

2014-12-07 A Response To Ferguson

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SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

Good morning. I have a couple of announcements to make. One is Martha read about the book drive for the Fair Oaks community center and children's books that we gather every year, this time of year. And the event of passing out the books is on Friday. So the announcement was made, but don't think come next Sunday with books. You know that we'll be bringing the books to Fair Oaks Community Center on Friday, midday, I think. And it's a great thing to do. So I think we're very, very happy that IMC can offer this thing. Children are very happy to be able to choose books for themselves. And the other is has to do about a practice of generosity. And in regards to parking around here, and now as a few things, I think kind of an instinct of many people is kind of like when you go somewhere place you want to park as close as possible. And, you know, I don't know quite why that is but you know, heaven forbid, used to walk or something. And then you park as close as you can, so that you can get in your car as quickly as you can at the end of this time here. So you can go for a hike later or something. The so it's actually quite generous. If you if you happen to come early. It's nice to come early. You know, it's a generous thing to come early so that you can park further away from here that does a few different things. It takes a little pressure off the neighbors who live here if you don't have so many cars right here, but also there are people who have physical limitations where it's harder for them to walk, and so they can find a place nearby to park and also some people do run late and we want to be a place that's relaxed with people to come when they're late and it's probably better for all of us if if they're not as late so late Because it you know, because at the park so far away, so. So if we have more space nearby that's available for the late comers then you know, it works better. How's the hearing system devices? They're all good. The other people let's get different one let's get a different one for you. So how's that sound any better? We'll get a different box for you because other people say theirs are okay. is getting get one. No, no, nothing, no problem. So also we'd ask you, please do not park in the parking lot across the street here. There's a new nursing home across the street. And they have asked us not to parking in their parking lot and we want to be good neighbors for them. So I think it's really important that we don't use the parking lot across the street. So, other side.

So let's, let's see that as I'm working out a better, much better, great. Okay. So I believe that our practice, Buddhist practice or mindfulness practice has the greatest value when it's applied not just to ourselves, but in our relationship to the world around us. And that world around us extends to our immediate surroundings community and beyond that in circles going out into wider and wider community, global community in this world. And Paul said earlier in his announcement about one of the tenants of Buddhism is to connect I think exactly who said it, but to can to people with an open heart to the, to the universal aspect of our common humanity. And so, since August, I've been wanting to say something about the shooting in Ferguson seems like a very important part of our collective world that we live in part of our circle to be mindful of. And I didn't quite know what to say. And it's a hard thing to

talk about. And I don't know much about some of the related issues. And so it's hard for me to talk about it. But it's kind of stunning to after that to have a whole series of other shootings by police of black people in this country. And so it becomes a bigger, bigger part of our collective psyche. And how do we hold that? What do we do with it in our mindfulness, how do we open up and connect to something like that, rather than close down and pull away Keep it as it at a distance. There is a myth, Buddhist myth. Kind of a fairy tale. That's very important in our tradition. It's a story of a serial killer named Āṅgulimāla. And Āṅgulimāla was, you know, was going around the countryside, killing many people. And people were quite scared of him. And when the Buddha heard about him, the Buddha walked into the woods where Āṅgulimāla lived. Even though people said don't go in there, it's dangerous for you. And Āṅgulimāla saw him and saw this, you know, mendicant, that monk who has no weapons no nothing just robes and probably thought, Wow, my good luck. And, and, and so he started going after the Buddha following him down the road and as the Buddha Walk calmly Āṅgulimāla tried to catch up to him. And even running after the Buddha, he couldn't get it catch up to the Buddha walking calmly. It's kind of a fairy tale part of the story. And so finally Āṅgulimāla yells out, stop. And the Buddha says, said, continues walking and says, I've already stopped, why don't you stop? And you know, it's a metaphoric way of speaking, you know? And that got that got Āṅgulimāla's attention. And then he finally then he was willing to hear what the Buddha had to say. And I guess what he realized was that the Buddha even had, you know, had metaphorically stopped, he'd stopped his greed, hate and delusion. And Āṅgulimāla was still operating and agreed running greed, hate and delusion. So why don't you stop?

