

Vesak Talk for Adults

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on May 6, 2012

We celebrate the Buddha's birthday today and it's a happy occasion. It's called the Vesak and it's also the celebration of the Buddha's awakening when he was about thirty-six, as well as his passing away when he was about eighty. I find it symbolic that one holiday celebrates these three events with his awakening being approximately half-way between his birth and death.

His awakening led him to discover how to live in this world without being in conflict or struggle. I think it's one of the remarkable possibilities of any lifetime to discover how to live without any inner conflict at all. There might be outer conflict with the world around us. The Buddha had some in his time. But there's a distinction between what the heart does, and the concerns we have to think about, reflect on, and engage in. And with practice, we can find a heart wherein we are at peace, and there is no longer struggle, conflict, or aversion. There's no longer holding onto something, or feeling unsafe or threatened. Halfway through his life, the Buddha discovered how to live a life without struggle.

He talked about a life without *dukkha*, a life without

suffering. But if we keep using that word suffering, we begin to kind of glaze over, and the mind goes numb. But I think that to talk about conflict or the absence of conflict is significant. There is a strong tendency in religious circles, Buddhist circles, and human circles to want to hold on to an ideal. If I have become a spiritual person, a realized person, or a good person, then I will be a certain way. I'll always be loving; I'll always be compassionate; I'll always be peaceful. I'll be some kind of way.

As I said earlier, trying too hard to be something is like trying to grab onto the sound of a bell [rings], which you can't grab onto. But it's quite significant to talk about the absence of conflict, where you experience an inner life without struggle, or in conflict with yourself – without feeling bad, or unworthy, or that you have to hide part of who you are. There are many ways in which we struggle and are in conflict. To learn how to relax, to shed, to let go of, to overcome these stresses we live under is one of the great tasks of a human life.

As we discover how to live without conflict, then we get to be who we are. I like to believe that most of the unskillful or harmful things we do to ourselves and others, come when we are in conflict. And if we discover a deep abiding sense of the absence of conflict, struggle, greed, aversion, fear in our heart, then what's left is the flowers and the beauty of our heart. What's

left is that which is good. But what that is and how that manifests in any individual will be different. I wouldn't want to try to fit anybody into a Buddhist mold. If you're going to be a Buddhist, you have to look like this, wear these kinds of clothes, and behave this kind of way.

I am in awe of the many ways to be a human being. Each of them is special. I hope that in doing this Buddhist practice, this mindfulness practice, it helps us discover how to be free of our own conflict, our own struggles, and how to have a peaceful heart. But I also hope that it helps us to see and recognize the specialness, the value, and worth of each human life – so that as we meet the diversity of different lives, we can celebrate, respect, and include them all. So that all beings are welcomed into our hearts – so that all beings feel that they *belong* in our hearts. We are all in it together.

I hope that this practice can lead to a recognition that we are all here in a mutually supportive way. Our open heart supports other open hearts. And when our heart is closed, we have our community to help us open. When the hearts of others are closed, we have our good will, generosity, kindness, and compassion, which create a field that allows others to feel safe. And as they feel safe, perhaps they can begin to blossom and open up.

Part of this day of celebration is to remind ourselves of

what's best in our own hearts. And also what supports and expresses that – what creates a container of support. And so we usually chant the Refuges – taking refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha. And we also use this occasion to renew the commitment to the beautiful gift we can give to ourselves and the world. That is, to live by the Five Precepts – not killing, not stealing, not lying, not engaging in sexual misconduct, and not intoxicating the mind.

Some of you know this, and some of you don't; so because some of you might not know, I will chant each line first by myself, and then in call and response style, you can respond second. The chant begins with homage or paying respect to the Buddha. Without the Buddha, his practice and his awakening, we would not be here together as a community on Sunday morning. We would all be somewhere else. Because of him, we are here. Without him, this wouldn't be happening.

[Audience repeats after each line]:

*Namo tassa bhagavato arahato
sammāsambuddhasa*

*Namo tassa bhagavato arahato
sammāsambuddhasa*

*Namo tassa bhagavato arahato
sammāsambuddhasa*

*Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi*

*Dutiyampi buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
Dutiyampi dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
Dutiyampi saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi*

*Tatiyampi buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
Tatiyampi dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
Tatiyampi saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi*

And then to recite the Five Precepts, I will do half a line in English, you will repeat; and then I'll do the second half.

For the sake of our practice together, I commit myself to not killing.

For the sake of our practice together, I commit myself to not lying.

For the sake of our practice together, I commit myself to not take what is not given.

For the sake of our practice together, I commit myself to avoid sexual misconduct.

For the sake of our practice together, I commit myself to not intoxicating mind or body.

When I teach the Precepts to children, I don't call them the Precepts. I call them the Five Protections. I tell them

that when they are babies, they can't do anything for themselves. All of their needs are taken care of by the adults. Then, slowly as they grow up, they begin to take care of themselves. They start walking and talking. At some point they are toilet trained, and so they can take care of that by themselves. At some point they can take the public bus, or walk to a neighbor's house down the street. There are all of these milestones. At some point when they are old enough, their parents aren't really there anymore to protect them. They are out in the world on their own; but even then, they need protections. These five are very important protections to carry your whole life. They might sometimes seem burdensome until you live with having broken one of them. Then you have to live with the consequences, and you wish you had kept the protection.

The Refuges of Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha are important as reminders and inspirations. One way they are important is that they provide a context or a reference point for our lives that is bigger than our own individual efforts. They point to our own efforts, that we can do this practice, and walk this path. In this wider reference point is the Buddha and what that represents – the awakening. And the Dharma – the teachings and practices, the inner natural unfolding that isn't quite our own doing, although we have to set the conditions for it. And the Sangha – the community that supports us as well. Sometimes it's really crucial to know that there is a

bigger container than just our own efforts, that we can feel we are carried and supported, reminded and guided.

As we end, those of you who would like to, come up and wash the baby Buddha. Remember that the baby stands for you. As you wash the baby Buddha, perhaps you are washing that which is most valuable and beautiful in your own heart; and it is always there for you, available for you, even though sometimes it is obscured.