

2009-08-02 Fire Sermon

Fri, 8/14 4:46PM • 38:17

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

burning, fire, world, people, coolness, buddha, war, disenchanted, guilt, sermon, buddhism, subjective experience, idea, suffering, driven, talk, greed, grew, distractibility, subjective

SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

This morning I'd like to talk a little bit about a discourse that the Buddha gave. That is called the fire sermon. It's said to be the third talk that he gave after his awakening. And often the first three are kind of packaged together as being quite significant. And this fire sermon was this sermon that was given to a group of newly ordained monks group of people are doing together, who had been fire worshippers. Back in ancient India, Deva did a lot of fire warship and that was their primary religious activity. And in giving a teaching to them, he gave a teaching called the fire sermon appropriately. Now to get into this fire sermon, I think it's helpful to realize that in Buddhism and the Buddha's teachings often Contrast or dichotomy that's offered between suffering and being liberated from suffering between being tormented by suffering and being relieved of it. And so the image of the fire is one, it's often used for the part of the torments or the struggles, the afflictions the difficulties of life that we have. And the contrast is that of so the kind of oppressive heat, the contrast of that is refreshing coolness. And those of you who have lived in very hot climates, maybe you could appreciate how nice important coolness is for refreshment for nourishment for relief, whatever. And people who, you know, they say that English language because it came out of cold and damp and rainy England What's championed in the language is a lot of words of warmth. A person who's really warm hearted is a really wonderful person. In really hot climates, someone who's cool hearted, is someone who's, you know, valued a lot. Whereas, you know, we say someone's cold and, you know, that's not that, you know, it's, you know, it's not a good thing. But, you know, the metaphors of a society have a lot to do with, you know, where the language was developed. And so, Buddhism, the language in this in the metaphors of Buddhism, arose out of a very hot climate of India. And so coolness was very highly valued. And so one of the synonyms for Nirvana for Nibbana liberation is coolness becoming cooled. And if you know if you're English, that doesn't mean much. But if you're In from Phoenix, then perhaps you'd read the other day was hundred and eight in Phoenix, right? So being cool is good. So the contrast here is between fire and coolness and the press of heat and refreshing coolness. And the Buddha begins this sermon by saying, everything is on fire. Pretty rhetorically pretty dramatic way of starting. I read a, I saw a book of 100 or whatever, greatest speeches of all times. And this sermon of the Buddha was in that book, a fire sermon, and it's kind of kind of has this wonderful rhetoric and it approaches. So it starts off, everything's on fire. And perhaps I shouldn't say it in a mild way I should say, you know, everything is burning. And then you have your attention. Everything is burning, burning, burning, burning. Some of you know Ts Eliot's poem, the wasteland, you know, some of you. The third section of that is called the fire sermon. And it's the taken from the title of this sermon, the Buddha. And he wrote it right after, I think right after World War One. And there's so much devastation. In Europe, especially England, so many people died. I was actually quite moved to this last week, last couple of weeks, and reading about the two English soldiers who died, who one was 111 and one was 113. And they're the last living connections apparently of English people who went through the what's called the trenches and you know, horrendous

brutality and destruction and war, I mean hundreds of thousands of people dying and single battles and the stupid way of fighting wars off like they're all stupid. And

