

Simplicity

Gil Fronsdal

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This morning is the very end of this ten-day retreat that I've been teaching up at Jikoji for fourteen people, and I'm very much filled with the retreat. I leave here as soon as we finish, and go up there for the closing at eleven thirty or so for the retreat. And it's very special to be on retreat in general, but this retreat is particularly a suite for me. People who are very dedicated practitioners are all there. All the people there are very dedicated, a lot of experience, and I get the opportunity this retreat to work with them very closely. There are fourteen people, and I can see fourteen people a day for interviews.

So I saw every one every day and kept track, and it was quite wonderful. And what I'd like to do this morning is try to do a summary of what I've been teaching for the week, for ten days, and I don't know if I can do it, but that's what I'd like to try. Ironically, the subject is simplicity. So I should be able to say that quickly. One way of describing spiritual practice is that it's a homecoming, a coming home. And it's useful to distinguish a little bit between a house and a home.

A house is just one building, and many people can walk, drive down the street, and see lots of houses. But a home is a place where someone inhabits, and they feel at home in. They feel like this is a place they can relax and be themselves, and don't have to defend themselves, or don't have to create the self-image. Or a place of acceptance, usually a place where, if there's family members, that there's some kind of acceptance as family members. Sometimes complicated relationships, but it's a place where people can let their hair down or feel at home. And at least in the image of it, a kind of generic image of being at home, it's quite different than being in a house.

And inspiring practice is, in part, about coming home, finding how to be at home not just in your home, but wherever you go in yourself, in life. And in being a kind of homecoming,

it's also a kind of coming back to something we already know. I think I believe it's a kind of belief that we all have some deep, innate knowing of what is true and or what it's like to be at home, or what it's like to be just present in a very simple, complete way, without needing to be anything at all for anybody. And that's part of what spiritual practice is: to point to that which we most deeply know, and to give it, and perhaps find an opportunity to develop that or live in that much more often. It's not a matter of imparting teachings or something you don't know. But practice is really about pointing to, pointing something you already deeply know yourself.

Maybe you just have hints of it. Maybe it may be something you remember, maybe a childhood experience, or some experience you've had. Some point in your life felt so right or so true or so much at home that it becomes a cornerstone or touchstone in the memory for what's possible. And maybe spiritual practice is about coming to that again, and it's not about creating it, which as many people think it's something out to create. I put all the conditions just right, then I'll have it again. But the kind of deep knowing that's within us really can't be created.

It can't be, can't create conditions to make it happen. It's there. The very act of creating something gets in the way of it. It's a state of great simplicity. T. S. Eliot wrote a poem, *The Four Quartets*, and in it there's a line that goes something like, "A state of complete simplicity costing nothing less than everything." And Buddhist spirituality can be understood as a process of simplification, or a process of pointing to simplicity, the process of liberation, the process of coming home to it.

And it's pointing to something very, very simple that's always here. The present moment in and of itself is always quite simple. If we live fully in the present moment, with no before and after, no here or there, it's quite simple. If we bring in past and future, here and there, then it gets complicated very quickly. But the present moment in and of itself is quite simple. And the present moment in and of itself is indistinguishable from our capacity to know it, from knowing.

And there's something about knowing itself which is quite simple. And if you knew how simple it was, and knew how precious that simplicity is, then you would be free. One of the comments that several people made at the retreat—these are people who've been in practice for a long time—was that they said, by the end we finished the theme of simplicity. They said, "Why had no one ever told me it was so simple?" Mindfulness is really simple. It's not about what they thought they had to do, but finding it, getting insights.

And they try to, you know, use a laser-like mindfulness, can get in there and see clearly, can

understand what's really going on, or some particular states of mind was the point, or to get rid of certain things which are undesirable was the point. Our capacity to know is so simple, mindfulness so simple. It doesn't require any of that. And to understand, taste this simplicity of what the practice is about, is transformative. And so I tried during this week to try to point to that simplicity. Do you hear me? Okay, one picking.

