

Nonviolence (5 of 5) Courage to Engage

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Gil Fronsdal

We have come to the fifth talk on nonviolence. Most of you know that this series is an understated way of responding to the horrific violence that's happening in the Middle East. Also in my heart is the horrific violence in Ukraine, Syria, Sudan, Burma, and all over the world.

The last meditation I led might not have been the most popular meditation that I've given. Many people associate Buddhist meditation with acceptance, relaxation, allowing, just settling back and being no one, going nowhere, nothing to do. I'd like to propose that that's only half the picture. Making that the full picture of what Buddhist practice is shortchanges us. We don't really step up or live in this world in a completely free way. The Buddha did not avoid the world after he was enlightened. He engaged in the world and intentionally went into places where there were people. One of the first things he did was go back to his hometown and visit his people.

Half of the practice might be considered relaxation. The other half of practice is to awaken energy, a capacity to act and not be held in check by fear, resistance, or diminishing ourselves.

There's a way of letting go of conceit and fear that allows us to show up more fully. In fact, when we practice mindfulness and are really present in such a way that we're no longer limited by our fear, nothing limits us from acting wisely, well, and compassionately in the world. Buddhist practice is about going forth, connecting, and living for the welfare and happiness of everyone.

One of the very important quotes for me in the Buddhist discourses says that:

A wise person does not intend harm to self, to others, to self and others, and to the whole world. Rather, a wise person intends welfare for self, intends welfare for others, intends welfare for self and others, intends welfare for the whole world.

Practice is not just about intending; it's also about showing up. I would like to give a couple of quotes and then make what for me is a very important statement. To portray his idea of showing up courageously, the Buddha uses metaphors that are not so popular in modern Western Buddhist circles. There is a very strong ethos against anything that is excessively assertive, masculine, macho, or warrior-like. There has been a strong movement to back down from the warrior metaphors that the Buddha frequently used. I've avoided them because if I use them, people will be critical or surprised when female teachers are allowed to use these metaphors. It can be very inspiring to hear them coming from women.

Here is one such metaphor:

Compared to a person who conquers a thousand times a thousand people, is the person who conquers oneself. The person who conquers oneself is supreme in battle.

The greatest battle we fight is the one with ourselves. We fight all the ways that we limit ourselves, hold ourselves in check, get attached, and live in fear. That is the battle. That's where we show up with courage in this practice. It takes courage to relax deeply, settle back, and allow our experience to go through us.

These two elements – letting go and courageous actions – go hand in hand. In some situations, one or the other predominates. It's not all about letting go, it's also about courageous action in this battle with oneself. That doesn't mean that we're hostile towards ourselves, aggressive, or hating ourselves. It actually means that we love ourselves because we want to stop the ways we limit ourselves.

Here is another quote:

The person who day and night delights in harmlessness and has loving kindness towards

all beings is the one who has no hate for anyone.

Here we see again the Buddha's idea of harmlessness. He delights in living a harmless life and comes with loving-kindness, free of hostility towards anyone. These are some of the key and most important teachings the Buddha gives. Over and over again, we see the emphasis on living a harmless life with *metta*, loving-kindness, and no hate for anyone. This does not mean that we're passive. The example of the Buddha's life is not one of a passive person. He was engaged with people and situations of his time.

Here's a small quote that I like about the possibility of harmless action. The Buddha is speaking to his main attendant, Ananda:

It is possible that you can look on with indifference at an elder monastic, a senior monastic being offended. Truly, Ananda, care does not grow from being still and unreactive when a senior monastic is being offended.

If someone is being offended, the teaching here is to stand up and get involved, rather than doing nothing. The Buddha told his monastics that even if

their teacher did something unethical, they should speak up, talk to the person, and not let them get away with it.

The reason I want to emphasize action today and end this week with us stepping up and doing something is that the more we're troubled and distressed by events in the world, the more important it is for us to act and to live differently. It does not help the world if we simply sit back and are angry, upset, and afraid while expecting someone else to do everything and having opinions about what should have happened and who's wrong.

The world needs people who step up and courageously act in the world. There are many ways of doing this. Each person has to find what's appropriate for them, their life, their situation, and which doors are open – what they can do.

If the San Andreas Fault (only a mile or two away) ruptures here in the peninsula where I live and there's a massive earthquake like there was in San Francisco in 1906, I bet we would see heroic and tireless efforts by the survivors to help and step forward. I don't think people would say, "I'm going to go meditate now." We step up and do. Otherwise, we are actually harming ourselves.

