

Buddhist Practice for Building Bridges to Peace and Justice

Gil Fronsdal, Mohsen Mahdawi

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****Gil Fronsdal****

So, thank you all for being here and welcome. This is a meeting that I was been looking forward to doing ever since it was planned. And I had the wonderful good fortune to have the ability to invite Mohsen Madami here to have a conversation about his wonderful work and his wonderful orientation for doing peace work. And he comes from a very, very special background that maybe is almost unimaginable for me, kind of challenges in life that he's had. Growing up in refugee camp on the West Bank, experiencing violence during that time, coming to the United States, becoming a peace worker in the United States and working for Israeli and Palestinian peace, building bridges with Jewish communities. It's remarkable what he's been doing.

And in the process of that, at Columbia University, he started doing Buddhist meditation. And that was a big transformation. And so I've had the good fortune to have a few conversations with Mohsen now. And I believe he has a remarkable message to give and a remarkable heart to share. And I'm delighted to be here with you. And Mohsen, would you have anything you want to say as a greeting to begin?

****Mohsen Mahdawi****

Thank you for this opportunity, Gil. And thank you for this opportunity, my larger Buddhist community from all over the world. I feel a great gratitude and an honor to have this opportunity to be with you. And grateful for your hearts and for your dedication to make our world a better world, to alleviate all suffering over human beings, and to continue to practice this beautiful sacred practice that has transformed my life, which is becoming a Buddhist practitioner.

****Gil Fronsdal****

So maybe to kind of be most current with you, if it's okay, I don't know if it's most current, but you graduated from Columbia University a year ago. And fortunately, you were able to

be at the graduation. And now you're back at Columbia University doing graduate work. Can you say something about what you're doing in graduate school? Why are you doing that and what purpose?

****Mohsen Mahdawi****

What I'm doing right now is studying. I just started my master's degree in international and public affairs, focusing on peacemaking and conflict resolution. And the reason I am doing this is because it feels that this is my purpose and this is my destiny. Coming from the background that I came from, a life that has been torn apart by wars and conflict and occupation, and being impacted by it as a child living in the refugee camp. I continue to hold that inner child with me while I am walking this path.

The reason why I returned to Columbia after all of the levels of injustice that I saw there, and the injustice that I have been facing in the United States related to the detention and the continuous fight in the courts for my rights in America. But this path, it is a path that I am dedicating for the future of the Palestinian and Israeli children to not live a life of horror, of pain, of torture, and of wars. And this is the reason why I returned to Columbia.

****Gil Fronsdal****

Thank you. And there's one of the remarkable representations of the orientation that Mohsen has was in reading about it, learning about him, was to see the manner by which he was detained by ICE. Some of you might not know the story that he went for this citizen interview, became a U.S. citizen, went to the immigration office in Vermont. And something did seem a little off, right? Invited a whole visit. But it was a successful visit, I think. You passed the test. That's great. I took that test. It was a pretty easy test, wasn't it?

****Mohsen Mahdawi****

For somebody who attends an Ivy school. For me?

****Gil Fronsdal****

I was asked, what's the ocean between the United States and Europe? It was kind of ridiculous.

****Mohsen Mahdawi****

It has a range of questions, and I can imagine, and I understand why it feels this way.

****Gil Fronsdal****

But anyway, he passed everything, walked out of the office, and then he was arrested by ICE waiting for him. And he came out of the building to be put in a car, be driven off to detention. And there's a remarkable video of Mohsen smiling and putting up his hands like this, coming out. Wow, how did he manage to do that? Most people would be afraid.

****Mohsen Mahdawi****

Yeah, that specific moment has built up before I get to that point. And I loved seeing your hands that far because I did not have much room. The handcuffs were keeping my hands so close. But the idea that I wanted to communicate to the American people and to people who are watching and who care, that yes, we can face a deep level of injustice. We can face this destiny that is basically I was instead of walking out of my citizenship interview with a citizen and full rights, I am taken handcuffed into a cell that was seven by 12 feet.

And what is the reason for that? The reason is because I built a movement at Columbia University that's asking for human rights for Palestinians and was asking and advocating for ceasing fire. But the emotions behind me not being deterred or scared by the intimidation and by that level of force, masked agents with arms, with guns that they are carrying, and they take me after they make me do the oath. They ask me if I'm willing to take the oath to protect and defend the constitution of this country. And I had a glimmer of hope, even though I expected I'm going to be detained.

And all of a sudden they come inside the office and they handcuff me and they take me into prison. Now, the feelings that are related to this. Before I went to the interview, I was attacked and targeted by certain groups that were supporting the ongoing genocide at that time in Gaza. And they called for my deportation.

