

2012-01-16 Reflections On Practice Society

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SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

So Good evening, everyone. And those of you who have come over the years, will might remember that this particular holiday, the Martin Luther King holiday is my favorite American holiday. And partly because I'm so inspired by the work of Martin Luther King and, and the amazing influence he's had on many people's lives, including my own. Can people hear, okay? And so in spending the day thinking about, you know, what could I talk about this evening? My thoughts kept coming back somehow that I should somehow related to Martin Luther King's work or some connection somehow. And, but I don't think that he would care so much if we talked about him. I don't think he was so much about what it was in, he wasn't in for himself and what he, how he wrote about it, but rather, he was in it for the greater good of our society. And he was one of the one of the remarkable ways that I think one thing when it comes to contributions was his beautiful articulation of how we're all in it together. That it's not, we're not separate from each other, but we influence each other's mutuality in our society. And so we have this quote. All I'm saying is simply this, that all life is interrelated, that somehow, we're caught in an incredible network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects me directly affects all indirectly. for some strange reason I can never be what I ought to be, until you are what you ought to be. So this idea of the world interrelated. So what's the connection between Martin Luther King and what he stood for, and coming to a meditation center and meditating. And for me, one of the connections that is that in my life is I look at how I've been changed. growing through my life, meditation had a variety of very profound influences on me or effects on me. And one of the ones that I wasn't looking for many of them was looking for I was just minding my business and meditating away and then the some certain changes happened that hadn't occurred to me that would happen. But one of them was that very important one for me, was that my sense of self began to shift and change, or to say it differently, or perhaps I stopped operating with a very, very strong hard Lee bounded sense of self that I'm here in People are out there that I was separate from. And it wasn't exactly that I could say that I felt connected to people more through meditation. But it was as if, in the empathy, we became stronger in the sense that how other people were, what they felt was that their, their well being was not only important to me, but because me wasn't so important anymore. It wasn't that it was important to me. It became, it's almost as if it became me. And that was, that's kind of remarkable aspect of this. It's almost as if, how other people are and what they feel and their well being became as important. You know, to me as me as my well being or, or, you know, there's, there's a sense of separation in this regard wasn't quite there as almost as if you know, where we're all connected, and the way that our left and right hand are connected, you can say that they're separate. But they kind of are also very much related to each other. And this was quite a surprise for me to feel this because and the result was that a very important part of my life been kind of a governing principle of my of my life since this meditation had its effect on me was to live a life that tried to better the world, tried to make a difference, start to improve people make things you know, somehow respond to the suffering of the world. And because of the causes and conditions of my life, and what I how it wasn't, you know, my practice and things. I've

taken the route of doing that through Buddhism and through Buddhist practice, because I saw how effective it is and meaningful it is for instituting personal change for helping people overcome their suffering.

And then, but there are many other ways of responding suffering in the world the critique that people can have of Buddhists like me, which is an interesting critique, I think so worth, you know, considering is that, you know, meditation seems to mostly involve the individual individual change and focusing on yourself we sit here we close our eyes. And what does this have to do with what happens out? You know, and further away in the city and the poverty and the war and all that. It seems like you're kind of maybe avoiding engaging in the social issues of our times in favor of some personal self help kind of thing that's only gonna be good for yourself. And that interesting critique. And so if that's what if that critique is true, I would be heartbroken, you know, that I hadn't, I didn't want to base my life on just kind of, you know, self help. approach that made people just feel good at the expense of ignoring everybody else. But I hope is that as and what I have put my faith in is that as we begin to look deeply at ourselves at the meditation does, that the forces of Buddhist Buddhist terms greed, hate and delusion begin lessening for us, the forces of fear the forces of separation or bias, of greed begin to decrease and get replaced by things like greater sense of connectedness and love and caring, and in that love and caring, becomes an interest to live a life for the betterment of others that we feel connected to others. So I see these Can I very closely connected, I don't see one or the other. And I would like to hopefully see a society where the inner inner transformation is seen as being intimately connected to the outer transformation. The people and the outer transformations connect to the inner transformations, not one or the other. And I've known people who have had outer transformations in their life, where their life has been improved dramatically in kind of worldly terms, but there was no inner well, improvement. In fact, they were miserable, maybe more miserable or before. So just to focus on outward improvement of people, Miss is something very important to focus only on the improvement of people, I think also misses something important because I hope that we're somehow in it for as a society to support each other. So what some people do on martin luther king day is not remember Martin Luther King so much, but it's supposed to be a service thing to go out and be of service in our community. And how many of you did that today? For people That's impressive. Are you seven further hands went up five, six. So, yes. I'm not the one who's evaluating I didn't get to decide for yourself, I think accounts if you don't usually do it. And so I think it was it wasn't meant because of the holiday. But as it turns out, my 14 year old son went today to volunteer at the Second Harvest, which is one of the largest food banks in the country that serves Santa Clara and San Mateo County here. And the reason he went is that he has a eighth grade project, they have his school they all students have to do it. long project eighth grade project. And so he spent a long time thinking what he wants to do. And his his big thing is moviemaking, that these days, that's his passion is making movies. So he decided that he would make a documentary. And he decided to make a documentary on hunger in San Mateo County. And so he went in and, you know, on twice now to meet with someone at Second Harvest, someone who kind of, I don't know, public relations person, I think, and second time, he brought his buddy with him and they set up cameras and lights and everything and he interviewed her. And then we got to find out more about all this. He went and volunteer today, then down in San Jose. And, and so then he's also maybe maybe he heard about there's a homeless shelter in Redwood City where someone here at IMC is connected. And she said that

