

## Four Ways of Unity

**Gil Fronsdal**

**February 22, 2026**

**Keywords:** dhamma, pīya, saṅgha, right speech, generosity, nonviolence, San Quentin, IMC, equality, ecosystem

---

So as a prelude to the talk, when I sat down to meditate now, I had what arose for me was an attitude or a sense of wonder that sometimes happens to me when I sit to meditate. And that is when I was, you know, I've gone to amazing natural places in the world. I've been to the edge, I've been to the Grand Canyon, the edge of the Grand Canyon, I've been to the Sierra's with amazing views of mountains and been at coastal scenes with amazing views of the ocean or just kind of an awe-inspiring kind of experience of nature all around. Sometimes when I sit down to meditate, I have the same sense looking inward to myself, that here too, this is a natural wonder that I get to participate in. That somehow in my capacity to feel, to know, to mentally perceive from the inside, the whole experience of being alive, it's kind of a natural wonder. It's a nature preserve that you're walking around in.

It's amazing the complexity of this and the wholeness, this thing that we get to walk around in, which... and to be, and both physically, mentally, heartfully, you know, it's not, you know, it's a byproduct of millions of years, what millions, you know, almost a billion years of evolution that slowly this amazing natural thing. And we share so much of what we experience in our body with other mammals and things. And so I sit there kind of in awe, the wonder at the wholeness of it. And so to sit in nature. And nature by itself is not, doesn't kind of divide itself up in the way that humans are capable of dividing up nature, the world themselves.

You know, we have this principle of a local ecosystem, which everything works together. Everything kind of has a role in a place that is in balance of a certain kind. And then we build a freeway through it, or we have property lines and people build walls. And suddenly the animals can't move around as easily, or if they do, we decide that they're wrong and they shouldn't be there. I read a wonderful article some years ago of a farmer who's, there was a lack of water, and water was an issue, he was farming. But there was a river that ran through.

And many years ago, all the beavers had been killed. So he reintroduced the beavers. And sure enough, the beavers started building dams. And with the dams, the water started to flood a little bit. And with the flooding, they started to grow trees. And we're in a riparian zone.

And pretty soon, the local area had plenty of water. There was more rain, there was more everything. He restored what had been destroyed by the ways that humans kind of get in there and don't allow the natural ecosystem to operate. So same thing is in ourselves. It's very rare that many of us, in our kind of modern way of living, allow our own inner natural ecosystem to operate as a whole. We prioritize certain parts.

We push away certain parts. We emphasize certain capacities and abilities and other capacities and abilities atrophy. And so the way that we were evolved to be a whole with all these different capacities somehow operating together and working together, don't quite, are not quite there. The same thing happens in society. Societies, families, communities can be whole. And when they work together as a whole, then things work better.

If people are generous in supporting the whole of a community, when the community is divided, and there's the inside and the outsiders, there's the us versus them, then as divisions start forming, and the flow, the natural flow of the ecosystem begins to be undermined. And as it begins to undermine, it tends to create more divisions, more hostility. And recently, there was some interview with the one of the leading researchers, proponents, or academic students of nonviolence, named Michael Nagler. He was at UC Berkeley for many years. And he talked about how authoritarian regimes, governments that were overthrown through non-violent means tended to become democracies. The authoritarian... dictatorships that were overthrown through violence tended to produce more of the same kind of government, less democracy.

So there's a way in which when we divide violently and cut people off, and that it tends to produce more of its aim. And then there's another way that restores the whole. And so this social whole, the community whole can be done. One of the stories that really impressed me a long time ago when I was in Japan is that back in the 5th, 6th century in Japan, the valley that Kyoto is in was small, but there was this idea that evil spirits would come down from the northeast and attack Kyoto, and they had to protect themselves from these evil spirits or something. And so they built a monastery up there, Buddhist monastery, temple, to do chants and do practices in order to protect against these evil spirits that would come down.

And that became more and more supported, became richer and richer and bigger and bigger.

And at some point, for I don't know all the reasons, but it became a huge force that included having monastic soldiers. They had their own army. And then it happened. Evil came down from the northeast and attacked Kyoto. It was the monastery itself.

