Dharmette: Strength and Compassion

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on February 22, 2017

What's on my mind is to tell you a few stories from the Buddhist tradition. They're stories about how we can be in the world, the complicated world.

The first is about a famous king, the first emperor of India, King Ashoka. He conquered and united much of India during his time, but was considered to be very cruel in his conquests. The battles were quite bloody. There was one famous battle, where the records say 100,000 people were killed. The day after this battle, the king walked through the battlefield, surveying the carnage. I imagine it was pretty gruesome to see. And then walking through the field was a Buddhist monastic, who was steadily, calmly, and peacefully passing through it all. The contrast between this carnage and the monastic was quite strong. The king saw someone who could be independent, not pulled into the world of the violence, not caught up in it, not afraid of it, not angry with it, not distressed about it – but clearly in the middle of it, upright, and calm. Walking in the middle of this situation is a powerful image. It was powerful for Ashoka because he stopped the monastic, and asked to receive their teachings. And the teachings he received

converted the king from his violent ways to essentially become a non-violent ruler of his country. And the conquests ceased. Buddhist monastics had a certain strength of presence. I don't think of them as being weak in their calm, but rather having strength and dignity – being upright in the middle of everything.

The other story is not exactly a story, but a rule that monastics have. Buddhism is often associated with being non-violent, and yet there is an exception to this. If a monastic is being attacked, then for the purpose of escaping (this is the language used: "the purpose of escaping"), the monastic can strike out. So, if someone comes at you with a knife, you're allowed to hit away the attacker's arm. If someone grabs you by the throat, you can knock away their arm. But you're not allowed to attack them first. You're not allowed to hit them, except as a way of escaping danger. Then, you're allowed to strike out, to be violent in that situation. But there's a caveat, or a requirement: you can do this only if you have *mettā* in your heart – only if you have kindness for the person attacking you. You're not doing it out of hate or hostility, but you are taking care of yourself. So here again there is this idea of being upright, strong, capable, and at the same time being soft and kind in the heart – but also, very clearly and definitely, knowing that you need to care of yourself: "This is what I need to do."

The third story is one of a monk who was sick with

dysentery. The sad story is that the other comrades in the monastery were not taking care of this person. You have to realize that sometimes when people become monks and nuns, they really *need* to become monks and nuns. They have things they need to learn [laughing]. Rather than thinking the monks and nuns are actually fully enlightened and are the perfect embodiment of Buddhism, sometimes they're the people who *least* embody what Buddhism is about, and that's why they become monastics: to learn something. That's how I explain this story that the monks and nuns weren't taking care of this monk who had dysentery, leaving him lying in his own excrement.

The Buddha heard about this, and with his disciple Ananda, went right up to this sick monk, and the two of them got water and towels and cleaned the monk up. The Buddha then gathered all the monks and nuns together in the monastery and said to them, "Here in the monastery, you have no fathers and mothers to take care of you, you only have each other." Then he continued, "Those of you who want to take care of me as the teacher, you should take care of those who are sick." In India, where taking care of the guru is one of the highest spiritual things that you can do, it's a pretty big deal to say that taking care of the sick is like taking care of the guru. So here is an image of the Buddha, dignified and upright, went right into the place where the monk was sick, got water, and cleaned him.

To me, these three stories point to a way of being in the world. The third one is nice, and I wanted to save it for last for its example of compassion and caring. But sometimes we spend too much time emphasizing compassion and care, and some people actually become weak in the process. Some people think they're supposed to care and give themselves over to whatever is going on, rather than standing up and being upright. They feel they have to be soft and gentle, thinking, "I don't count. I have to be compassionate," or something like that. Being compassionate is a really great thing to do in the world, but you can do it with strength, being upright and dignified.

Sometimes we have to take care of ourselves. And it's kind of dramatic, this idea of striking out. Sometimes we have to establish firm boundaries with family and other people. But the rule is to do it with loving kindness. You can still take care of yourself. You know the importance of firm boundaries – and this is how it is now.

Sometimes we're in a world of carnage. We're in a world that's really horrible to be in. It's not making it pretty, or making it different from what it is. But it is possible to be in the middle of it, and to not be part of the carnage or the wars. To not be a part of all this, but to have an upright, balanced, dignified way of being – a strong way of being that also allows us to have calm

and peacefulness. This can be very helpful for the world around us, just as it was in ancient India. It just happened that this monastic walked through the battlefield at the time when the emperor was most vulnerable, and receptive to expressions of peace.

Part of this practice of mindfulness that we do is to help us to become soft in our minds. I talked earlier today about developing softness, and having relaxed qualities inside. But that's not the whole story. It's also about developing strength, and being able to hold yourself upright. This idea, literally and metaphorically, of being able to be upright in the midst of whatever goes on, means that we don't cower; we don't collapse; we don't run away. But also we don't attack; we don't strain; we don't push forward. Instead, we hold a certain balance where we're rooted in ourselves. We're rooted where we are standing. There's confidence and strength in that. And then in that confidence and strength, there can be calm. There can be peacefulness. There can be freedom – the radical freedom that the Buddha points at. This radical freedom – a deep letting go – doesn't require that we lose our strength. It doesn't require us to become pushovers, or washed over, or drowned by everything that goes on around us – but there is a kind of uprightness in the midst of everything.

So I hope that, as you do this practice, you remember that this is part of it also. It's possible to practice

mindfulness while being upright, having a certain strength of character – a strength of being rooted in yourself. And perhaps mindfulness is more effective and powerful when it's a reference point for you – your own personal strength, your own personal sense of being grounded and upright wherever you go.

So that was what on my mind, in my heart today. Hopefully it resonated well enough with what's in your heart and mind.