So one of the things I said is that the homecoming, coming home, is not always a comfortable process. Just as maybe in our physical homes, there could be places, rooms which we haven't cleaned for a long time, or maybe we haven't been to the basement or the attic, and finally we go to it and we find, you know, musty, dusty, unfinished projects or things we try to push away and shove away, not pay attention to. So part of coming home entails going into all the rooms in our houses and our homes, and cleaning them up, and seeing what's actually there. And part of that is seeing the ways in which we complicate the simplicity of presence, simplicity of knowing, and seeing the different elements of the complication allows the possibility of simplifying our presence. Our knowing, seeing what keeps us from being free. It helps us then to let go of those, or to find a simplicity that maybe doesn't even require letting go of them.

But the simplicity that's beyond them, the simplicity, the larger simplicity of knowing that holds them. There are two movements in Buddhist practice, speaking very generally. One is to see what obstructs your freedom, and then find ways to let go of it. The other way is to see what obstructs your freedom, and then find how there is a larger freedom that can hold that. It's kind of like the knowing of that which obstructs your freedom can lead to two things. One is, with that information, you can try to do something about your problem.

The other thing you can do is to relax and hold that problem in the larger peace of awareness itself. And both are very important ways. These two pointings, and some people can only do the first until they get a clear enough sense of what awareness is, how precious and phenomenally simple and transformative awareness is, so that they can trust awareness enough, so they can do the second option, and so they can see a problem they have in their life, no matter what the problem is, and rather than thinking, "I have to get rid of it, or fix anything." Of course you should do that to some degree, but in your heart of hearts you don't have to do that. Rather, you have to discover how to hold that in the non-reactive, open, spacious, boundless awareness that's free. The simple awareness which is always here can hold everything and not be caught by things, not contracted around what goes on.

And that entails a trusting of awareness. And the profundity of what Buddhism has to offer involves a phenomenal trusting of your awareness, of awareness. We trust that before we

trust anything else. And if you look at your life, what you'll find is you trust many different things. We don't use that language now much, but you trust your bank account, you trust having money in the bank account. You trust building up a sense of self.

You trust your fear. You trust your ambition. You trust your desires. You trust your aversions. We trust them because we're so quick to take up residence in those. We're so quick to live in those.

We're so quick to have them be the preoccupation of our mind. Anything which is a preoccupation of the mind is something in a way that entails some kind of trust. What we're asked to do in Buddhism is to trust awareness instead. And it can feel very vulnerable and very tenuous, because where is awareness? What is awareness that has no color, no shape, no sound? Awareness is very silent.

Awareness by itself is kind of like space. It's often likened to space. You know, you look around in space. You know, you can't see space exactly except by what defines it. It's empty of things. And if we're always focusing on things, we're not going to appreciate the space.

Awareness is always focusing on things and preoccupations, that it's very hard then to turn away from all the preoccupations we have, what we feel in need, and rest in awareness itself. So these two ways, either of letting go of what obstructs your freedom, or understanding how there's a freedom available right now when your awareness can hold that in a non-reactive way. So there's a list I went through during the retreat of nine different aspects of simplicity: simplicity of being, simplicity of being home, of knowing, of awareness. And for some people, just pointing to the nature of awareness itself, and for other people, it defines what they have to let go of to discover that simplicity. Depending on which of these two approaches you take, the first in the list is understood to be progressively more difficult things to let go of, more deeply embedded in our psyche. It was a little bit humbling to realize this, because the first one, by itself, seems quite daunting.

The first is, not to believe in taking things personally. What do you think of that? Are you ready for that one? Not to believe in taking things personally, not to have, not to believe that there are things which will define you. Taking things personally means that these are things that define who you are. In Pāli, it's called *sakkāyadiṭṭhi*, and we're very quick to take things to define who we are: our body, our intellect, our emotions, our possessions, our relationships with people around us, the cosmos, people.