if you want children him there. And those people who live there the shelter, probably very happy to talk to him. And he got very kind of excited by this idea. So my son is 14 is learning about what goes on in our county, and, and our community, Silicon Valley. And he is amazed as he's studying this, to discover the disparity in wealth. That happens to be around here for some of you probably noticed. But he hadn't, you know, I don't think he really understood until he started seeing the statistics of what goes

on. He asked me today, how many millionaires are there in Silicon Valley? I said, I don't know. And so he was an online and read and everything and he came back and he said he claimed a class I don't know if how he what he found, but he's told me this. He said, there's a well over 10,000 millionaires. So Valley. So I don't know what that's but then that's, you know 10,000 How many people do you think that Second Harvest Food bank feeds every month in in San Mateo and Silicon Valley, San Mateo and Santa Clara County 250,000 people a month, get fed by Second Harvest. That's a phenomenal number. It's 10% of the population of these two counties get served by the food bank, this particular food bank, and they don't feel that because there's 2.5 million people in these two counties. So 250,000 people get fed every month. And, and in their literature, they claim that you know that they don't feed all the people hungry in the county. There's a lot more hungry people then or In, you know, they they feed. And their literature says that the way they word it repeatedly, they say one in four people in these two counties are at risk of being at hunger. That's quite impressive. And we have a school here in Redwood City, where 80% of the kids live in poverty and are eligible for our get food assistance in the school, because their families can't afford lunches and things like that. That's quite impressive. So my son's reading these things, you know, his eyes are getting bigger and bigger. And so we, you know, what do we do? You know, what, what is what is our role and how do we take into account this disparity? Do we just kind of say, well, that's the way it's supposed to be. And it has nothing to do with nothing. It has nothing to do with me. I mean, it's those other people. It has to do with them, someone else is supposed to do something about it. Or, you know, everyone's responsible for themselves and that's what they got. That's what they got into in their life and has nothing to do with me they better work harder or whatever, I don't know what you know, what, how do we feel? How do we connect? Are we connected to it? So my my hope certainly is that Buddhist practitioners begin to become relaxed enough, still enough to begin noticing an index stillness of their own hearts, to not only notice, but to be moved by what they see. And in being moved, then to do something, to respond to the suffering of our world. We can't respond to every possible thing that's the world comes along. But perhaps we can respond to some things and perhaps we can respond more As we come along with what, you know, inspires us what's meaningful for us what to do. So, you know, in my, in my example, I don't do a lot, I don't go to food, I don't go to food banks, I don't do a lot of these things. Because I feel that the best use of my time and effort is to be a meditation teacher. I feel that I serve a lot of people, I meet a lot of people who suffer. And this is the kind of thing that you know that I have, I don't know if I want to say, skill for but somehow the causes and conditions come together. This is what I could offer. And so I try to do this as best I can. And I work hard. I think I spend a lot of time doing it. So this is my response. And when I see suffering in the world outside of my circle, one of the things I try to do is I'll, I'll use the energy that gives me and try to do a better job here

to respond and Amazing what comes in through our door here. You don't get to talk to them, many of them, but what comes through this door is amazing cross section of our society. And, and they say it's been said that no one comes to Buddhism without suffering, suffering somehow behind it. So, you know, you know the, the amount of suffering that comes through this door is quite impressive. And I'm not saying this to depress you, I'm saying that, you know, I'm trying to justify myself why I'm not out there and I don't have to go out there. I don't have to go out there and comes here.