And the government, the Trump administration, has said we will deport the students who participated in the student movement. And I was one of the first people who were being targeted. But during that time, I stayed calm and I stayed clear of fear. And part of what helped me, a big part, is the Buddhist practice and the meditation.

And every time the fear would come up in my body, I would just sit, close my eyes, and start breathing in into the tension that usually initiates around my core or my belly button. And the more I breathe into it and I relax it, I am no longer actually motivated or under that level of fear or intimidation. So I stayed calm before the interview. I stayed calm when I was sheltering in a place during that time.

And when I did my interviews with certain journalists, they said, aren't you afraid? I said, no, I'm not afraid. Because I believe that the work that I am doing is a work for humanity and it's

coming out of a place of love. And if I am rooted in that energy of love, and if I have awareness that I am in my body and I can calm my body, there is no fear that can shake me or intimidate me.

****Gil Fronsdal****

Well, then you were released from detention after about two weeks. I guess you were released from the courthouse where you went in front of the judge. The judge didn't seem to have any case to be detained and let you walk out. And you walked out on the steps of the courthouse and people were there to the cameras and the journalists and people were there. And you said something remarkable.

****Mohsen Mahdawi****

What I said, basically, I walked out of the house without being out of the courthouse after spending 16 days in prison. And I actually in prison when I was visited by Senator Peter Welch, and he asked me, how could you be this calm and at peace? And I told him I deeply believe in that justice will prevail and it's inevitable. And I believe that the courts and the people of the United States will stand up for what is right and for justice.

But when I was released from prison after the judge made the order and he acknowledged that this was an attack on the constitution of this country, and he acknowledged that any further detention for me would cause not only harm to my person, but it would cause harm to the general public, to the American people, because it's based on free speech. And he also said that that time reminded him of the McCarthy era and the Red Scar, the Red Scare. So the moment I walked out of the court, I gave a speech.

And in that speech, you can watch it on YouTube. It's about 15 minutes. But part of it, I said that our work, the work that we are doing is a work that's coming from a place of love, not a place of fear. And if we are rooted in love, there is no fear that can intimidate us. And I said to President Trump and his cabinet, I am not afraid of you.

And that line was taken by international media and national media and put on first page that this person who you detained for 16 days, who you tried to intimidate, who you put in prison, is coming out not being deterred.

****Gil Fronsdal****

Your Buddhist practice at Columbia University had a big impact on you. Is that where you learned to love, or was that something that you learned elsewhere?

****Mohsen Mahdawi****

I think it's a combination of things. The Buddhist practice, in fact, it started before Columbia. I may have not shared this with you, but I found meditation and I learned about meditation at a small church in Vermont that is called the Heartland Unitarian Universalist. And who was teaching, who taught me meditation there are members who moved to Heartland, Vermont, hoping that Thích Nhát Hạnh would have a monastery in that town. And the monastery ended up not being built, so they found their way into the Unitarian Universalist.

And what was amazing to me during that time is after being, I just moved to America at the age of 24 when I started learning about meditation. And for the first time in my life, I was able to experience a level of safety. I've never experienced safety before because I lived in a refugee camp under the Israeli occupation.

****Gil Fronsdal****

It's a little bit of a remarkable thing you said just now. Never experienced safety.

****Mohsen Mahdawi****

Correct.

****Gil Fronsdal****

Until you sat down in a Unitarian church to meditate.

****Mohsen Mahdawi****

Until I came to America.

****Gil Fronsdal****

Until you came to America. Then you started feeling safe.

****Mohsen Mahdawi****

That's right. And I never had the opportunity to deal with my trauma and pain. Because as you might know, when we are in a state of mind that is under defense, or in a state of mind that is just trying, we are trying to protect ourselves, we cannot deal with our pain and with our emotions. And for the first time in America, those painful memories from my childhood started surfacing.

And it was very painful and intolerable to a certain level. But what helped me with those very severe emotions was the practice of meditation. And I was fascinated that five to 10 minutes of sitting down and just breathing in and breathing out, mindfulness, mindfulness meditation would call my emotions to this level. And that's when I started having awareness of those feelings that were surfacing and I started dealing with them on the way.

So this is the beginning of my journey to, you know, to Buddhism through meditation. And when I saw this, I was so fascinated to the point that I started learning about Buddhism. And the first exposure to Buddhist texts actually was Jack Kornfield, who you connected me with, which I am very grateful for. And that was the beginning of my journey into Buddhism.

Columbia has a different story. Because when I went to Columbia, I was very triggered. Triggered by the tightness of New York City moving from Vermont and the nature there. Triggered by the sirens in the streets. And triggered by the lack of light that was the situation in the refugee camp. And I felt that I really needed to meditate.