so right after that, you know, World War One, he's writing the wastelands. And third section, this poem is called the fire sermon. And that section of the poem ends. It's burning, burning, burning, burning. And so I was moved by these, you know, over one stories last couple of weeks. And I grew up, you know, I've had a very fortunate life feels to me many ways. One was I've never been through war. And it's I feel like it's quite unusual for many people in the last centuries to not not to go through a war probably many of you have not gone through a war. Some of you have, but I grew up with it all around me. I grew up in Europe quite a bit. I'm Norwegian. And my parents went through war and went through occupation, no occupation of Norway. My grandfather had things that he didn't want to talk about. He was in the resistance in Norway, and he saw things he was arrested and jailed. And my friends and my family growing up, you know, growing up in Italy, partly, it was common to hear stories of people who had been through the war and all kinds of ways. And you know, at times I heard stories from people who had been soldiers who had killed people. And what do you say to them? They tell you their story of how they killed someone. What do you say what do you know? How do you respond? One man, I knew I was captured by the Japanese in Indonesia and was held in Japanese prison camps in Indonesia, treated quite brutally. And then he was released. At the end of the war Japanese surrendered and so he was released and, and they were shipping all the Japanese soldiers back to Japan. And he was a free man and he walked down to the docks where they're being shipped back and there was one particular soldier in prison camps who was really brutal. Maybe killed people, tortured people, brutal people. him and his friends came along and tied him up and threw him into the water. What do you say? He tells me the story. What do you say? So I grew up, it's all around me. And it's great for me there's a contrast. One of the themes of the days is contrast between Life have, you know of how I've lived my life in a very fortunate circumstances, and then being so aware of so much suffering so much pain, so much war and distress in so many different ways of reaching out into our society in our world. You know, I grew up I'm old enough I grew up with the Vietnam War. Some of you are as well. That was quite a big impact on me and war after war after war. It never happened here. So close though. I remember being in LA and watching la burning, I think it was 1964 63 the watts riots and we will kind of live the kind of in hilly areas we can look down and see la burning, burning, burning, burning. And the Rodney King Rodney King, riots, Monday and retreat, I was teaching a retreat. And this woman came to me and what he wanted to talk about in the retreat was her Father had been somehow in the wrong place at the wrong time during the Rodney King riots, and now was basically kind of in a semi vegetative state. And burning, burning burning and then at the Iraq War start the first one started walking through San Francisco and seeing store windows broken in trash cans on fire, relatively mild, but still burning. The prison system in California United States place a fire burning burning all these people burning quite dramatic. The United States have such a huge prison population such as California has a huge his biggest recidivism rate in the country. And if anything has failed, this California prison system so it's easy to see these things. And there's a lot of them and so some of us live in comfort and don't see it daily basis is something we read about in that paper or something. We, we encounter, you know, far away. And some of us live right in the middle of it in our own communities, where even our own families where there's fires, burning, burning with rage and burning with greed and burning with lust and burning with all kinds of things.

And so everything is burning, everything is burning. And then there's a very interesting movement that happens in the very important movement is, you know, how we relate to all this strife and burning and difficulty. And at some point, when we see it objectively in the world, at some point, our subjective experience becomes prominent. At some point is you would get so distressed perhaps like some of your distressed I brought it up today. And we feel we feel kind of troubled by it in some way, or

frightened by it or upset by it or something. Or perhaps we're the one who's burning And we're filled with rage or hate. We're filled with lust or greed in such a way that we're on fire. At some point, the object that we have the last object of the hate becomes less important than the way it's feels for us the subjective experience of how difficult it is for us. And that's a very important turning. And we turn away from the object of our concern object of focus, to become aware of what's actually going on for us here. And sometimes it's because the world is so distressed, so difficult, that simply we can't do we feel our reaction is so strong. At some point, we can't ignore it anymore. Some people in feeling their own distress then will lash out even more, will focus even more externally. want that person get rid of that person fix up what's out there, but at some point, there's a turning inwards about Gee, I need to look at this here. I need to look at what's happening here with me. And some people see that they're burning and I've been on fire I've been in fire with a fires of less than hate and it feels awful to be kind of lost lose lose my freedom and to kind of being driven by these inner forces that are so powerful. The and so what happens when we turn inwards the subjective side of it all and that is where the Buddha pointed to so when these monks appears, who had been fire worshippers came to hear, as in teach, a said everything is burning. He then did that gets their attention perhaps, and then he turned it around immediately, and he turned around to the subjective world and perhaps the fire people being fire warship or focusing next Eternal world something out there, the fire gods are going to fix things if you if you sacrifice in the fire to the fire Gods the fire Gods will provide bounty, boons, or support, support us. And the Buddha taught over and over again turned away from the external ritual ritualization that happened much the end of his time, as being the place of spiritual life, and focuses back into the subjective world here. So when people were focusing on bathing in the Ganges, back then, I mean the Buddha, in order to become ritually pure, the Buddha said, Oh, that's not how you become ritually pure. The way become ritually pure is through your own ethical behavior, your own virtue, that's what pure purifies you. So again, turning in subjectively, to how you are. animal sacrifice. Oh, he'd say, oh, much better than sacrificing animals is to practice generosity. Be generous that kind of sacrifice your own possessions and support other people. The much better than worshipping there was people apparently back then who worship the four directions, North southwest and all that. The different directions. And here Oh, much better than that. These are the way you really do it. He said, the way you really worship the four directions is the, the I forget exactly how it goes. But the western direction is your family. And you take good care of them. The southern direction is your teachers, you take good care of them. The Eastern direction is, you know, you know the different people. And so he kind of turned it around and said, Oh, it's really how you engage with the world, how you support it and how you help. So when talking to these ex fire, monks, the Buddha said Oh, everything is burning. And then what is burning This is what he said everything is burning. And how is everything burning? The eye is burning.