So then, you know, people also, you know, people who come regularly to Buddhism, you know, sometimes we want to see Buddhist resources or Buddhist teachings that might somehow relate to this issue of social engagement, social justice, doing something. And if you go back to a time of the Buddha, we see and we see that the society was so radically different back there. I mean, I think that if you did occupy the palace back then and that, you know, that it was off with your head, you know, there wasn't, you know, that was basically it. You know, they mean, it was a, you know, very authoritative, it was run by a king, king hate absolute power. And there's depictions in the ancient texts of the various

tortures in ways that the ancient caves would kill people with very little compassion. So the idea of protesting the king, even if the king was not doing things very well in society, was not an easy thing to do. So you don't can't You can't look, go back to that. You know, we live in a society now where speaking up again, social justice doesn't put you in the guillotine so easily. So, there's much more teachings about this now than there was 2500 years ago, it was more dangerous to do so. However, what the ancient Buddhist tradition perhaps the Buddha himself did, was some of the social teachings that were adjusted study that were offered. We're couched in stories in mythology. And so there's one ancient Buddhist discourse that's attributed to the Buddha. And if it's attributed to the Buddha, I think it's an example of the Buddha being a storyteller, and telling stories telling myths kind of making up myths. In order to make a point and, and he's kind of playing with some of the ancient myths of India at this time, but he has this particular story and he discourse and turning of the wheel in the long discourses of the Buddha it starts at a time when human beings live to be 80,000 years old. So, now you see a kind of mythic great we're in the realm of myth here 80,000 years and, and there was a king who ruled the people there. Great monarch. And he was so great that he had all the symbols of royal power that were important in ancient India. And the first of those symbols is called the wheel The Royal Wheeler that was actually the text they call it the wheel treasure, the treasure of the wheel. And the wheel was considered to be a symbol of power. And it seems like in this myth, there was this kind of like mythic wheel that somehow floated in space someplace in the sky or floated outside the palace that symbolized his power and his rule that he ruled the great expanse of India. At some point, he decided that he was getting to be old, maybe it was signnow, 70,000 years old. And he decided to step down as the King and he passed the, the, the kingdom to his son. His son became king. And when his son became king, he noticed that the great symbolic wheel was no longer present that disappeared. So he called all his wise counselors together and said What happened to that symbol of royal power? And the and, and, and the counselors said this and this is perhaps one of the, one of the three myths that Buddha is making a point about, you know, trying to say something to the local kings maybe at this time. So they said, The Counselor say to this, you know, this mythic King, a new king, he says, oh, the symbolic the symbol of royal power power doesn't transfer from one king to the next, the new king has to earn it is by how you rule that that that you, you, you you acquire the symbol of power. So he asked, Well, how do I rule and he says, you rule righteously, and you protect people, and you prevent poverty. And you know, the variety of kind of

good for your people and if you do those kinds of things. Then the this, this we'll reappear. So he goes and he does all this righteous things. To the UN, the universal, righteous duties of a king protects everyone prevents poverty in His Kingdom, and ensure enough that we'll reappears. So he lives everyone lives happily for another 70,000 years, from wherever along until he decides to retire. And he passes the kingdom on to a son. And the same thing happens with the next one. What happens next king? The he calls the counselors together and it says, you know, that big wheel has disappeared. You know, what happened, you know, supposed to be a symbol of power and they explain what you have to do all these things in order to earn it through here. And so he said, Okay, so he does most of those things. But what he doesn't do is he doesn't prevent poverty. And because he doesn't prevent poverty, people go hungry, some people and because they go hungry, they steal. And then people go to the king said, Oh, this person stole and so he then called them to the court and said, Did you steal? And he said, Yeah, I stole No, you shouldn't steal stop stealing and I'll give you some all kinds of stuff. So you stop stealing. And so then other people saw if you steal the king will give you a lot of stuff. So they stole more people stole and after a while that King caught on it. This is not working. So instead of giving them stuff people are the robbers, people, the deeps. He said, Well, I'll do is I'll just chop off their heads. Kill them. But when he killed them capital punishment, then the populace thought Oh, this is a dangerous now, and we should arm ourselves and they kind of armed themselves with all the good top tech technology weapons of their time. And then they started going around and robbing and stealing

and fighting. And as they did that, then the king got even more involved in fighting and protecting and the violence of his times and then people because of that people started lying before that no one lied. And so that that is this course This describes a progressive decline of society. And as they do this apparently takes a long time because as they do this, people's lifetimes decrease. And so first they go from 80,000 to 40,000 years. And for you 2020 to 10. It goes down, down, down, down, it goes basically down to only seven days. When things become really bad, they become so bad that people, all they do is they go around with weapons, killing each other, not recognizing each other as human beings just as beasts and animals, killing themselves left and right. Except for a group of people who go, don't want to kill, and they go running into the forest and hide for those seven days. And I guess everyone else gets killed off, they kill each other off. And when it's all quieted down, they come out of the forest and they say, Oh, there you are, we survived. And they say, What if we don't kill? And so they don't kill? Sitting, they say, you know, and then their lifespan, expanded. I don't know how long though. This is good. Our lifetime spend expanded. What if we do more live live? We're in more ethical ways. Yeah, let's let's not steal their lifespan expense. Let's not engage in mining their lifespan expense. So then it goes The other direction, right? Until finally, we're back at the 80,000 year lifespan of people. And at that point, you know, then in this this particular discourses myth, it's so far in the future, that the time it becomes a time of my trailer Buddha, the next Buddha to be. So, indirectly This is a story about a few things interesting one is that, that the duty of a king is to protect the populace be concerned for their welfare. I can imagine this wasn't necessarily the highest priority of some of the kings in the Buddha's time. The