So I said, the best way to meditate is to find a community like the community I had in Vermont. And I started attending meditations with the Buddhist Association at Columbia. Little I knew that after a semester, I would be nominated to become the president of that association.

****Gil Fronsdal****

So I want to go back to this thing about you. It never felt safe growing up until you came to the United States. That's a remarkable thing. Other people have told me similar stories about never having had the experience of safety until some particular time. And so certainly you were shaped by your difficult experiences in the refugee camps and the violence that you experienced there. Maybe you'll tell us a little bit about that.

But what was it about growing up there that taught you about love? What were the positive messages that you got growing up that helped you with that challenge of being afraid?

****Mohsen Mahdawi****

My life when I grew up in the refugee camp has different phases. The first phase is when I was, since the time of birth, to the age of roughly seven. And that's the time where I was, as you might imagine, kids don't know what is beyond their circle. I thought that everyone grew up in the same situation that I grew up in, even though the refugee camp was a very painful reality.

And during that time, from birth to age seven, my mother taught me spirituality. And she was a practicing Sufi. And as you know, Sufism and Buddhism have a lot of overlap. So for the Sufis, God is a God of love, a God of compassion. And this is what brings you closer.

And I was in love with my mother. So whatever she said, I believed her. And that was a great foundation for me. But after that, there was a separation between me and my mother. And my life started going downhill in a very painful and serious way.

The first exposure was when I lost my brother. I was eight years old. He was six years old. And

he passed away. And that reality of seeing my brother dead in front of me. And taking him to the cemetery and burying him on a rainy day and literally shoveling dirt over his body was such a painful experience for me.

And then the second intifada, which I can talk about in details, when I started experiencing trauma, a loss when I saw my best friend getting shot in front of my eyes. And I was a kid, 11, 12 years old.

****Gil Fronsdal****

He was 12?

****Mohsen Mahdawi****

He was 14 years old. And that experience generated more pain and anger inside me. The reaction was pain and anger for the injustice that the Israeli army did. And that story continued because at my birthday, which is September 12, 2001, after September 11, my uncle was killed, also in the hands of the Israeli army.

And instead of celebrating my birthday, I walked in my uncle's funeral. And a series of different things. When I was 12 years old, I witnessed a strike that shattered seven people into pieces. And I went to the location, age 12, a kid, holding a plastic bag in my hand and collecting their body parts in my little hands and peeling their skin off the wall and putting their fingers in the bag to honor their body.

And then when I was 15 years old, I was shot in my leg and lost other family members. And I saw many people suffering there. So I was angry. Where is that love? I shifted away to see the Israelis as oppressors and to love my community, want to protect them. But the feeling was anger and the feeling was a need for revenge.

And that feeling did not start changing until I went to the university in Palestine. And I started seeing different angles and relating. But the love that I also felt was a sanctuary for me. Because every time things get so painful, I would go to that spiritual space. And I would say, this is painful. And I trust that I am not alone.

Later in life I understood through Buddhism that the idea of separation is an illusion. And that is basically something I practiced without knowing what it is.

****Gil Fronsdal****

Wow. So was it a long time to be free of that anger?

****Mohsen Mahdawi****

It took a long time. A very long time in fact. Until I came to America, that's when I started intellectualizing it. Because before, I've never had the chance to really step outside of the picture. Before, I was in survival mood.

And before, I only experienced Israelis and Jews. We didn't know any other Jews except the people who came with their military uniforms and their rifles. The Israeli army that would break into the houses. The Israeli army that killed and shot many people and shot me. The Israeli army that humiliated me on military checkpoints, and that level of fear of subjugation because we lived under apartheid system.

But when I came to America, and it happened kind of in a synchronous way, where I started connecting with people who, for the first time, they had the opportunity to hear my side of the story. And for the first time, I am meeting Jewish and American, Jewish Americans and Israeli, Jewish Israelis, who are sharing a meal with me and sharing a coffee with me. And for me, that was a very different experience than what I experienced in the West Bank.

And I came with this realization while I was also practicing meditation and attending the Unitarian Universalist Church. And they said at one point, the human being is not an enemy. If there is an enemy, it is fear, it is segregation, and it is ignorance. And I came to understand that the enemy, in fact, is the system that uses segregation to separate people from each other, to dehumanize people one side and empower another.

And the system that makes people fear the other, that is the fear, and the trauma that the system capitalizes on and weaponizes and abuses in order to subjugate other people to injustice. And the last part is ignorance. The system itself that brainwashed people and does not share the truth with their people.

And I said, if people get the chance to connect and to share what's in their heart, they will realize this. And they will realize that the issue is the systems that creates injustice. It's not the humans and that is related to the belief of the goodness of the human nature.