So, in Phoenix a week or two ago, I figured it was police officers who said to black men to stop as he was right away. And what would have happened if he had said I've already stopped? Why don't you stop to the police officers? Would they have understood? Instead the police officer shot him dead and he's running away unarmed black person what do we have to stop in this country? What has to wear we have to address and face. And these things happen so many times. It was just stunning to me again to just last week something a 12 year old in Cleveland named Tamar Rice was playing with a gun in the playground, and a police officer shot him dead. And a 12 year olds kind of amazing and I tend not to look at videos, but I saw the video of that one. And I just couldn't get I couldn't believe what I saw. I couldn't I couldn't believe how that could have happened. How could anybody else police officers have done what they did? I just couldn't do it didn't make any sense. So a few weeks ago, month in October, I was teaching a retreat week long retreat with Ruth King, who's a marvelous African American Dharma teacher.

And she's done a lot of thinking and teaching about diversity and racism in our country. And so I was very fortunate that you had great conversations with this topic. And so I asked, brought up what kinds of things with her and was nice. I learned a lot from her. But the thing that I learned the most thing that really touched me in a very good, I think, very important, meaningful way. I was saying something to her about my experience of African Americans in America and things like that. I think it's I forget exactly what I said. It was something like, I've noticed that in how African Americans relate to me, sometimes there, they feel a sense of caution and being held back. But then it's some point the pendulum swings quite strongly, it tilts over. And there's tremendous warmth. And so I was just kind of asking what's, you know, what's that's different than it is the I feel like there's a different way of relating than other people who relate to me and other people of diverse backgrounds that they don't this isn't quite same dynamic. And then this is what she said. And she said something like, of course, it's because we're kin. It's because we're family. And I kind of like, stun me, and immediately, immediately what I, what I got I understood or what is that? For the African Americans and European Americans have been intertwined, entangled with each other for centuries in this continent. And they've interbred, And there's very few African Americans who don't have European blood. We're family you know, we're connected in deep

ways. And it's a connection which the white people have mostly denied and pushed away and how many you know, slave owning white men have fathered African American children and then just not related to them or sold them off and test them on to other places and have denied it denied their their family and so here you know, a family it's been denied it's been held at a distance and it must be so painful to be always be on the receiving end of the pushing away and, and not being recognized not being included as kin as family. So when Ruth said that to me, as I said, had a big impact on me. So my background is that I was born in Norway, much of my growing up was in Europe. And much of my adult life was United States. And I have net I know for most of, you know, I never really wanted to strongly identify as an American because you had this European background and seems like whenever I came back to America, there was something about American what was going on in America like I didn't tell about this mostly the way white people, you know, behaved and wars around the world and racism and all kinds of things as you know, I don't really want identify with this. And it's kind of strange, you know, I've spent most of my adult life here and that's not feel that you know, kind of hesitant that identification. By now, I'm more American culturally than anything. I'm probably having been here so long. But when Ruth told me that we're kin African Americans, European Americans, even though you know, my background, you know, they've been centuries and centuries in Norway so we mostly bothered the English. And the when she said that I one reaction has own it now I'm ready to be an American. Ready them kind of that I wanted that that's that sense to me. So the idea that we're kin and so what does it mean to open our hearts? What does it mean to open up to include the other and, and to see the other as someone of you to open our hearts to. I think that Buddhist practice is a very important practice to help us open our hearts but opening our hearts is not enough. We still have To also watch our minds.

And this is a combination of what you know, we open our hearts, and we watch our minds. And then I think we can live in a safe world. And but opening our hearts means that we feel connected to others where we have our love for them or care for them. We're there for them, we're willing to be present. But watch our mind is so important because our minds are capable of all kinds of odd things. Maybe not all of you, but at least some of you I think. And so we produce these thoughts and concepts and ideas and judgments and biases and preference that we have. So quickly all people do this. And one of the first lessons I had in this was when I was 18. I was traveling in Morocco. This was 1971 probably. And it was the first time I'd been to a non western country by myself struggling with a couple of friends, a couple of friends. And I noticed that and so a lot of it was pretty traditional back then. And some of the places we went and people were there traditional clothes and men wore these yellow buzz, which was nice long kind of gowns or robes and with hoodies and, and then I, I noticed that after some time in Morocco, that there was a kind of a lightness in my mind a particular kind of light or open feeling in my brain that I was unfamiliar with. And then I got curious, continued being in Morocco and what is this going And finally, I determined that what was going on was I had no context for judging the people in Morocco. In America, you know, I was a hippie, whatever that meant. white middle class hippie. And there were people who, you know, there was strange relationships with, you know, like, the conservatives and no, rednecks and jocks, and then, you know, businessmen, you know, and I see these people around and I would have a little reaction to them. But in Morocco, I had no context for you know, just man with your lava, you know, was he a Democrat, Republican? You know, I don't know what you know, just Was he a jock? You know, I don't know. And so that part of the brain that was involved in judging Evaluating and reacting to people based on these concepts was an operating. And that's why I had this likeness in my mind. And that was kind of a wake up for me that you know, how my mind operates and what the impact of my mind is to be in reaction to people. So to have an open heart and watch your mind, you start noticing what the mind is doing. And it's very powerful to be, have the mindfulness strong enough and present enough that you can watch the birth of a thought, birth of an impulse Birth of a feeling, because if you can really see it at the birth of it, then you can you can put a question mark behind it. Is this really true? But if you don't see the birth of a thought and idea, a concept, a judgement, and it's kind of like barrels