What we see through the eyes is burning, or they said most clearly it says here the mental impressions that come with the eye are burning contact of the eye with visible things is burning. The sensation produced by the contact of the eye with visible things is burning. With what is it burning? I declare onto you that it is burning with a fire of greed with the fire of anger and the fire of ignorance. It is burning with the anxieties of birth, decay, death, grief, limitation, suffering, dejection and despair. So the world is not burning everything when the good He said, he says everything. He does not mean the world, you think of everything is everything. Over and over again, when the Buddha used the word, everything, he limited it to how we experience everything. And there's a huge difference between the world and what our experience of the world is. So if we and this is a very, maybe seems like a subtle difference, but in Buddhism is very, very important. There's the book I'm holding. And there's the experience, I have the I have the book. And the book is one thing, but my experience of it might be colored by my desire for the book, by my pride around the book since I was involved with it somehow by all kinds of subjects, subjective attitudes I have towards this book. So I see the book and part of the statistics. subjective experience is part of my experience of the book. So When I see the book, I see the book experience a

lot through the apparatus of my own particular sense doors. If I guess I was a dog, I'd be colorblind, right? I wouldn't maybe I wouldn't see it as blue. But I see it as the cover is blue. The subjective way we experience things is very impactful for how what goes on. Buddhism is not doesn't make much claim about the nature of the world as being good or bad doesn't affirm the world or, or when we reject the world, the world is what it is. The focus of Buddhism is that how we relate to this world as it is. That's the real place where liberation can happen or freedom can happen. And that's where we get bound up in creating the creating our suffering, suffering, you know the conditions of the world, there are what they are sometimes very difficult to be with. Sometimes easy to be with conditions of the world are what they are, are suffering based on those conditions comes from how we relate to it, the subjective world. So the Buddha's turning here to the mixing into your go back and look at how you perceive how you experience and here he starts with the eyes, how you how we can experience with the world with the eyes is can be burning, it's burning with greed, hate and delusion. And then he goes through and you can enter rhetorical way the ears are on fire with and how we see how he hears on fire with the fire of greed, hate and delusion, anxiety. The nose is on fire, the taste is on fire, the body's on fire, and the mind is on fire with these these things, and it goes on and on. You know and if you appreciate the kind of repetitive ways of getting sermons, they work best if you talk in a very dramatic way in a way that I can You can hammer it hammer it in you know, the air is burning, the tongue is burning the body is burning. Considering this a person who walks the noble path becomes disenchanted with the disenchanted with visible things disenchanted with mental impressions based in the eye, disenchanted with contact of the eye with visible things, disenchanted with the sensations produced by contact with the eye visible things becomes disenchanted is very important word is enchanted means we no longer are under this idea, this magical idea or this spell, that somehow the things that we experienced in the world, whether it be things or people or ideas or whatever it might be, that somehow magically they're going to provide us with lasting peace and happiness. As in well being, that if we can just manipulate the conditions of the world enough that then everything will be fine and happy ever after

Buddhism, the Buddha over and over again is saying, saying, if you really want lasting happiness and peace, you don't find it by manipulating the world, and your family and your people and get everything just set, right you don't even you do it by manipulating your health. But you meant you find it by how you relate to this world. And if you relate to it through this magical thinking, that it's going to provide you with lasting happiness. It you're, you're, you're putting your eggs in the wrong basket. And so there's a very important very important step in this subjective experience of Buddhism is turning into a project seductive world, where this objective world is no longer reaching out of itself. Grasp grasping and holding on and wanting enchanted has magic. And this is lots lots of very helpful with magic. As a meditation or meditation is this training, not to have the mind go out or grab on or stay connected or stay attached, stay driven, stay burning. And slowly be willing to let go willing to calm and relax and learn to cool down. So, the experience of the mind and the heart is one is not driven, is not burning is not caught, is not engaged. So, one becomes disenchanted of all that, and by disenchanting, becoming disenchanted, one divest oneself, of grasping, and by the absence of grasping when is made free, but when is free when becomes aware that one is free, and when, when this exposition was propounded in the minds of the monks became free from attachments to the world and released from all entanglements and doesn't say that here but their hearts became cool. So is your world Bernie? And what's your experience of becoming cool? So this dichotomy between the problem and the solution, the problem being if there is a problem for you, is here is defined as being fire. And the solution is good news is that there is extinguishing of the fire. There is a coolness that can happen and the, you know, having grown up in an English speaking language, I don't doesn't it's not that impactful for me this idea of coolness, but the idea of peace is and is coolness and peace I think maybe are, are synonymous. And I think one of the beautiful, beautiful things are very profound things very meaningful things that I've experienced through this, my practice, Buddhist practice is being discovered or touched. Delightful