****Gil Fronsdal****

When did you know you were going to, when did you decide to dedicate in building peace? That is a big part of the transformation that I have.

****Mohsen Mahdawi****

When I had this realization, I knew that if people, if Israelis and Palestinians have this opportunity, have access to the information, to the truth, to the reality that Palestinians live under. And if Palestinians also get the chance to understand that their trauma is an extension of the

Jewish trauma and what happened also in Europe and how did that affect the Israelis themselves. I knew that there would be a much better reality for them to live together and to live with equality and with justice, including the Palestinians, the refugees who are denied their rights to return to their homelands and to their lands.

And I knew, I learned also about the philosophy of Gandhi and the philosophy of MLK and the philosophy of Nelson Mandela. And this is something I learned before, but I did not get the actual practical understanding until I came to America. And at that moment, I said, this is my path. My path will be the path of peace, the path of nonviolence, and it will be the path that will not only change minds, but also will change hearts.

Because if we have the right set of information, if people have access to the truth, as Gandhi has explained, the truth has its own forest to achieve justice. And this is, as I shared earlier with you, it's part of also the Buddhist practice, which is related to the right speech, which is sharing the truth.

****Gil Fronsdal****

But I think that probably truth by itself is not enough.

****Mohsen Mahdawi****

Correct. You would like me to expand on this? Yes. So the truth by itself is not enough because we see many intelligent people around the world who can see the truth and they cannot actually act on it. And they cannot, like they read it, but they cannot allow it to transform them.

So part of my belief is that with the truth, we must also practice empathy and compassion because without empathy and compassion, we could easily get heated up, we could easily get into a debate, and we could easily shame and guilt somebody who doesn't have that access to the truth. And therefore, we have to allow people to feel that they are, it's an emotional thing. So you get the truth and you get the emotions, the feelings.

The emotions and the feelings is dealt with by compassion and empathy. And the truth is dealt with by sharing it and speaking it, the right speech, the right act.

****Gil Fronsdal****

So my, I've said this plenty of times, in my early years of doing Buddhist practice, I wasn't tracking how it was changing me because I wasn't oriented to. I was oriented towards in a kind of simple way of getting enlightened. But what happened was slowly, slowly, I was getting compassion.

And part of the reason from that movement towards compassion was because I sat like you did, just breathing with the suffering. And I had so much suffering. And there was this magic or this alchemy of sitting and being calm, being present for the suffering. It kind of worked me. It changed me. It softened me. It opened me.

And in the process of that, slowly, slowly, I became, my capacity for compassion grew until it became the organizing principle of my life. But it took years.

****Mohsen Mahdawi****

This is very powerful. And I believe that this practice is a practice that brings a theory of changes from within. Because when we try to empathize with others and we don't understand how to empathize with ourselves, I don't think it is actually possible. We have to create that level of compassion and empathy with the self in order to be able to practice it with others. We have to feel it and to feel its impact.

And usually, when we process our suffering, the emotions, the difficult, painful emotions that we deal with, that suffering is transformed. And I listened to Thích Nhát Hạnh, where he shares that difficult, painful emotions, in order to transform them into positive emotions, the magic is compassion. So we do it internally.

And if we are in a state of what I call love, which is a state of peace. So, when we meditate and we are relaxed, that is a form of peace, inner peace. And I understand that our emotions come from a range of feelings, positive feelings and negative feelings. Positive feelings are related to the core emotion, which is love, and negative feelings are related to the core emotion, which is fear.

And the idea if we have fear in our body, our body would be tense and not at a state of peace. And when we let go of fear, our body is in a state of love. And this is a process of compassion and empathy and breathing in love breathing out love. And the moment we are in that state, we're able to bring it about to other people.

So when people say, I want to see peace in the world, I say peace is created from within. I start with myself. I affect my friends and my neighbors. We affect our city, our country, and our earth, our humanity.

****Gil Fronsdal****

So there are some people now, because they really feel amazingly alarmed and worried. What's activated by the violence in this world, the divisions, the hostility and hate, and this goes on and on, the challenges we're facing these days. And there's sometimes a rush to

action. What's it like to try to create peace without having cultivated this empathy?

****Mohsen Mahdawi****

There is, generally speaking, fear from many people who see and feel the injustice. They are not willing or they are hesitant to step into empathizing with the oppressor. And the reason for that comes from three misperceptions.

The first one that if you empathize, you justify. This is not true. We can see a mother who watches her child causing serious harm. She empathizes with the child, but still tells the child in a loving way, this is wrong, you should apologize, or you should do something to fix this mistake. So the first misperception is empathy means justification.

