

You're supposed to pick at it and hold on to it and repeat the same story. But in this practice we learn to leave things alone. Just sit in this still place, watch and see. And this is where if you can feel like there's a home or it's nurturing, nourishing, subtle, it's good to be here. It's good to be present in this settled, quiet place, a sense of well-being.

Then it's easier to just be watching stories arise, stories cease. Suffering comes, suffering goes. It comes, it goes, it comes right back. But then it goes, it comes right back. And after a while, you know, what's happening in between?

It's not always. It's repeating itself, but it's not always. And you start feeling that maybe it doesn't make sense to keep holding on to these beliefs, these stories. Maybe it's okay to begin relaxing. And there's a number of ways in which they are the gripping mind, the clinging mind, the attachment mind, the resisting mind, begins to relax.

One is we've learned how to have this unconditional acceptance where we just hold. It's kind of like a friend of yours is holding their hand in a tight, tight fist. They're so angry. And you see there's no talking to them. They're just besides themselves in their fury.

And you're worried they're going to break their hand. So you go with your warm, soft hand and come in and just hold their hand. And you tell your friend, rest in my hand. And anytime a tight fist rests in something, then the field begins to open, begins to relax and uncurl. Can your attention be like that?

What is it in you that you can hold so it begins to soften? That's one way. Another fascinating way that the clinging begins to let up, we stop kind of grabbing, is that when we see that things are coming and going, how fleeting it is, the thought, Kara, is, now that I've mentioned this possibility about how wonderful these garden stones are here, you might have your own thought of how much you want those garden stones at home. And you see the thought arise, I gotta have a garden stone. So of course, if you gotta have it, you better cling for it, go for it.

And it's like, but so you take your hand to grab that thought, that idea, because that's what you cling to, mostly we cling to ideas. So there to grab the idea, but by the time the hand gets there, it's gone. It's outrageous. It turns out in a funny kind of way, clinging is a delusion. It's kind of like grabbing a hologram where you grab it and nothing, or water.

Or it's like painting these stories the mind makes that we live in. It's really like painting with

watercolors on the surface of a running river. It doesn't stay. So there's a certain state of meditation when we have this deep, deep quiet and clarity that we see, in fact, that things are coming and going all the time. And yes, clinging to them as suffering, craving for them as suffering, resisting them, hating them as suffering is stressful.

And after a while, you might realize this clinging thing doesn't work. And rather than melting it in the warmth of your palm, awareness... you kind of just get tired of clinging. This is a drag. I've been doing this for a long time and it doesn't really help.

So seeing it doesn't work. We let go, let go. We leave it alone. Leave the comings and going alone. And it can be one of the great joys of meditation is to just settle back and just watch.

The comings and goings, the changing nature of the river of change, that the present moment always is. The present moment is always a river of change. The present moment is the only place where we can be in our lived experience. The past no longer is. You can remember the past, but you can't live it.

The future has not come. It's just a projection, a dream, a fantasy, a thought, a construct. You can't live it livingly. It's only in the present where it really is the lived experience. And here we live in a river of change.

And to really start seeing that and realizing to cling to any of it is suffering. To hang my hat on it, to want something from it, to want it to be different than it is. To want it to stay, to want it to go faster, to want it to never come back. All these wantings that are quite limiting. And it limits our intelligence and limits our creativity.

And it reduces the amount of space that's in our hearts, in our minds, in our inner life, for wisdom, for love, for goodness. For feeling the depth of who we are. It limits our capacity to nourish and nurture the growth of this preemie that maybe the suffering is. So with, as we cultivate stability, be, well-being, confidence, then at some point we have the trust to just allow things to be, just let's be here, be present now, and watch from this still quiet place, and see the comings and goings.

And you'll see it'll be obvious to you at some point. It'll be revealed to you when you're ready that clinging to anything is suffering. And that there's a certain category of mental constructions, mental fabrications that we make, that it's just suffering. Mental fabrications, mental concoctions, mental story-making of... That is just a drag.

And you'll realize that you have something much better you can do than continue those concoctions, those fabrications. Because you know something about well-being. You know

something about being here, present. With warmth, with care, with love, we all have good hearts. We lose it, we lose touch with it, if we're in our head too much.

May a deep insight into suffering make room for your good heart to keep growing. Growing until you become free of all attachments and all suffering. Thank you.

So if we're here at IRC in person... I put up now a sign-up sheet for practice discussion tomorrow. And there's enough space for about half of you. We hope that's enough. It usually works best, nicest.

It's the people who have easy access to... Well, none of you have easy access to Adrian, so... But at least to me, there may be a way to sign up for people who live farther further away if they want to sign up. Anyway, the sheet is down on the door if you want to sign up for tomorrow. And if it fills up, and I don't know, you can leave us a note and we'll see what's possible.

My schedule till tomorrow is quite full. And Denise also will put up some signups for tomorrow afternoon. And so may your still quiet place be a refuge, a support, a womb with which to... have a deep insight into what we call suffering.