And people identify with nature, with the world. You know, one with the world. Or there's all kinds of ways in which we can want to define ourselves, and more kind of closer ones. That

can cause a lot of suffering. And a lot of our suffering has to do with personalizing things, taking things personally. And it's very liberating to realize you don't have to do that in small ways.

People begin seeing that as they practise, and in big ways. For example, people can struggle for a long time with physical pain, and then at some point they feel the pain, and they realize to see a difference between taking it personally, my pain, and just holding it there kind of openly as the pain. It is a whole constellation of reactions that come together with my pain, that are absent with just the pain, a self-pity, for example, to mention just one. And just allow something to be there, not take it personally, or to have a strong emotional reaction, and not take the emotional reaction personally. To recognize it's there, be very honest about its being there, but not take it personally means you don't take ownership of it, so that you don't engage with it, and act on it, and defend yourself from it, or fight it, or support it, or, you know, feel it, or all kinds of ways in which we take things personally, and just allow the emotion to be there freely. It'll fade away by itself.

But if we engage in it, we take it personally. Often we just feed it and feel it. It's not like it's happening to someone else. But to take it personally is to say that this defines who I am, and any definition that we have about who we are limits who we are. And we can see that in other people, how quickly they limit themselves by their definition. They'll come to you and say, "You know, I'm incapable of doing that by myself." That's a definition they're finding themselves.

And sometimes you see, it's not accurate. "I'm unworthy." Or, you know, "I'm always this way," as people say. Or sometimes people define you, and it gets very clear when they're doing that. Then it's, you know, once upon a distant time, you just happen to get a little bit annoyed slightly. And for that person, you are always someone who's an angry person.

Persons always kind of careful around you. They kind of put you in a box, a category. There's many ways in which people can feel how people define you. It's a lot harder to see how we define ourselves by taking things personally. And it's a lot simpler. Life is a lot simpler if you don't take things as a definition of who you are.

You can take kind of working kind of, you can kind of general light ideas, you know, to carry around with you. Someone asks you what nationality you are. It's okay to tell them, but you know you're not fooled by that. You know, you can let that be the kind of thing that defines you. If they want, you know, they want a category to put you in, that's fine. It's helpful a little bit for the senses, whatever.

But this is the first step of simplification: is to learn how to simplify ourselves from taking things personally. The second—and this is a popular one, especially for people who are, well, you'll see here—and the second one is a giving up clinging to virtue and spiritual practices. Thank God, finally my doings, but this practice ten years now and finally I can let go of it. It doesn't mean stop doing as that does it. It means stop being devoted to a virtuous life, or being engaged in spiritual practices, but no longer clinging to it. And this is really common for people engaged in spiritual life, is to cling to religious life, as is to cling to their religion, cling to their spirituality.

In part, spirituality will often people use it as a way of defining themselves, you know? And so they go around and do all these kinds of, they adopt a garb, a uniform way of talking, or, you know, world views. Not so much because it's true, but because if then they know the ten, they kind of know, it's a proof that they belong to that tradition, that part of that, this is who their identity is. When I first showed up at the San Francisco Zen Center in the seventies, you could tell who were the real Zen students. They were the ones who wore army grey ames vests, fat pants, and carried Danish school bags, and wore malas, these Buddhist beads, and all those things in themselves are wonderful things. But it was adopted as a uniform, and all these people were going round with various combinations of those things, because in part because, you know, they could feel some comfort if they knew that they were on the right path, if they were at least wearing the right clothes.

So we cling to, but if we cling to religious practices, that practice will do it for me. Mindfulness, I've heard that's really great, and there's hope until we cling with our hope, with our desire, with our ambition. If I really do it well, I'll be the most mindful person in my block, and people will just praise me to no end. But to cling to virtue, you now be self-righteous, for example, is a process of complicating our life unnecessarily. So in Buddhism, these things are important, but you don't want them to—you want elect. In a sense, like all of them, the freedom of freedom is not complicated by virtue.