The second one is related to inaction. So the idea if we empathize, we move it from an emotion of difficulties and pain, negative emotions, into positive emotions. And if we are in this positive emotions, we don't have the charge to bring about change. And this is also a misperception. Because when we are acting from a place of harm or a place of fear, we are not actually creating and imagining the world that we would want to create, which is a loving world. You can't create a loving world from a place of fear.

But when we are coming from a place of love, we are able to imagine, envision, and even treat injustice in a very compassionate way. And the third one that is related to the lack of empathy is the idea of separation. And that is related to dehumanization. So if somebody is causing me harm, they are not like me. And that harm that is being caused by this person does not something I can't relate to.

So I separate myself and I say I am better than them. They are bad. And this is a matter of dehumanization. And because empathy, the moment you empathize, you can't empathize with somebody who you are separated from. You understand the root causes of an issue, and you would have to break that separation between the oppressed and the oppressor to a certain level while still holding the scale of justice.

****Gil Fronsdal****

What you're asking is hard. I agree with you, but it's hard for people to do this.

****Mohsen Mahdawi****

I agree with you. It is hard because people don't have the tool to be able to practice because the practice is not theoretical alone. The practice is something you sit in and you feel in your body. And it is difficult also because we are breaking a lot of, we have to get rid of a lot of the thoughts that has been imposed on us and passed to us.

We see the forms in mass media, dehumanizing nations and peoples and the groups and preventing any level of empathy. We see the educational system on a smaller level, not able to teach kids from very young age how to empathize. But the practice is very simple.

And also we see a very strong level of violence that's being applied mainly by states that also make people very pessimistic and lose hope that a change from a loving, empathetic practice, is very difficult, but I can see it. I can feel it. And I know that we will be able to do that because for the first time in our life, we are interconnected.

We've never been in the history of our humanity interconnected to this level. We get technology. If somebody is hurt in Palestine or in Burma or anywhere on earth, we can see it, we can feel it, and we can empathize with it. But also this brings an opportunity that our understanding, the spiritual understanding that we have to process, and the psychological understanding how to heal trauma is more possible than any time before.

And this interconnectedness among people can bring give the light of hope, which I believe it is very possible, and we will see it in our lifetime.

****Gil Fronsdal****

Well, that is one of the things that, in ways you've inspired me, is the tremendous, not just, I wouldn't say you just have hope, you have confidence that there can be a change.

****Mohsen Mahdawi****

It is not just, first of all, I am honored to hear that you feel inspired by my belief. But this is not coming just from a theoretical practice. I've seen it in my own eyes. I've been with many people who were on the other side, whether Israelis, whether they are Jews, whether they are Palestinians, black and white republicans and democrats and I've seen the magic when people are able just to have a very little small practice and feel the compassion and the empathy and how things shift. It's not sudden. It takes time. I've seen people taking a year or two to shift, but the moment they see it, the power that is generated from those people, the commitment that you feel is very powerful.

And I see it on an international level. What I saw and what we saw with the genocide in Gaza and the protests that took place all over the world, that is empathy. So people are able to empathize with the Palestinian to feel their pain when they see children torn apart, when they see houses and hospitals and churches and mosques being destroyed, when they see the murder of civilians, 70,000 plus people.

And when they see this genocide unfolding, it moved the whole world. And why did it move

the whole world? People don't ask that. It's not political. It's spiritual. Because we have the Buddha nature. And the Buddha nature has the nature to empathize. We are encoded to empathize.

If we see somebody being hurt, we can feel with them. We want that harm to stop. And I think the world is conditioned right now because people see the injustice. The trick is they are able to empathize with one side, but not with the other. And how to help them to transform that empathy that they feel with one side to the other, because the change that has to be done is a change of hearts and minds together.

****Gil Fronsdal****

So you've been working on, some people call it building bridges.

****Mohsen Mahdawi****

I used to bring my hammer and my soul with me.

****Gil Fronsdal****

Building bridges between people. And so you described a little bit now all these different people. Can you talk about some of the work you've been doing so far in creating bridges and part of that is great coalitions?

****Mohsen Mahdawi****

So I've been working on building bridges since 11 years ago. What escalated my work and what elevated the energy around it is the deep level of loss that we witnessed after October 7th. And one thing that I have to be very clear with, I empathize with both Palestinians and Israelis. And that empathy is related to the human value and the human feeling.

And I can explain how and why and how do I understand that empathy towards the Israelis who are seen as oppressors. And yes, the Israeli system and the government and what they've done to their people, they are in an oppressive position. But I came to understand that also to empathize with them because as I explained earlier, the system has conditioned them and different circumstances to think this way and there is a way to transform that beyond.

