

2020-08-23 Do What You Can

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SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

So welcome to this Sunday morning Dharma talk. And for those of you who have been here before, and those of you who may be new, I want to invite back Patacara and Patacara was living on her altar for a while. She was a gift to IMC and IRC and she was one of the most important of the earliest Buddhist nuns, who was a teacher, teacher of many of the other nuns of the time of the Buddha. And we're very fortunate to have a statue of her and she's back here today today because she lives in Santa Cruz at our retreat center. But the retreat center is about six miles from some of the big Santa Cruz San Mateo County fires that are happening now. And so, some of the resident volunteers came here to IMC for shelter and they brought her along for safekeeping and very happy to have her back and she'll be here for a while and this time around and I don't know how long and nice to have our company.

So for those of you who are not in the Bay Area in San Francisco Bay Area, there's a kind of Ring of Fire around us. Just west of here, probably, I don't know, as the crow flies, maybe five, six miles. There's fires going on and down towards Santa Cruz, about six miles from Santa Cruz, there's fires and big fires. They're destroying many homes and There's some 70,000 people who are evacuated down there and directly south of here or southeast little bit, there's one of the largest fires in California history, Mount Hamilton mountains, which is just east of Santa Cruz of San Jose. And then fires going up slowly up to the Bay, but big fires up in the northern counties in Napa Valley area. And that also is one of the very biggest fires in the California history that's burning well over 200,000 acres. And the air here in California and in here in the Bay Area's intermittently full of smoke. This morning it's relatively clean. The times where it's been unhealthy air to breathe and so, and we have people in our community who have lost their homes, in the mountains here and some some of them it's always tragic, some of them may be a little bit more tragic than others if all their savings went into their home and everything burnt and disappeared in the fire. As far as I know, we don't have anyone who has been injured. But certainly has a big impact on many of our lives here and what goes on and to have

this happen the same time as COVID-19 and the wish to be sheltered and to be appropriately distanced from other people so not to either get the COVID-19 or pass it on. It makes it challenging this time when all those evacuees have to go someplace and on the move and not at home. So it's challenging time and they say it's challenging, not only because of what's happening right now, but also what's coming, the weather's changing. Tonight more lightnings supposed to be coming. Most of these fires are lightning fires. Apparently they had about 12,000 lightning strikes in California over the last week, especially last Sunday, Monday, I think. And those 12,000 lightning strikes about 500 fires were created all over the state. So Fire, fire forces are quite spread thin and challenging. And so with all that as kind of the context for our lives this weekend, this week, this time, and it's kind of for California. So let's repeat what happened just two months ago, and we had huge fires last year. And seems like it's becoming a regular pattern to have these big fires and the weather conditions have changed dramatically. To that really allows these fires to occur.

So there is a story that begins that once there was qs a large forest, for which there came a storm, big lightning storm came and thunderous lightning struck the tops of trees and frighten the animals and the people who live there and in some of the lightning lit some of the trees have on fire. And the fire trees burst into flames. The flame spread to neighboring trees, the sparks from the trees flew from one tree further away, and pretty soon big parts of the forest were was where it was on fire. This could be a story just a few miles away from here in Santa Cruz Mountains or it's a story that's told. It said to be told at a time but the Buddha, it's a jataka tale, tale birth stories of the Buddha they're kind of Buddhist fables. This one is a fable about a small bird. Some people call it a quail. Some people are parent who found itself in this huge forest fire. And the fact that the description that's given for the fire back, back then ancient India is almost the same. The description for us today speaks to the occurrence of these kinds of dangers, these kinds of human experiences that we live in and world experiences. They're coming through a fire. The Santa Cruz Mountains here the big big destruction happened at the big base in redwood forests and the redwoods are more or less Okay, most of them and they depend on fires to come through for their whole ecosystem is fire dependent. But the ranger station that the headquarters there is not fire dependent, in fact that got destroyed in the process. But the redwood trees continue so in this jotika tail, there is this small parrot that is able to fly to safety because it can go fly above the flames. And a lot of work begins to fly above the flames through the smoke and feeling the heat coming up from the graph from the tops of the trees, and is flying to the river where it can be safe. And, and as it looks down into the forest, it sees all these animals running and animals that are trapped. Deer with its fine trapped, all these animals that are kind of agitated, screaming, running, trapped and trying to escape the fire. And this just opens the heart of the parents and their parents that I have to do something I can't just escape from myself. But what does a small parent do? And so the parrot goes to the river and dunks into the water to get all its feathers as wet as possible. And then carrying the weight of the water and feather flaps back. Now it can't fly quite above the fire anymore but just to singed by the fire as it flies along back to the heart of the fire the center of it, and then shakes out its leaves, so the drops can fall out of its feathers and bound to the fire. And those drops, you know, they don't even reach the flame the flame before they sizzle up and evaporate and