ahead and just leave it in your mind and you're kind of paying attention to other things while the concept is operating. It can be very easy to take it to be the truth. So the example I like to give is someone's you're walking on the sidewalk and someone comes down the sidewalk who's, you know, looks really scary to you. So you're happily going along and being mindful, your mind is relaxed. And you notice the arising of fear, or the rising of the idea, or that's a dangerous person. And rather than and sometimes people are dangerous, so you've got to, you know, sometimes that's a good thing to notice. But if you notice the birth of that, and put a question mark behind it means you can look again, this really true and you can take ownership for why you might be thinking this person scary. Oh, this looks like the bully in high school that I travel with. And it's not not that person, but it looks like that person. So that's why it's scary, or you know, all kinds of things you kind of look at and look more carefully and we make judgments of each other all the time.

You know, probably human beings are human judges. And I don't know if it's bad, I don't know if it's bad to judge people you know, it's just because we don't want to make bad something. It's kind of so basic to human nature to be judging, evaluating, having, you know, but we have to be responsible about it. And careful about it. And that's why watching the mind so you know, they say, watch pot never boils. The Buddhist saying is a watched mind never boils. And watch mind never gets caught up in anger and rage, all these things. Watch your mind. Open your heart and watch your mind. And so in terms of race relationships in America, it for everyone, I think everyone involved in American society. Watch your mind and see what you do and see the concepts you're operating under and be very careful have question marks behind it, and all that Angulimala said to the Buddha stop, and the Buddha said, Why don't you stop? And I could well imagine that many black people in America could say that to white society, why don't you stop? You know, the white people get benefits in this country that a lot of other people don't get certainly lots of benefits that black people haven't gotten it but I think it's often not recognized. You know, it's kind of just expected it's normal to go into a bank and get a loan and we get, maybe you get the low normal enough and just take it for granted. Up until 1997 the Department of Agriculture gave preferential loans to white farmers over black farmers in this country 1997 Isn't that amazing? So probably the white farmer just This is what you do you go bank and get alone. And, you know, it's kind of ordinary. And if you're a black farmer, you know, it didn't seem fair. They said, I can just stop. You know, we've already had to stop, you know, we're, but why don't you guys stop? Stop kidding. One one pot, you know, other people preferentially in us in other ways. Housing, housing loans, the Federal Housing Administration in 1930s, during the Great, you know, depression, had rules that apply preferentially to white people. After World War Two that's coming back from the war received a number of benefits that are very important for this for the economic kind of growth of United States into the 1950s. And like, one of them was that that some vets got educated grants that go to education who got preference the White soldiers got more preferential grants that go to school than the black soldiers stop so reasonable it's a reasonable thing to say to American start up. But why you know it's so hard for white people that we don't know our history right so this watch your mind be mindful circle have the circles go out Be mindful of the world we live in also require some education some learning and it doesn't take that much to learn these things. If it just a little bit of research to understand what it was this world we live in, what is it like to live in a society and what are the benefits we get preferential treatment we get. I read recently a fascinating book called whites like me, some of you know the book black like me. And he has this guy has a wonderful little attitude. I like him. He was right by his own experience. He grew up in Nashville and in the white community And growing the black community and a lot of black friends kind of grew up right in the middle of black community in Nashville and, and then at some point when he went to middle school, he'd always, you know, most of his friends were black. And then they all went together to middle school. And then he watched as the schools began to separate the whites and the blacks in the schools. It didn't make any sense for him because he, he didn't have he didn't have good grades. But he was given the preferential classes over the blacks. And

he was very painful for him to watch. And he goes through the history again, the book goes through a little bit of history of from, you know, colonial times of how it was like what it's like to have been a white person in America.