possibilities of peace, delightful possibilities of having quenched or cooled the fires that have driven me. And what I've what I find is that as these fires within me have quieted down and cooled, that I have a very different relationship with the external world. We're at very different relationship with the wars that we have all around us with the suffering and the difficulties that seems such a big part of this human life of ours. We don't want to deny that it's there. Anyone have pretty it over But be able to meet it and encounter it and so and be helpful in this world with a with a heart and a mind which is not on fire, which is not with anxiety or greed or anger or distress, but be able to meet it with our peacefulness or coolness and to offer our cooling effect on the world. The Buddhist path is a public path. And a public path means that how we are changing transformed by It is not just something that affects us, but also it's it supports and helps other people as well. It's um, hopefully we can all cool down together. That's why I turned off the air conditioner earlier. So we can we could do it. So that's my fire and brimstone talk.

So now it's your turn. If you have any comments about that, or questions or whatever you'd like to say in response to the talk, please.

I had two kinds of comments or question. One is that

I noticed that

you know, the intense burning of fire isn't that different than the look, you know, you think you're cultivating, or I think I'm cultivating disenchantment, and maybe I'm not hung up on something. But there's sort of a low level of distraction. And then when something comes along, that makes me really greedy or desirous, I think to myself, Oh, that this isn't so I mean, the subject is is maybe more I'm more focused on one subject, but I'll be

kind of

distracted, just as distracted when I'm not full of greed or desire. And I'm kind of wondering what is it like to cultivate? Do you cultivate disenchantment? Or is disenchantment is something that just happens

naturally last question, some people will cultivate it. And hopefully it's cultivated out of wisdom. Immediate last thing you want, I think, I don't think I don't Well, I don't have a lot of trust in simply learning an idea. I think that's a good idea. And then I'll try to fit myself into that idea. Now I'm going to go on being disenchanted but if there's a real seeing real interest, that real understanding that I've been burned enough times by this, okay, I've been broken down now. So I think it's useful to become disenchanted with it and no longer be pulled into that world you know, and, and be reminded myself how often I got burned by it. That kind of cultivation, I think is maybe useful. It's a wise way of living. Some of the disenchantment just comes with time, we as we practice, as we, as we practice, we become more sensitive, we become more sensitive, we become naturally more aware of the impact and the cost of how we're living and the enchantment we have. And as we're aware of the cost, we tend to become naturally more disenchanted. So I'm what I like very much kind of the net more natural approach to practice, you practice the practice, you know, opens our eyes and we see more clearly and then we change as a result of that. You talked about your low grade, distraction, distracted mind. And, you know, maybe there are times when you're filled with greed, hate, you know, that's recognizable, but seems like you know, there's low grade kind of distractibility. Maybe there Yeah, yeah. So maybe they're embers because if you sit down to I mean, one of the great tests I think, is sitting down to meditate. Because you sent out a meditate and you've, it's a wonderful time to kind of find out what's

actually going on in your mind. And because I've been in situations where I thought, Oh, I'm doing just fine, thank you. And then I sit down to meditate, oh, I'm really, you know, certainly caught by those those subtle ideas and thoughts, you know that there's certain unresolved things going on for me. And I wouldn't have known it and as I sat down to meditate, so the low grade, distractibility is a symptom that something is still unresolved for you and someplace you're not free. When the Buddha spoke, he, I think it'd be safe to say it was more of a agrarian culture. But in today's urban information overload age, it seems like our distractions are thousandfold greater than and what I find in these agrarian cultures is that more of a challenge for us to cool us down or it was I mean, is there any hope for us? jam packed urban world? No.

If your subjective world is jam packed and urban, there's no hope for you. Your subjective world has to stop being jam packed. Somehow you have to doesn't mean that you have to necessarily get rid of all your cell phones and computer and electronics and everything. But unless there's some change in how you live your life if you try to do everything and do everything and have every possible gadget and thing and you know and get you know, it's just you know that that probably there there's no hope for you.

Good luck you Have more you want to ask? Okay, good. Thank you

about the British soldiers who died

recently. I really liked

reading about one of them

who was so bothered by World War One that he couldn't share his impressions with about it with anyone until he turned 100 years old

11 years ago,

and then he could finally say, it wasn't worth it.