disappear. And the parrot goes back to the river and does it again and again and again. Now up in the high heavens, there's God's called devils in India, who are living lives of pleasure and luxury and ease. And they look down to see the fire below in the forest burning and they see this little parrot going to the river getting water wedding itself off and shooting gets water over the flames and doing it over and over again. And they kind of little bit laugh at it and say look that silly parrot and the parrot can't do any make any difference in this big fire. And it's, you know, it's this not what it should be doing. And they're a little bit dismissive of the of the parents, except for one of the gods. And one of the gods was quiet and very thoughtful, and decides to go visit and takes the form, shape shift shape shifts into the form of a great eagle and comes down and flies next to the little parrot and says, parrot, parrot, my friend. What you're doing is hopeless. Let me give you some advice. You should really go and save yourself go someplace where there is no fire, go to the side of the river and be safe.

And the parrot says, Many people give me advice. I don't need advice. What I need is someone who can help me. And that went right into the heart of the great ego, this deva, this God. And the God looked around and saw what was happening in the fire and also saw the animals who are struggling and is trapped and maybe screaming with the flames coming and, and felt and attached. Yes, I want to be a person I want to be a being like this parrot. I want to be a being that helps. And so the devastated decision I'm going to also help this parrot but as it is, the heart opened up of this demo. So did the tears. And the tears started streaming down off the beak of the great eagle and off its feathers of its face and started falling. And falling because it was that tears of a deva, the tears were immense. And it's almost like it was raining across the forest. And all those tears, then that came from there, there was a wish to be of help and to dedicate itself to make a difference. Then quench the fire still the fire and ended the forest fire. And so that is a fable retold in ancient India at ends with a little line that says and in that lifetime, at that lifetime is the Buddha speaking. I was the parent and all these jataka tales are stories of the Buddha and different past lives before he became a Buddha. And they say that in each of those lifetimes. He had to learn a lesson and hear in that lesson of being a parrot. He maybe he learned the lesson of perseverance, the lesson of compassion, the lesson of we do whatever we can. We're not expected to do more than we can, but we do what we can. And this idea do we do what we can? Are we doing what we can to help this world to help the forest fires of our lives in ancient India and that Buddhist teachings, forest fires. fires are very symbolic, both of the danger of fires themselves, but also other fires that exists the fires of greed, hate and delusion. The Buddha talks about four great perils the peril of fire of floods of kings and bandits. And so this, you know, fires come through and but the fires inside of us, the floods inside of us the, the Kings inside of us and the bandits inside of us, those can all be dangerous as well. The fires, as I said is symbolic of greed, hate and delusion and greed, hate and delusion to some huge way is also has a role to play in the, in the changing nature of our environment, the environmental changes the climate changes we have. And so without really looking deeply into ourselves, are we really going to quench the fires. So this idea of we do what we can, no matter how small it is, like the parrot and, and like the devices. We let our hearts break open. Later. That's where the compassion resides and why I say that is that it's certainly deeply, fully a sad thing to have people lose their homes lose their lives, people die, people get sick, and

people get afraid. There's grief to be experienced in this regard. And, but how to experience grief, how to experience sadness, how to experience the pain of the world, without getting agitated, without getting contracted, without getting spinning out into discursive thought, how to kind of connect to it with a broken heart open heart. So that the compassion that's in there that care the love can come forth out of us.

So that's the that's the function of practice, Buddhist practice. Buddhist practice is particularly, you know, that really shows us the path or the way in which that we can engage in the world effectively. And one of the key lessons of Buddhist practice the depth of it is the lesson that not to become ill not less than to be peaceful and it's a bit all, but rather, the lesson of not giving in to the forces of agitation, not giving in to greed, or hatred, or not succumbing to fear in a way that makes us agitated. And there's a huge difference between saying, you know, let's try to be peaceful and calm versus saying, it's just I don't see it's not worthwhile for me to now get involved in spinning out in my district. have thoughts. It's not worthwhile for me to latch on to my the blame that I have, or latch on to self criticism for what, you know, how could I've done something, or to latch on to anger. It's not worth latching on or picking up certain things. To learn that lesson through practice, to know to sit quietly enough, attentively enough, and to watch carefully and see very clearly what it's like for the mind not to latch on to any of these things. And to see what it's like to latch on, and as we latch on, to see what is lost, to see how it's not doesn't really serve us. There's a loss in that. This is a phenomenal lesson to learn. It's not worth it. It's not appropriate, but there's a loss in getting caught and agitated, it doesn't mean we don't care. We can actually care better from that deeper place inside. We can care better to the world or wiser about the world, when we don't give into all these other things that keep us spinning out and preoccupied and concerned. Of course we do. It's not a crime to do that. Of course we do. Life is challenging. But the practice can teach us how to see. Learn to recognize mean takes a while, sometimes it takes months and years to really start seeing that it's not worth picking up. clinging, not worth picking up latching on. And that's a very different perspective, than the perspective that Oh, you're supposed to be peaceful. Because then we can argue well, peaceful, peaceful, being peaceful is okay. But this is not the time to be peaceful. We have to kind of be involved and concerned and get, you know, active. But instead of saying we have to be peaceful, what Buddhist practice teaches us is we don't have to latch on, we don't have to get caught. And this is a profoundly deep and important lesson. Not only when there is a forest fire, not only when there's fires around us, but also for the fires of sickness, old age and death. The inevitable fires, that life comes with being alive. Just as it's natural for the fires to go through Redwood land. It's natural for human beings to get sick. They're lucky enough to become old and to die. What do we do then? And so a story I told last year, or an allegory I told last year, The Buddha was talking to a king. And the king said, Well, you know, Buddha said something like, how are you? And the king said, Well, I'm preoccupied and the things that kings are preoccupied with and sensual pleasures of all kinds because he's wealthy and has a lot of power, conquering neighboring countries and worrying and all these things. I'm busy.