So for 10 years, I've been speaking with different communities that are very different than me. I've been to synagogues, to churches, to community centers, to Buddhist circles, to many different spaces, to activist spaces. And I started at Columbia University building a larger coalition later, because it felt to me that the system that is fueling the harm, for example, in America, the American government, not the American people, is what fueled and supported

the harm of the Palestinian people and the oppression now that's happening in Venezuela and in other places.

And I'm saying that from a place of love. I see it. I see the injustice, and they say it from a place of love because I feel the love. I feel love to this country that gave me a level of safety, to a level and the path to discover this practice of Buddhism, to be connected with many communities. And I want this country to live in an equitable and just way.

So back to the coalition building at Columbia University, there was a reaction to what was happening in Gaza and I envisioned a coalition and co-founded it with many other people. And it was the largest coalition in the history of Columbia University that sparked a movement across the country and across the world on university campuses. And they saw the impact of that.

Universities play a major role in sustaining the consciousness and the moral clarity of a country. We see that also through the history. You were part of the activism anti-Vietnam War, and similarly with Black Lives Matter, similarly with the civil rights, similarly with the MeToo movement. And the issue is those movements, they are built in certain ways and they take a level of sophistication to build this coalition.

So now, after we established and built that coalition at Columbia University, it has served by creating awareness about the Palestinian issue and bringing it to the table and actually dropping the veil on many things that were not clear. Now we are in a different phase because the issue is not only for me about Palestine. The issue is about the future of our humanity.

What happens between Palestinians and Israelis will serve as a model and exemplar to the rest of the world. One way or the other. That's right. That's exactly right. And that's why I feel in my heart, and I believe that this is very important, and this country plays the major role to make that change.

And I believe in this country nonviolence and movement building will bring the change by just acting from a place of love and empathy, committed to nonviolence and sharing the truth. So the coalition building, you build coalitions on different campuses and the moment they are aligned and coordinated with each other, that would create a movement.

****Gil Fronsdal****

So you were creating coalitions on Columbia University before you were detained. Correct. You're back at Columbia. Are you continuing that work now?

****Mohsen Mahdawi****

Yes. In fact, the first week after I was released, I was advised to not participate and just sit back. And I said, no, this whole purpose of why the government attacked me is to make an example of me, to shut me down, to prevent me from continuing to do a very important work, a peaceful work, a work for humanity, a work that's aligned with the constitution of this country, a work that's aligned with international law and human rights, a work for the future of our humanity.

I said, I'm not doing anything wrong. And I'm going to continue because if I stop, I'm giving them what they want. And I continued to build. And now the work that we are doing, we are building a movement for humanity to restore human rights, to reform international law that has applied double standards and get us to this misery where we see wars across the world.

And to be able to build unity among people based on love and understanding that what we have in common is much larger than what divides us.

****Gil Fronsdal****

But you're getting a master's in foreign policy and you're talking to them about love? Does that go over well?

****Mohsen Mahdawi****

Well, there is a lot of work that needs to be done there.

****Gil Fronsdal****

At the master's level?

****Mohsen Mahdawi****

A hundred percent. I decided to engage in the program itself. It's called International Security and Diplomacy. And funny enough, that the foundation for the international security and diplomacy is related to game theory and to starting wars and to proposing different solutions related to wars and related to literally you can transform it into intimidation when you coerce, coercion, different means of coercion.

And very little focus in that foundation on negotiation. Because in negotiation, you have to learn how to empathize and to understand the interests and the needs of the other. But this is helping me to understand how is the typical way in government structures and institutional structures, how people do think about conflict resolution. And yes, when I speak with my cohort about ways of empathy, of framing, I see also the aha moments, which is very interesting.

****Gil Fronsdal****

Hopefully you'll change the professors too.

****Mohsen Mahdawi****

The interesting thing is every professor that I have studied under last semester, including a professor who served in the CIA and another professor who has connections still worked at the Pentagon and to different military points, everyone says to me, we appreciate what you're doing. You're doing an important work. And this is where I see the acknowledgement and the change.

****Gil Fronsdal****

I can imagine that for someone like you, who's so thoughtful, I think you prepare your plan, you have a beautiful vision. That I can imagine that in taking your classes, your classes are all serving you. You're using them for your building the skills and the understanding you need to do the piece of work that you're building. Is that right?

****Mohsen Mahdawi****

Yes. There is a challenging balance because there is, I have to always think of priorities. The priority between what needs to be done right now and the priority that I see is the movement building because we have very little time between the gigantic industries that are controlling AI and the military industries, the weapon military industry and the government that is not abiding by democracy and by the constitution.

I see a sand clock that requires from me to prioritize that. And at the same time, I am taking classes, and this is exactly what I say. Every time I feel frustration because I need to put more work into working with people and into building, I say to myself, let's reframe it. How is this serving my purpose? And my purpose is related to peacemaking and conflict resolution. And it's not going to only come from the school, but it comes also from the practice.