It's not freedom. The process of becoming free is to let go of clinging to virtue. So hopefully you're virtuous at the same time. The third is a giving up doubt. And doubt is the obvious way in which we complicate our mind, complicate ourselves. And, you know, often it's difficult to feel at home if you're filled with doubt, and doubt in particular about what is the nature of freedom, what's the nature of, you know, what it really feels like to be at home, what it is to really to know deeply.

And if you don't really know for yourself what freedom is, even when you engage in spiritual practice, you're always going to have a little bit of doubt, which can agitate the mind, keep

you from really being at peace. And that is just the way it is. It's ok. But the process of simplification is to then at some point, let go of doubt, also hesitation, holding back. The fourth is no longer clinging to sensual pleasure. And this is that you find a lot of lists in Buddhism that focus on sensual pleasure, and you think the Buddhists are party poopers, and that the thing is it's sensual pleasure in and of itself is fine.

You're welcome to enjoy it, but it's the clinging to it which is the problem. And sensual pleasure is a shorthand for the tremendous drive in human beings towards pleasure and to avoid discomfort and pleasure. And on a gross level, we see that, you know, that some people confuse pleasure with happiness, and people will pursue all kinds of pleasant activities, thinking that can provide them with their happiness. Addicts and alcoholics sometimes denote a clear example of this. But then there's a tremendous a lot of attitudes and beliefs we have around pleasure. It's not just simply attachment to pleasure in a physical way, but it also comes with our attachments to beliefs.

But what pleasure entails or discomfort entails, some people feel that, you know, they have this attitude that their life is only successful, they've only, you know, doing it right, life right, if things are pleasant, if there's pleasure, if something's, you know, if they have a headache, or they'll be off that day, or there's things are uncomfortable, or there's no electricity or no water that day, or something. I don't know what. The very thing which is uncomfortable, that's by definition means that something is off with life, something off with me. I've blown it. Life has blown it. And something has to be fixed.

Freedom has to allow the possibility of not reacting for or against pleasure and comfort, and pleasure is not of freedom, and if you are pursuing and preoccupied with pleasure, you're not going to discover the radical simplicity of just now, just being present. And, you know, pleasure drives human beings to a phenomenal degree. Many times, I believe, a people's philosophy of life, or even a political position, political party they adhere to, sometimes is not because of the great philosophy that's involved. But sometimes it arises out of a reaction to pleasure or displeasure. Someone's uncomfortable with seeing a homeless person and their whole philosophy of how to deal politically with homeless people, it's not out of some wise philosophy, it's because they are repelled by their own discomfort, and they're trying to get rid of that and push that away. The amoeba-like reaction to pleasure and displeasure is very foundational to what drives human beings.

The fourth complication is aversion, ill will. It's a little bit kind of the flip side of sensual desire, clinging to sensual desire. But the clinging to ill will, to aversion, there's a lot of energy, a lot of seductive power in ill will and aversion, in part because people use it sometimes to define

themselves, but sometimes because of the rush that comes with it, sometimes because the belief systems entail what you feel, again, like you need and don't need, what you need to be present for, not present for. And if there's something there which is uncomfortable, you know, we have this ill will and we want to push things away, the mind cannot be simple. The mind cannot discover the simplicity of freedom that's present right now. It's available right now.

The home that's here, regardless of what's happening. If the mind is for or against anything, the awareness at least, the awareness cannot be contracted towards or away from anything. The fifth, the sixth—and those of you following the traditional list, I'm actually going over nine, usually this is ten, and six and seven are collapsed into six—and the sixth is clinging to spiritual experiences. Now this is considered really hard to get rid of. You know, it's a lot easier to get rid of, to let go of taking things personally than it is to cling to spiritual experiences. Certainly, you can cling to it because of taking it personally.

But there, you know, even without that clinging of taking things personally, clinging to spiritual experiences is a way of complicating, agitating the mind, hindering the freedom that's possible. And so many people who engage in spiritual—everyone who engages in spiritual practice will do this sooner or later. There's levels of calm and peace and well-being that you've heard about, and so you want to get it. Only if I get those things, you know, then I'll be okay. Or you've had a taste of it: I've got to have that again. And so you spend years negotiating your mind and everything else around you in order to re-experience that particular peace that you've had, a particular joy or love or great bliss or whatever it was.