And the Buddha then says this allegory said, Imagine, dear King, that the mountains of the of the East, a messenger comes from the east and tells you, King, the mountains of the East, are rolling forward towards the Capitol, towards your palace, towards you. And a messenger from the south comes and says the mountains of the South are rolling along, crushing everything that's away coming to you. The mountains of the West, the mountains of the North, they're all connected. verging on you, and it's gonna crushing everything as a way until it comes here. Given that, what would you do then? And the king sitting on that case, I will practice the Dharma. And the Buddha said, that's good. That's right. Because the mountains of sickness, old age and death are coming, rolling along. And that's coming for all of us. And, and there will come a time if and hopefully, for all of us that we, if we can be conscious as we come across these two big challenges, that the nature of our practice, if it's become strong, becomes really central to how we meet those challenges. And it comes a time when we're not even like the parrot. We can't even we no longer can even do a little bit to help ourselves. The end is coming. And here's where that Dharma lesson is so important. Because if we look we can we know so clearly, even as we're facing death, it just simply not worth. While it's not not not useful. It's not pleasant. It's not it there's a loss, deep, great loss, to latch on to fear, to latch on to anger, to latch on to disappointment, to latch, on latch on to resistance, to be fighting, to be hating to be versus to be afraid. It's just not worth latching on to that being involved in that. And we can see so clearly what is lost as we latch on. And so then we don't do it. The consequence of that is that we come back To a place of peace without being told that you should be dying peacefully without being told that you don't have to think about all these thoughts about the future, the past, what do you have from what's going to be? It's so obvious that you're better off not going there. That you have a home you have something precious and valuable here and now, even as you're dying. And that place is you don't want to lose it. It's not worth losing it. That's where wealth is. That's where value is. That's where a deep sense of meaning even is there. That's lost as we latch on. And that is one of the deepest Dharma lessons we can learn. As we keep doing this practice and keep being mindful and keeps seeing And learning and recognizing what's really going on, moment to moment in this life of ours and how we respond to how we react. And when the time comes, for the heart to open and for our, the metaphoric tears to flow freely and put out the fires of the world the best we can then made the so when the time comes and we experienced great loss, we don't have to be afraid of the deep, emotional feelings that come with that. If we can meet those and open to them with our mindfulness, if we can learn how to have strong powerful emotions of even sadness and pain and loss, and even fear, and we've learned not to latch on to anything not to add anything extra not to get spin out and discursive thoughts But there's deep respect for what the heart is feeling, which I think is what the story tells about the Devo who wanted to help and just started crying. That's where the healing began happening for the forest. So to allow our humanity allow these emotions to come, but to learn, not to resist, not to hold on not to cling, not to get involved in discursive commentary judgments about it, this simplicity of just letting it flow.

So we learn this lesson and apply it in so many different places. And sometimes it applies in the ways that we want to help the world. Sometimes we apply it so we help ourselves and allow what's inside to be healed and opened and met with respect. And we'll use that those lessons at a time when there's

no help possible in the sense that you know what we're really up against our own death perhaps and the mountains have finally come in even then to meet that without slipping off into discursive thoughts for slipping off into attachment and clinging. This is a powerful and valuable and meaningful way of living and dying and finding our way. We live in a world that's full of danger. There's no denying it. And we live in a world where we can practice and this practice for our hearts. makes all the difference in the world. Don't be the parent that escaped the fire and doesn't help be the pirate escapes the fire just enough to help come back and help. Don't be the dev that is aloof and dismissed. What's happening in the world? Be the devil that wants to come and help hearts opens up into flows. And to be that way, please practice the mindfulness practice, do the meditation practice. It's one of the most powerful and significant thing a person can do with this life we have. So on this day of forest fires all around us, maybe they're all roaming towards us. Maybe May we remember to practice and we may remember that Penny ways that we can get our feathers wet, and check them out. There's no amount of helping, which is too little. We do if we can.

So thank you so much, and I look already seeing you next Sunday as well. Maybe next Sunday. I think maybe I'm teaching retreat next Sunday. So we'll see what happens.