****Gil Fronsdal****

So your primary work right now, in terms of peace building, is to try to create empathy, connections, understanding among groups of people in the United States?

****Mohsen Mahdawi****

My greater goal is alleviating the suffering of the people. This is liberation everywhere, everywhere. And my peace, my model that I see myself effective in because I just, it happened that I was reincarnated in this body in a refugee camp taking this path coming here. I see

my model and my prototype is related to the project of the Palestinians and the Israelis, and is related also to helping to create the largest movement for humanity in the history of our humanity.

****Gil Fronsdal****

Organized initially around the Palestinian-Israeli?

****Mohsen Mahdawi****

The Palestinian-Israeli for me is a model. And I don't think it will be resolved without creating a much larger movement. Peaceful, nonviolent movement, loving movement, teaching people how to build coalitions, how to resolve internal conflict, and stay centered in the energy of love and compassion and empathy.

****Gil Fronsdal****

It's a big project. And do you have a lot of people helping you now?

****Mohsen Mahdawi****

It is indeed a big project. And more and more people are offering help, coming to help. And we have different teams that are building this. But also it is what's in people's hearts. People want to see justice. People want to see equality worldwide.

And the issue is, because many people are under that instinct of intimidation, or reaction to the harm, they're unable to envision, to see, to imagine what the future could look like and how to get there. And this is an old tactic that has been used by many different systems. And the idea again it comes to the basic principle when you let go of fear the truth will appear so simple and clear.

****Gil Fronsdal****

So it's quite inspiring to have so much come out of your heart and how you're gathering a lot of people because you need the whole world to be with you. And it would seem like a little bit of a hubris to think that you can do what you're doing. But I don't get the hubris. I don't see that in you. But I do see a lot of wonderful confidence.

****Mohsen Mahdawi****

The confidence comes from seeing smaller models working out and comes from my deep belief that the human nature is good nature and from the reality that we are time in history, that we are interconnected to share information, to share strategies, to share knowledge and to unite.

****Gil Fronsdal****

And you're motivated.

****Mohsen Mahdawi****

I feel alive when I sit in meditation and sometimes I meditate and I meditate on imagining what the future could look like. I feel alive and it feels true in my heart. And I see the influence when I connect with people who feel a level of despair and hopelessness. And they say, how could you feel this way?

And the moment we start talking and communicating, I see and feel the shift. And I believe that the Buddhist community, to be honest with you, the Buddhist community has helped me to have this energy and this clarity. And I believe that the Buddhist community is one of the very few communities that has the power to help people to stay rooted, to transform the negative emotions, and to come from a place of love and empathy.

And I have a sense of soreness and sadness in my heart that I have not seen the Buddhist, a lot of respectful Buddhist master teachers and monks and nuns have been distanced and not engaged with this world. If the Buddhist message is alleviating suffering, and if we can teach people how to alleviate suffering by the mere simple practice, at the time that we need it the most, because we are aware of it, what are we doing?

And this is a call to every Buddhist practice, the practitioner, and to every Buddhist teacher. I am calling on you and I'm calling on you because this is the time that we need you the most to get engaged with issues of injustice, to help people to practice empathy because we need it the most and many people are losing hope and I can't do it alone. We can't do it alone. We need all of us to be part of this serious transformation.

Our humanity is crying out and we are on the verge. If we don't act and act soon, I don't want to say where we might be going but we see it, we feel it.

****Gil Fronsdal****

So to me what you said is true and profound and wish of mine as well. But I can't help but to hear this wonderful request or prayer that people step forward now to engage in all this in the world of injustice and bring justice and love. And I could hear your heartfelt request for that, but I can't help hear it without having heard this huge foundation under it of your love.

And it's a message to not forget the love. And yes, I hear for you. Yes, it's a request or a prayer that we step forward, and this is the important time to do it. But I hear the totality of what

you're saying is do it with love. Do it with empathy. And it's too easy to forget the love.

****Mohsen Mahdawi****

And this is the reason why also communities fall apart, movements and coalitions fall apart. When the energy is anger, when the energy is hate, when the energy is resentment, even if it might be directed, it would be directed at somebody who is causing injustice. Eventually it backfires internally and the coalition or the unity or the organization or the group would start falling apart. And this is the only way that we can move forward.

****Gil Fronsdal****

So Mohsen, thank you for this wonderful conversation. And I'm very aware we have 400 people here listening. And I've had the privilege of asking you questions and very meaningful answers. Those questions were for myself too. Anything you'd like to say directly to the people who have heard this now for the last hour or so?