but also it was an idea that this the power this is another idea that appears elsewhere in the Buddhist discourses as well is that the authority of a king arises out of the people rises from what the king does. authority that's given by the people who are live and live there. And it's not granted. It's not hereditary, it's not divine. So, this is 2500 years ago. So, this is quite something to kind of imply, but rather, the right to rule comes from how you behave. And this goes along with a huge turn in philosophy or in religious teachings, that the Buddha was part of an ancient India, where, where what became important in ethics was not ritual was not how you were born born in different castes, but rather what was important was your your behavior and more specifically, the intention behind your behavior. And so the source of ethical evaluation became the quality of your intention. What you did. So if if your intention was motivated by greed, hate and delusion, then it was considered unethical and had deleterious effects. If it was you're motivated by love and generosity and wisdom and had different effect. And so the quality of your ethical behavior was what shaped you and your society. And so this mutuality, this way in which we're all kind of in it together also comes through in the story is that our behavior, First there's, there's stealing, and then there's more stealing, and then there's killing and lying and all these things, that these these kinds of ethical behavior in this myth aren't just things that happen alone, and without that effect and anything else. But they have a profound effect on the world those people were living in and their lifespan and their you know, everything changes. Other discourses were similar idea appears. The nature of the physical world begins shifting in ways as well. So at least in the ancient world, the idea was that our world we live in is affected by the ethical quality that motivates our actions. So this is a crazy myth, right? You know, because, you know, how could people's ethical actions and inner intentions of greed, hate and delusion have big effects in our world? Right? I mean, that's not unheard of, until this last century, and that's what we're seeing, right? We're seeing any big time. I mean, that's really, you know, the effect that humans have had on ourselves or in our globe, in our environment in our society and this world religion is huge. And it doesn't take a lot of analysis to dig behind the surface and say, eventually, it comes back to people's hearts, individual hearts And maybe collectively many hearts, you know, what motivates what comes out of people's hearts? Is it beautiful? Or is it ugly? Is it? Is it fear or hate? Or is it generosity and love? Someone I hope, I hope that some people are trying to change their hearts. Because if there's no change of heart, then what do we have

to rely on to try to create a just society or a safe society for everyone? Do we then rely on the police or the armies to rely on draconian rules and laws? You know, I put my hope that if there's really going to be change, and for people, I hope it's been through change of heart. And I hope that meditation is one of those tools that creates the best conditions are very good conditions for making our hearts malleable to let our sharks grow or let them or to help support letting the best qualities inside of us come forth out into the world.

Here's a nice Martin Luther King quote. So he's talking about people, the United States. We may all have come on different ships. But we're in the same boat now. That's nice. We're all in it together now. How can we not be

so what One of the qualities of this from my point of view or Buddhist point of view of a mature heart, a good heart that's grown and developed. It's a heart that never turns its back on anybody. It says sometimes we step back, maybe we need to, but we never turn our hearts are back, the back, the heart never turns his back towards anybody. The heart stays open, hearts tastes available, stays concerned. Even if we have to step back and protect ourselves at times. We never close our hearts to anybody. And if we don't do it, because once the heart is closed, then be careful. It could be your lifespan will decrease. As said there was a there was a doctor in England many years ago, like 200 years ago, who apparently had a huge anger problem and he said at 1.1 of these days The person who makes me angry is going to cause me my death. And then he apparently had got angry with someone in a heart attack and died. So don't close your hearts. Keep it open. You won't let 80,000 years but the other thing Martin Luther King said had looked at some quotes from those writings today. And in a relationship this 80,000 year, you know, lifespan. He was he said repeatedly, what's important is the quality of your life. Not the length you live.

So I suppose How old was it luck with the king when he died? 3639 something like that. It's late 30s someone no

die young men. Relatively I suppose the his quality of his life was pretty high. He chose the life that he lived in many ways. He chose how to respond in a world that he didn't choose to live in. But he chose how to respond and to respond with that kind of courage was quite a phenomenal thing. quite amazing. And then he claimed that anybody could do what he did. Anybody is available capable of doing great things if they serve. So, I hope that was okay. My thoughts for today, Martin Luther King. And I hope that when you do sit down to meditate, that you sit down to occupy your heart and in doing that may Your heart be open to everyone. Hey, all beings live in your heart. Thank you