When 9/11 happened, I had a strong understanding that I had to do something different. The first thing I did differently was two weeks later I was supposed to give a day-long workshop on the Buddhist teachings of mindfulness. I decided I couldn't do that right after 9/11. I changed the workshop into a workshop on the Buddhist teachings on peace. That was a small thing and it wasn't enough, but the last thing I wanted to do was to go back to business as usual.

That happens over and over again. Many times in our life we read some horrible thing in the news and then we're changed for a while but then things go back to usual. The murder of George Floyd was horrendous and had a big impact on so many people. It highlighted the racism in the United States in a way that it hadn't been highlighted before. Many people were alarmed and there were movements to change. Now some years later, how much has changed? How many people have stopped being concerned about and focused on this issue? Many things pass so quickly.

With 911, I said, "I have to be changed by this. If I'm not changed by 9/11, I haven't really taken it in." I'm involved with the Sati Center, a Buddhist study

center. I decided we have to do more than just study the *suttas*, the Buddhist teachings. We have to do something for our society. From that came the decision to do the Buddhist chaplaincy program.

For 20 years now, we've been teaching a year-long introduction that has trained many people in the skills and orientation to Buddhist chaplaincy.

Chaplaincy is a way to open doors for people into a significant way of offering spiritual care. People have become hospital and prison chaplains, and have been involved in politics and in other ways. There are all kinds of places where people have stepped up and offered care. This chaplaincy program that started because of 9/11 has now spawned two other similar programs in chaplaincy.

A big part of my life in the last 20 years has been oriented around how I was changed by 9/11. With the situation for the last couple of years in Ukraine and what's happening now in Gaza and Israel, we're seeing a huge amount of violence. The endless cycles of violence have impacted many of us for many decades.

There's something qualitatively different and more powerful about what's happening now. There are so many children being killed, teens being shot down,

and innocent people being murdered. Many people are living a life that's worse than at San Quentin. I often go to San Quentin, the state prison here in California. From the pictures and reports I get of how people live in Gaza, it sounds like their life is worse than life in prison here in the United States.

There are a lot of opinions and ideas about all kinds of things. Putting opinions aside, are we willing to be changed by this? I would like to suggest that the more deeply we are impacted, the more we harm ourselves if we don't allow ourselves to change and do something different. We might not do something for the people in Gaza and Israel. How much can we do there from this distance? But maybe now we are motivated to do something else better.

Many times when I read in the newspaper about horrific things that impact me, it motivates me to be a better Buddhist teacher and to give myself more to this teaching, because I believe this work is peacemaking. This work is helping so many people to become free of suffering.

But sometimes that doesn't feel like enough. I've been impacted a lot by these last couple of weeks with Israel and Gaza. The question is, at my age, what do I do? How do I do things that are different? I

don't know yet what's possible or what doors will open that are appropriate to step through.

I created the chaplaincy program many years ago. I considered facilitating a training in the Sati Center on non-violence – the strategies, the wisdom, and the philosophy of it, and the inner work that has to happen in order to be a non-violent warrior for peace.

I've also been interested for many years in Buddhist peace studies and peace-related social justice and political issues. I've devoted my life to other things these years as a Buddhist teacher. My time is limited. What can I create at this point in my life? I'm not just giving this as an example. I'm reflecting and thinking about how I can be different because of the violence in the world. It's not enough just to sit back and have opinions.

I offer this to you as something for you to think about: the more deeply you've been impacted by this world's tragedies – whether they are personal, nearby, or far away – the more you'll do yourself a disservice if you hope just to relax, chill out, and get back to life as usual.

You can do yourself a tremendous service by evoking courage and strength – "Yes," you will step forward, act differently, and contribute to the world differently. Do it in a way that's appropriate for you so it's not a source of stress or exhaustion – it's a source of inspiration. It is enlivening and meaningful for you.

The Buddhist dedication to non-harming includes not harming oneself and benefiting oneself. This courageous way of acting in the world for the welfare of everyone includes you so that it's not stressful and doesn't cause more harm to you. This action is not about putting yourself in greater danger and feeling even more distressed. It's the opposite. You step forward to meet the suffering of the world in such a way that you are a better person because of it. You can be nourished and even freed by it. This is possible. Courageous action in the world can be transformative.

I hope this week has given you things to think about and consider in a serious way. This teaching is very important for me, despite its shortcomings in terms of actively addressing things more specifically. I'm sharing with you something that's been at the center of my life for many years and I'm glad to be able to speak about it.

Thank you very much.