****Mohsen Mahdawi****

I'm grateful for your time and energy to hear part of my story and to hear about the journey and about the work that we are doing and for a little child from Palestine who did not think that he would be alive after the age of 18, who is now 35 years old. My inner child is still with me and feels seen. I'm very grateful for you.

I would share with you three important messages. The first one is acting and coming to connect with the world from a place of love. When we have tension, it's okay to take space and to process it and to transform it into positive energy and then coming to the world in a loving way because your way will show many other people how to act from a place of love.

The second one is we have to stay positive. Because if we are unable to stay positive, we can come into despair and to not be able to take action. And that is a dark energy in terms of allowing the forces that are creating harm to continue to create harm because we don't see a path forward. And during every crisis, during every time of darkness, and this is what we have learned, there is always an opportunity and possibility to see that positive change and that opportunity.

And it is on us to always think what is positive in this time of a crisis and how can we redefine the boundaries in order to create a positive impact. And the third part is raise your voice in a loving way and share the truth because your voice matters and it will encourage many other people who are afraid to share their voice in order to be able to stand up for our humanity.

****Gil Fronsdal****

Thank you very, very much. And Mohsen is someone that I'm very inspired, very eager to support his work, what he's about. And some of you have already made donations for signing up for this program. If you'd like to continue to offer more, or those of you who haven't, you can go to Sati Center.

You should have gotten an email, and you'll get another email. And that email, you can make a donation that way. And that's going to support his peacemaking work. He has an initiative that's called Peacemaking Initiatives for Coalition Building.

But just stay informed over time with what Mohsen is doing. I think that it's creative, it's powerful, it's meaningful. And his track record so far of bringing people together and doing coalitions is fantastic. And so he has every possibility of continuing to succeed in all kinds of ways. And it's certainly someone to support to continue doing this work.

And so here at Sati Center, this is to have Mohsen come here. It follows the conversation that we had a few months ago with the Israeli and the Palestinian Dharma teacher who had a dialogue and talked for a while. And this is going to be an ongoing part of a speaker series we have that we're calling *Peace Chaplaincy Speaker Series*.

And in February, we're going to have a conversation with Michael Nagler, who I've been dancing around the edges of for many decades. And he was a student in UC Berkeley during the free speech movement times and kind of rode the whole wave that came out of Berkeley at that time, including as a professor at UC Berkeley, curating the peace studies program over there. A fascinating man, also a Dharma practitioner of some depth.

And so there's more of these things that Sati Center is going to try to be doing, including creating a Buddhist peace and conflict chaplaincy training program to train people to do the kind of work that Mohsen wants to see happen in the world. And that includes a deep connection to our emotional life, to our capacity for love and empathy and care and truth. And this is the way forward.

I love his idea to have a vision of the future. Because with a positive vision, then we can live that vision today. So I want to thank you very, very much for so many things. For having this conversation, to be able to share this with this wide IMC community and people connected to us this way. And for your amazing warmth and generosity and wonderful empathy and human connection. I just love being with you and connecting with you. And I look forward to more.

Mohsen Mahdawi

I'm very grateful for you, Gil. I'm grateful for your teaching because it has been an inspiration

to me as well. I'm grateful for this beautiful community that you helped to come together. I'm grateful for you, everyone who has chosen to listen, to open your heart, and to also give your money to this cause. I'm very grateful.

And I have one last request before we close. If we can close with the loving kindness prayer.

****Gil Fronsdal****

Yes.

****Mohsen Mahdawi****

So wherever you are if you can just sit in a relaxing position and just pay attention to your breath and breathe in love and breathe out love. Breathe in love and breathe out love and try to feel it in your body. Breathe in love, and breathe out love.

And now, if you can join me with the prayer, and we will start from a prayer for ourselves. May we be well. May we be truly happy. May we be released from all kinds of suffering.

And now we can expand it to those who are joining us, connected with us during this conversation. May we be well. May we be truly happy. May we be relieved from all kind of suffering.

And if we can expand it to our loving ones, family and friends. May we be well. May we be truly happy. May we be relieved from all kind of suffering.

And if we can expand it to our neighbors and country. May we be well. May we be truly happy. May we be relieved from all kind of suffering.

And now we can expand it to the whole world, including those who we feel hurt by. May we be well. May we be truly happy. May we be relieved from all kind of suffering.

And now we expand it to all sentient beings. May we be well. May we be truly happy. And may we be relieved from all kinds of suffering. And whenever you're ready, you can just come back to the screen.

****Gil Fronsdal****

Thank you all for being here and being part of this. And your attention means a lot. And it's encouraging to have so many people come to hear this kind of message. And may this message of love and empathy and truth be carried with you in your heart out into the world. Thank you all for being here. Thank you.