And to cling to any spiritual experience creates suffering, is a way of complicating the simplicity of just being present. The seventh complication is conceit, and conceit involves—at the very foundation of conceit is not taking things personally, not saying that something defines who I am. But rather, it's the very sense that I am, which can seem very innocent or so obvious or so—what's the problem with that? Of course I am. I'm not someone else. But there's something about—we're talking of very subtle states now, in very subtle states, when the mind is very attentive, you'll see that the very sense of I am is extra.

It's not needed. It's a fabrication. It's an assumption that arises in part out of the sum total workings of who you are. The sense of I am, you know, if you look at it, it's very amorphous. It's very, you know, it can be very difficult to understand or see it directly for what it is beyond a kind of vague sense. Some people might say it's the sum total of all our clinging, you know, how they all feel together.

I don't know if this is a good analogy for this, but I use it sometimes. It's some great athlete

like Michael Jordan is, you know, playing a championship game, and it's his Chicago Bulls, or, you know, one point behind, and it's one minute left in the game, or ten seconds left in the game, and he has the ball, and you know he's driving towards the basket, and you know the whole championship, you know, hinges on him making that basket, and in the middle of that he starts wondering, "Am I? How am I? Where is the true self here? This is who I really am." He's not going to make the basket, trip. He's going to trip over his feet, probably, to have that kind of self-conscious concern. But I am at that moment, it just gets in the way.

It's kind of like I am, it's kind of like I do. Now, this is a good analogy, but sometimes use your eyes—your eyes function. I suppose you can see with your eyes, but you can't see your eyes. And then try to get involved with the sense that I have eyes this way, my eyes are, what they feel like is to actually take one step apart, away from the seeing that eyes do. To make sense, let your eyes just see, you're out to be concerned about the eye. It makes things look more complicated.

The sense of I am makes things more complicated. One of the things it lends itself to, too, is one of the more traditional definitions of conceit is comparative thinking. We compare ourselves to others. We compare ourselves to how we were in the past, how we want to be in the future, and it's one of the great sources of suffering. As we compare, comparing ourselves, it's possible to live in the world as we are without needing any comparisons. Comparisons are valid in some ways, but we suffer so much by getting contracted and defining ourselves and getting a sense of I am from that.

Those comparisons are not needed. So to let go, to drop even the sense of I am, to have the kind of genuine trust in awareness that it's possible just to be present with your awareness, with knowing, with life, with beingness, in the same way that you let your eyes just see without getting tied up with what's the I-ness of the eyes. The eighth—so now we're getting really subtle, according to the lists, they're progressively more subtle, closer and closer towards complete freedom—is restlessness. This kind of amazement is still restlessness. After all, you know, you're no longer defining yourself, and no longer clinging, and restlessness and agitation. It's a whole wide range of what you know restlessness can mean in us.

Sometimes we can barely sit on our cushions, like we come down to sit for our meditation, it's like being at the rodeo. And if it's a successful meditation, the fact that you manage to get to the end of your sitting without bolting. But I think what you're talking about here is a very subtle restlessness of the mind, the mind that focuses on objects, the mind that focuses on something external to itself, or to say it differently, perhaps, the mind preoccupied in objects, the mind which is delimited by what it's paying attention to. If I won't have a desire, you can

be driven by the desire or the thing you want, and you are always looking at the thing you want. But part of the movement of practice is to turn the awareness away from the thing you want, and sense and feel the desire itself. If you have aversion, turn away from the thing that you have aversion about, and turn around, and just feel what it's like to have aversion in and of itself, the subjective experience of that.

When the mind is always focused on a thing, the mind is actually alienated from itself. When the mind is restless, there's a way in which restlessness sometimes is self-perpetuating, like desire, sometimes self-perpetuating. Anything you do regularly and continuously, you create a certain momentum of the mind. So you're always busy, always doing, multitasking and doing many different things. It's very hard to stop because a momentum to want and do is still there. If you're always—the mind is always preoccupied with things, then the momentum is there, for the mind can be agitated to always want more things to fill it.