The very thing that was put there to protect Kyoto. And so there's certain kind of ways in which we try to protect ourselves, take care of ourselves, certain things we emphasize, certain beliefs we have, that actually makes things worse, even though we think we're protecting ourselves. But we're protecting ourselves by continuing to be divisive. So in Buddhism, the Buddha, one of the very important things teachings of the Buddha, both in terms of right speech, in terms of what is the kind of skillful way, wholesome way of living and acting in the world, is to avoid speech that is divisive. But rather, and the worst thing you can do is speech which divides the people who are currently unified. But the beneficial speech is a speech that unifies, that makes whole... And the best thing you can do is to unify the divided.

This is a very high principle in Buddhism. And so this idea of unifying a community, unifying people, unifying ourselves, meditation practice is how we unify ourselves, become whole. We no longer live divided within ourselves. We don't have the self-critic that's so mean sometimes to ourselves, or we don't have the fear that keeps us from really opening up and relaxing and be all of ourselves. And how we speak and how we live in the world can either contribute to more divisiveness or more of this unification. So there is a teaching that goes back to the earliest texts that I like to translate as... four ways, the four aspects or four grounds of unifying people.

Literally, it's bringing together, gathering together, holding together people. And so these four are giving. Giving. affectionate speech. You're allowed to translate this word, *pīya*, as loving speech. And then there's beneficial action, acts that benefit.

And the fourth one is equality, to treat people equally. So these are the four ways to unify people, or four ways to gather people together in a harmonious whole, to heal the divisions we have. So giving, probably there's no other virtue in Buddhism that's held up in greater value than giving, generosity. And over and over and over again, you see the text, you see the Buddha, you see the tradition emphasizing the value of giving, generosity. For the individual who practices generosity, the idea is that it too helps us become whole. Because when generosity is done well and wisely for the right reasons, it is a kind of releasing, loosening, opening up any movement towards being possessive and holding on to mine and I can't share it with other people, limits us.

It actually possessive, being possessive about things and even people harms a person who's possessive because it's like putting a freeway through the natural world or tightening up or

limiting, putting ourselves into a fortress. And so this movement of releasing here, you can have this. And it can bring a lot of joy. I don't know if statistically it's true, but many people have had the experience of going to a relatively or very poor place in the world and amazed by how generous people are compared to places where people are wealthy and how not generous they are. And maybe when you don't have much money, or much goods, or much at all, that it's more obvious the value of giving away. There's more the goodness, the immediacy of human connectivity and how it is to live with people and how we relate to people.

It's more obvious that actually it brings a joy and a delight and a sense of rightness and wholeness. When we share, rather than we try to hold on and say, yeah, I'm not going to share at all. And so one way to gather people together, unify people, is to practice generosity. It's not an uncommon advice that Buddhist teachers will give, that if there is social disharmony, like, you know, there's difficulties with your in-laws maybe, or some relative, or a neighbor, give them a gift. Give them a small gift, give them just a token gift. You know, it's a little bit hard for, you know, if you give someone a gift for someone to hold their anger, their hostility, it's something, it begins to kind of soften it.

And maybe it takes years to soften some people. But even if it takes 10 years, it's better not doing it at all. And living with hostility. And so to take the initiative to give. Many years ago, when I was young in college, I read a study, some kind of, I don't know, journal, sociology journal, or something, anthropology journal, about a group of people in the Philippines who were living somewhat isolated from modern world somewhere in the mountains, and they had a culture which emphasized dreams. And so at breakfast, families would get up and they'd tell each other their dreams.

That was just part of what was done. But they had the custom that if someone had a bad dream that involved someone else in the village, in the town, the next morning they'd go and give them a gift. And who knows why someone's, you know, in our dream and, you know, bad dream, but it might have nothing to do with them. But still, the idea that you would go give a gift, you would repair, you would make an effort to somehow heal whatever that dream may be represented or maybe even what done to yourself. So the idea of giving is healing. Giving is unifying.

Giving connects people together in warm-hearted ways, that retreating into our fortress, retreating into our, you know, walled area and not sharing what we have, not giving anything. It's all mine. It's me. I worked hard at this. This is mine. I deserve it.

And other people, you have to take care of yourself. There's some... There's some value to that kind of idea. I don't want to dismiss it completely offhand, but what it does is perpetu-

ates the divisions also. It doesn't do a lot to unify, bring people together. And so how can we practice more generosity in our world, in our societies?