Yeah. Yeah. I'm really struck by by I'm struck by how long the effects of war last. And you know, you know, hundreds of years, you know, there was also president obama was going to or The Presidential Medal of Honor to a whole bunch of people that's going to you know, this. And one of the people is the last living Plains Indian, maybe soon I don't know what Plains Indian War Chief, I guess the last one, but what's really struck me was not as much as the last living one of this particular tribe, I guess, whatever. But, but rather, he's, he's, he's the last person alive, who interviewed someone who was in the Battle of Big Horn in 1876. So they're kind of active against living connection to history, and, you know, how they how these, you know, these still affect people. And, you know, people are affected by war. African Americans in America affected by the experience of slavery, you know, slavery ended over 100 140 years ago, it's still a big impact, generation after generation, how these things affect you. So, you know, and so the war in Iraq, you know, it's going to be alive and relevant for people hundred years. From now, I hear in this country and elsewhere and, and when we go into war, we, it's not just the war of this particular year it's setting it's creating conditions for 100 years. And how we live our lives today are meaningful not just for this day, but are meaningful for well into the future for not just ourselves, but for other people as well. So, you know, part of what's behind this kind of, in my thinking about this talk today was that my own very strong motivation to engage in Buddhist practice is because I see the world burning, and I would like to be able to meet, meet it and help the world suffer less. And that's really what's driven me to become a teacher is to really try to make a difference in this world. And

it would be nice to believe that those of us It will try to make it Difference improve the world that that also can have 100 year effect. It's not just a war that has 100 years effect. Maybe IMC will be standing here in hundred years. Yes, please wait for the mic.

I drove here this morning and I parked on the street around the corner there. And as I pulled into the parking spot, I kind of noticed that fellow leaving that large building on the corner. I thought that well It must be a delivery guy committed liberties. He's coming back out. So I buckled myself and I was kind of fussing with the car and the guy start walking cross or coming down to the street. I noticed No, he's got a suit on and he's pushing a gurney and I noticed there was a blue blanket on the gurney. And as he cross in front of me I could see a human profile in that blue blanket blanket and I it struck me how mundane what I was seeing is one fellow pushing one grain with with basic corpse on the Somebody that died in the corner house there. And I guess I was what I got to see was, there was no ceremony or fanfare This was bringing out something that he was putting in a white band, they were going to take it away. And I could put the drama to it and say how sad but I think through practice, I just noticed this was a natural cycle and occurrence of life and here's a condition person who's no longer there and any thing that went on it's already happened and it was very natural for this to take place. I was again struck by how mundane this truly was to notice his body being taken out put into a pan and driven away that's it that's the story cannon light is burning and the conditioning of the sentences and the aggregates. So thanks

with regard to burning and lasting effects, hobbies guild I mean,

it can last a long time. Is there a purpose to guilt?

Yeah, it can really burn.

That's one of the purposes. I guess, I suppose one purpose of guilt and been a useful purpose would be to prevent us from doing that, again. If we did something that caused harm, guilt can be prevented.

But it's there and

wholesome guilt.

And in Buddhist psychology is a very Buddhist use language. Guilt is always unwholesome. It's always an unnecessary and useful, well, unnecessary. I mean, it has a use usefulness, but it's considered an unnecessary emotion. Because some of the ways in which we can learn from our mistakes don't require guilt. So we have other words in Buddhism, like some people's that you'd like there would be more so Regret, guilt has guilt has the quality of kind of self hate, at least in Buddhist psychology, but there's a kind of a self hate or self criticism as part of it. And that's, that's not useful but to feel some kind of healthy remorse so we do better in the future and so we make amends for the harm that we caused, is a very important quality for human beings. And so they learn to distinguish between that and to be caught and stuck and guilt means that we're really attached to something and very probably attached something to do with itself guilt has very much to do with self identification self ideas, so to understand what what is that what how am I holding myself what's my, my grasping to self, self image, self identity that I have here. And sometimes this idea that identity attachments to self are something it's inherited almost from the way we brought we brought up sometimes guilt is inculcated by You know, almost like buying mother's milk. And it takes a while to learn to be free of it.

So make sense.

To free become free of this bigger helps become to free yourself. Free yourself have this yoke of self idea, self focused idea. But as we free ourselves myself the yoke of self centeredness. The Healthy version of that is, if we do something that causes harm to the heart feels remorse, heart feels regret. And it's a if he didn't, I would worry about you. So thank you. And after last week's talk, the pastor said that that was a good beginning. So that's why I thought I would give this fire and brimstone talk and hopefully it was useful to hear it and hopefully useful to me. Here decide of what the Buddha had to teach the fire sermon. And if you want to get it from a different angle, go read the wasteland. So thank you all.