It's kind of like you've come into a room like here and you're always focusing on the things of the room. You think that's all important, and you look at things and things and things and things, and finally you realize, "Wait a minute, there's something else here. There's a space in the room, space holds it all," and that space kind of holds all the things, all the containers. In the same way, awareness that is not preoccupied and focused on the things that it's aware of, it's a compact space that holds it all. And as long as its awareness is focusing on things, it's always going to be a little bit agitated, restless, always going to be a little bit fragile, brittle. For the mind to be totally alive, soft, pliable, open, spacious, boundless, there has to be a sense of objectless awareness, which has no centre.

If there's no sense of I am, there's no centre to the awareness. If there's no sense of being focused on an object, there's no there. There's no here. There is no before and after. There is no becoming. There's no movement.

Awareness becomes a definition or all-surrounding, all like three hundred sixty degrees. It's like all radiant in all directions. So the last of the complications is ignorance. And when the last remnants of ignorance are let go of, then we have the experience of this unconditioned simplicity. And the unconditioned simplicity is—ignorance may be not the best translation for *avijjā* here, but rather it's unawareness. And when awareness becomes total, and awareness becomes—except when awareness is set free, when the awareness becomes completely simple, when our sense of presence becomes simple and is not focused or preoccupied or caught by anything, when it's three hundred sixty degrees all around, then that's the taste of the complete, unconditioned simplicity of being at home.

And then once you have that experience, even just once very radically, then you realize it is

actually of our nature all the time, that simplicity of awareness, presence, is actually here all the time. And then, rather than having to get rid of all these things, it's possible then to open your sense of presence or awareness beyond where you're clinging, so you don't let go of the clinging, you let go of the complication, you can just rest and hold it in a bigger container of presence, of awareness, so that we don't have to be involved in incessant movements of becoming and creating and manufacturing things and manipulating the mind. You let the mind get bigger, more open, more space to hold it all. We're kind of like people who, you know, someone who lives in the ocean, in the ocean, and always swimming in the ocean, and they really want a rest. So they're swimming, thinking only if they find some island somewhere, well, they can finally pull themselves up on the shore, on some shore, in the dry land, and rest. And they're constantly swimming, and they see these mirages.

They see these different things out in the distance. They swim to it, and they come to it, and they really think it's going to work, and they finally get to it, and it turns out that it's nothing there really supports them. And so they've got to go swimming some more, and they swim somewhere in another direction, and they're constantly swimming and swimming and swimming and looking and looking and looking and trying to find a place to rest. Only eventually they finally realize that all they had to do was float, and the water would have held them up just nicely. Awareness is like an ocean that's there waiting to hold us, to let us float. A very important aspect, the core aspect of Buddhist practice, is to learn to trust awareness, to place our trust in awareness, and to trust in doing that.

The native intelligence, the innate intelligence of who we are, that bubbles through that. So you don't have to prepare ahead of time when you come to do something. Perhaps you don't have to think ahead or manipulate or create a certain self, you can just show up. It's simple. You don't have to always know, and you also don't have to not know. The radical simplicity of being doesn't entail having possessions and doesn't entail having no possessions.

It doesn't entail having attainments and doesn't entail having no attainments. It's realizing the fundamental emptiness of all things. And in seeing the emptiness of all things, trust in your awareness, letting awareness be the foundation where you float, and let the innate intelligence and compassion and love that's in your home come pouring through. Trusting awareness is to trust, is to give space for intelligence, for love, simplicity. There is no love apart from simplicity. There is no love apart from silence.

To trust awareness is to sense the silence and the space which is always here. So it was quite profound for me to be on retreat, and I hope for the people who were there at the retreat, and I hope that you appreciated that. Whatever sense of the retreat I brought with me in

giving this talk, because I feel very much still in it, and I thank you very much. Thank you very much.