It's a wonderful question. And even more important part of that is how can we practice generosity in the world around us, to others, to our society, to... to around the world where people are starving in terrible situations. How can we do it so it supports us as individuals to become unified, to become whole, to become our own natural inner world actually flourishes by doing it? Because how we are internally and how we treat the world externally is completely connected. You can't separate the two. And so if people who are divided in themselves, they tend then to be divided in the relationship to the world around them.

At their local state, famous state prison called San Quentin, they've produced a lot of good there, believe it or not. And one of the great things that comes out of San Quentin is this slogan. that came out of a training where lifers, people who had done very serious crimes, were trying to be accountable for their crime, look into their crime, look into the childhood sources of trauma they had that set the situation for them to do their crime. Very intense work. And out of that work came the saying, hurt people hurt. Healed, people heal.

That's phenomenal. Hurt, people hurt. Healed, people heal. So this inner and outer, how we treat others, has a lot to do with how we have learned to heal ourselves or become whole in ourselves. If we're whole, then we relate to the world as a whole. We relate to everyone as our kin.

Of course we want to care for others. So... So I think it's really marvelous, this is how the inner and outer can't really be separated. The ecosystem includes the inner and the outer together. So giving. The second one is loving speech, affectionate speech. And the ancient commentary about this refers to it as kind of being sprinkled with ambrosia, sprinkled with blessing water.

sprinkled with something that's really kind of, you know, I guess, healing or delightful or beneficial. So to speak in ways that are kind, to speak in ways that are affectionate, that feel good, that are an ambrosia for the world, that are words that, like sprinkling people with blessing water. How can we, how do we speak? And we have examples in this world now of amazingly harshness. violent, disrespectful speech. I mean, my impression, you know, since I'm so old now, I've been around for so long.

So maybe it's always been this way, but I get the sense that when people can communicate kind of secretly without anybody knowing, and when they have a bullhorn and all that, people behave differently when there's, you know, you know, in contact with each other and

one-on-one and in communities. And so the amount of hate speech that goes on online, the terrible things people comment about other people's behavior is just astounding. The, it just kind of, to me, it's kind of unbelievable that anybody would take the time to spew these, you know, one sentence hate speech towards what someone has done somewhere. Yeah. And this divides. And the very sad part is, it's so harmful for the person who's doing it.

It's so, it's really, it's really, you know, and the even sadder part, it's so harmful for the person who does it, they're hurting themselves. Hurt people hurt. So if they're hurting themselves that way, they're likely to keep doing it. What can the rest of us do? Don't return in kind. Have your speech, figure out a way to talk, that is healing.

Hopefully you're healed a bit. Come from that place and offer your kindness, even if you have to disagree with someone. Disagree kindly, gently, lovingly. Don't have a voice that implies hate or malice or disrespect. Speak affectionately, lovingly, caringly. We are all kin, one way or the other.

We're all in this together. That's what this teaching of nature is, that we're whole. The word *dhamma* means nature. So we're here living in the natural world, finding how to be here in a way that allows the ecosystems of this whole planet to bring out the best in all of us. So give and speak kindly. The third is beneficial acts.

Do something, please. Giving is a doing. Speaking lovingly is a doing. But maybe there are other things you can do. Maybe there are small ways you can take care of your neighbors when they're sick. Maybe there are small ways that you can make a donation.

Maybe there's ways that you can support causes that, you know, need our help and need our support. Many places are very challenged in the last five, ten years, ten years since COVID. Many nonprofits have gone under. Many places have been challenged by the radical change in government policy and are struggling to offer the kind of help for the world that they were used to doing for many years. So there's an infinite number of things we can do beneficially. And... But also what we can do is appreciate beneficial acts.

Appreciate acts of giving and generosity that exist. Appreciate the loving speech that exists. Appreciate the good acts that people do. I'm quite impressed and appreciative of how much United States is a donation culture. You could... Quibble about where the donations go some-times.

But compared to much of the world, United States culture has a very, very strong foundation in people making donations for all kinds of things. And we have tax credits and all kinds of things that can help with that, doing that. It's a recognized part of the culture. The other thing

that's really big in the United States is volunteering. Volunteering. It's, people volunteer all over the world, but somehow it's a little bit more organized here.