And he talks about centuries of affirmative action for white people. Centuries and how long is affirmative action been going on for Black people in America, you know, some places have been going on for maybe a couple of decades, few decades. And, you know, how does that balance the balance, you know, for centuries of one and four decades of the other, it's for decades going to even it out. So housing loans. The other thing was, you know, some of you probably know this that some cities in America had vibrant African American communities growing African American middle class. So then, America decided to put in have an inter interstate highway system to put all these highways around to build highways. And so guess what communities they avoided putting highways through the white communities. That's nice for the white people. The black people, they put through highways through these inner city places or cities. Just cut right through police communities and kind of destroyed them in the process. Over and over many places you can see it you don't see it in San Francisco anymore but I used to live in the corner of up there and lower hate and you know and there was a freeway on ramp off ramp that came from I guess one on one came right down to fell right to the fell came on and it was quite a big impact I lived right actually lived right next to the freeway for a while on Oak Street here the freeway at my window look out and watch people come by so you don't have to be depressed the whole area to have this freeway it's made it dark and unsafe and now they've cut it down and the place is becoming vibrant. And a wonderful play wonderful nice community of trees and all that and guess who lived there before the freeway and guess who's living there after the freeway? So who gets preferential teaching treats or treatment? So one more thing I'll say about this thing is about the whites benefit is that one of the fastest forms of growth of wealth for people united states is the growth in the value of their home. And guess whose home values go up the fastest. It tends to be people in white communities who gets the most help from their parents to get loans for first time home buying. one statistic I read is that 46% of white people have gotten cold loans or support from their parents in order to buy their first home, their home 12% of black people. So it's kind of and so if, if there's loans are more preferentially given to black to white people, if support for it is happening for white people. And then if if housing prices rise more quicker, and more white people's neighborhoods who's left behind? Who's getting preference? Who has where's the affirmative action working? Right. So are our white people still recipient of affirmative action in our country? And I would say there's a good argument they are.

So Āṅgulimāla, Buddha said to Āṅgulimāla, stop. And when are the white people going to stop? When are we going to stop? When are we going to kind of understand what's going on here? So that the, there's lots of not just African Americans in this country, but lots of people in this country can have a fair chance and equal chance. The idea of equal chance it's like, I think is value that I sell deeply in America. But it's hard to see it. It's hard to understand it. And it's very hard to have these conversations because you know, the It's very hard not to take these things personally. So for white people, as soon as that these things are talked about, all these white people with good intentions, sometimes are the most dangerous ones. Because they have good intention. So it's hard for them to see what's going on. They don't want to say wait a minute, stop. I'm not doing this. It's not me. It's somewhere else the problem and, but there are good people are certainly good intentions. But if you're supporting and being acting in a system of preferential treatment for white people, it's reasonable for other people to say wait a minute, stop. Take a look at this. What's going on here? It's not fair for us, what's going on.

And so many people in our society struggle with lack of opportunity, lack of fairness, lack of openness and lack of understanding, lack of Really people seeing them and seeing what's going on. And if there's one thing that I've learned as a teacher over the years, is that being seen for who you are

be really seen well, is one of the greatest gifts that we give people. And one of the greatest gifts our parents can give to us if they do it. If our parents don't do it to us, it's a tremendous burden to not be seen. And so how do we, you know, open our hearts and see everyone to understand everyone. And I don't think we can rely only on our good hearts only on moment to moment mindfulness, just what's right in front of us. I think also it really understand other people. Having the American experience having the immigrant experience having the Native American experience having that poor experience, that it takes a little bit to in for all of us to be curious to be interested. To learn, what is this? Who is this person? What's this person's experience? What's this person's background? To watch our minds and watch and see? What assumptions do we have? What reactions which responses do we have? And to learn through mindfulness to stay open, to keep our hearts open, if we're afraid, if we're prejudiced if we're, you know, towards people, if we don't do we don't want to get close to people to watch that and see that and know it, and learn how to be wise about that. And how to work through that or not have it interfere with an open heart. And to be humble. The I'm not probably humble enough, but certainly one of the reasons I didn't want to give this talk was I don't know you know, I don't know how to talk about this. You know, it's so difficult. I don't feel like I've done much study or understanding of And so it's easy to, you know, just add suffering upon suffering, because you talk about it in ways that are ignorance. But one of the things I've learned through my study of diversity issues is it's hard to you can't just do enough study to understand everyone. And you have to be very careful not to assume that someone in a group that you identify with a group, like, you know, like, the black people are a unified group, they all have the same experience. And so you can study anything, all kinds of, you know, things and that doesn't really help you maybe with the person in front of you. So one of the important principles in diversity work is cultural humility. And so to have a not knowing mind to be willing to find out what going on there, who is this person? So I'll give you two little stories my life about how I learned not exactly cultural humility but but how important it is to not have preconceptions of people and be curious and approach people like you don't do it. You don't really know them. Let's find out who they are what goes on. One was a simple story, painful story of working. I was working at a restaurant as a cook and I was in the changing room. And my shift and there was a new shift for someone else coming on my A friend of mine who I've known for some time we were friendly, came in to change. And I said, I kind of jokingly, maybe a little bit teasingly said hello in some playful way.