When I raised my children here in Redwood City, two sons I have, I was, I didn't kind of know, I didn't know about this part. I didn't really grow up here in America very much. I especially didn't grow up here in the summer, and I didn't, I don't know, I was just, I was kind of, I was just blown away by all these adults. who were sports coaches voluntarily. I mean, the amount of sports teams that these kids could join when they're kids, join for free, be supported for, be cared for, be loved by some of these coaches, usually. And I was kind of amazed at how what a huge economy of generosity and freedom, freely given, goes on in this culture.

People who go to soup kitchens and offer food and do this and that, take care of animals. And it just goes on and on how much there is. Let's appreciate it. Let's value it. And I appreciate it partly because when I have gone to Europe or talked to Europeans, it's very hard for them to appreciate it. how much this is the case in the United States.

Some of those countries expect the government to offer a lot of social care. It's maybe unfortunate we don't do it in this country, but they expect it. So in terms of, you know, it's kind of awesome, I think, that we have this center of ours, IMC, where we can offer everything freely, and it's all run by volunteers, that we're supported only by donations. Right. It's awesome. When I talk to my European Dharma friends, they say, that's not going to work here.

They don't have the same culture of generosity, of donations in Europe. It's outside of how they think and they do things there. And so it's much harder to have this idea of volunteers and having donations there. It is possible, of course, but I'm trying to say we have something wonderful in the United States. It's very hard to be dismissive of the United States. It's very hard to look at the divisiveness, look at certain parts of it, which are maybe dysfunctional and miss other parts of it.

And to take and appreciate what's good and support that so it can grow is part of this beneficial actions that we can do. So what can we do to bring people together? The final of these four unifying practices is treating everyone equally, equality. And the ancient text commentary describes this kind of like, see everyone as you would see yourself or be with everyone else in an equal way. So part of it means that as you would like, People not to be mean to you, don't be mean to others. As you would like to be respected, respect others.

As you would not like people to steal from you, don't steal from others. There's all this kind of like you want. See other people equally. They too want to be respected, cared for in this kind of way. The other is don't hold yourself higher than others or lower than others. Meet

people as equals in this world.

And so, you know, I don't know if this is the best example, but the ancient texts give it something like, if they're standing, you stand. If they're sitting, you sit. And if they're laying down, you lay down. Meaning, you know, in ancient India, if someone was of a higher status in society, you absolutely, maybe you couldn't even stand if they were standing. You had to always be below them and sit, maybe. And if someone in high status sat, you shouldn't be sitting.

If they're sitting on a chair, maybe you sit on the ground. But Buddhism emphasized equality. So how do you hold yourself with people in equal way? And I see one maybe Indian person here nodding his head enthusiastically. Sorry to single you out. But it's phenomenal, you know, the divisiveness of a traditional Indian society.

hierarchical society and how painful it is. And Buddha came along and emphasized equality. How do we do that? So the monastic community is meant to dissolve all the social hierarchy of India so everyone can be equal. I would like to believe that a Buddhist *saṅgha* like ours at IMC is doing the same thing. Like everyone is treated equally here is considered equal and there's not a hierarchy.

And, you know, it's easier to wish that than actually do it, I know. But at least we're trying to do that, to see each other equally and treat each other as equals. And that's a high value. And we have examples in this country now of people who are, I mean, the language that's being used, which I think is a very intense word to use. they're called criminals. Some of them did have a traffic ticket.

That was the extent of it. But I've had traffic tickets. Have you had a traffic ticket? Some of you are nodding. Well, then you're a criminal. I mean, it's just awful that, you know, the amount of, you know, this is not treating people with respect, with care, with equality.

We're seeing increasingly a way in which there's an inequality of how people are being treated. This creates division. This breaks the natural ecosystem. This breaks the natural ecosystem in our own hearts. So how do we bring this together? How do we live together as a whole?

And what I'd like to suggest and end the talk, we do it by seeing... It's all nature. We want the nature to become whole. We want nature to operate as one big, whole, healthy ecosystem, whether it's the inner nature or the outer nature, whether it's the, or both working together. And that, I think, is exciting. to appreciate that the inner and the outer, our inner ecosystem, the outer ecosystem, work intimately together, and you heal one, you heal the other.

You begin healing the other. If you hurt one, then it's easier to hurt the other. So the four

means of unifying people, giving, loving speech, beneficial action, and equality, treating people equally. So those are my thoughts for today. And since we're going to have a pop-up today, it's wonderful to have some chance to be able to say hello and meet people, greet people who are new.