And and I didn't take Time to find out how he was was going on. So he told me that one of his best friends just died. Oh, no, you know, I didn't do a lot of damage. But, you know, I could have at least waited a moment or two to see get a sense of him and see what's going on. And then I took it in a workshop in their early 80s with Steven Levine, he did what he did, he would do this death and dying workshops, anybody do these workshops with him? And he was brilliant. And his work very intuitive and you know, really great. And so I had did it in rain county weekend, Sunny, outdoor place, outsource beautiful place, kind of, I don't know, everything outdoor in the courtyard before it started and they're all these, you know, you know, again, you know, if you make a little bit of room for my narrow mind in a way my mind can make assumptions and judge people Something, I'll tell you how I saw people. I kind of like these are all nice middle class white people who are healthy and normal, whatever that is. And then we went into the workshop. And what these people were carrying with them just blew me away. Some of them were dying. Some of them their children, young children had just died. Some of them were parents died. So this and that that happened. And I realized that I didn't know who they were, and that the assumptions I had, you know, out in the courtyard were, didn't really do justice to who they were. And that had a big impact on me to be willing to kind of drop my assumptions and be curious and this cultural humility Who is this person? What? Let's find out. Let them let's listen carefully. I'm not going to ask maybe I want to ask a lot of questions because that could be presumptive. But maybe I'll just let them show themselves and reveal that the known who is this person What's going on? So, an open heart and to watch your mind allows you to have certain cultural humility or certain kind of rooms

in Buddhism, sometimes they talk about having not knowing mind to not know, to go into I don't know, yes, I think this way, but I don't know. And then who is this, what's going on here? So I hope that I hope that all of us are impacted by these series of shootings of black people in America. That all of you take it in in the best possible way. And that it changes you for the better. That somehow you take it in and take it as something very important to be conscious of to be mindful of and be aware of, not to close down not to be horrified not to get angry. But to use it to be motivated to improve our society for everyone to be motivated to change for the better. If we are impacted by these things, and we're not changed, if we're impacted by these things, we're not at least willing to kind of see how we can live in a better way. And if we're impacted by them and say it's only those peoples out there to police department in Cleveland for their stories in this last week about the police department in Cleveland, there was a federal investigation about the police department in Cleveland. And they concluded that Cleveland Police Department regularly use excessive force. Like when they use the taser for the man who was strapped down on the gurney in the ambulance. So, how do we become better people? How do we live in this in as members of the society as a better people. So rather than being weighed down by this, the Buddhist approach is to be is to be impacted by this, and then be inspired to do better to be changed to change and doesn't mean that you have to go to Cleveland talk to the police department.

But it means that maybe you're more sensitive to the experience of what it's like to be an American for African Americans and Native Americans. Maybe it's more sensitive to what it's like to be white. A lot of my diverse friends, you know, non white friends. They're kind of patiently or not so patiently waiting for white people to understand better what it means to be white. In the society, please, they said, please learn what it's like little bit about it. Don't just take it for granted like it's ordinary or normal to be what what it's like to be whiteness society. It means something. There's affirmative action that many other white people have received for years. Until we understand those things. Maybe it's going to be hard to have an equitable society. So sometimes our mindfulness practice we turn in within, sometimes we take our mindfulness and turn out and there's a rhythm of going in and out. Sometimes we go in in order to find how to become wise and calm and And not to be caught by, by our life. And sometimes we go out to discover what it's like to be a human being and to live in this world. And to go back and forth in and out, is hopefully a way that rhythm is hopefully a way that we can live in wide good ways, connecting to everyone with our universal goodwill. They all beings be happy. Thank you