

# 2002-03-04 Waking Up

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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## SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

Friday from teaching a month long retreat that some of us have people here in this room were at. And it was quite a happiness producing event. For me personally, it was very nice to be there. And one of my favorite things to do is to teach retreats, long retreats, contemplative retreats in silence. And month is a long time. It's like 40 days in the desert 30 days in Marin County. And it and it's very, it's wonderful to be part of people's ongoing spiritual practice over the course of those 30 days and to see the change transformation, the challenges that come that arises for people.

Now, there was one talk given at that retreat by Carol Wilson. Like many talks that inspired me, but it was one that she gave the kind have stayed with me for a while. And kind of the Asha, I should I should give that talk. And, and usually teachers only give their own talk over and over again but you don't give me Don't give another teacher and other teachers talk. So I won't do that. But the chain of associated thinking in my mind kind of over the last few weeks has led to I'm going to say today. And what I want to do is talk about the notion of being awake, waking up. Many of you know that in Buddhism, the word Buddha comes from the Sanskrit word, Bodhi, which is often usually translated as to wake up awakening. And the Buddha is a title Actually, it's not a given name. It's his title, because he's the one who's Bodhi, who's awakened. So he's the Buddha. He's the person who's awakened, the awakened one. So the idea of being awake is very important in Buddhism. And I've read many people who said That it's common in many different spiritual traditions to emphasize some kind of awakening. And the opposite of that is that they emphasize that people generally are asleep, that the general human condition is people are somehow sleepwalkers. That something about the way in which we relate to the world, we relate to ourselves some way in some way in which our thoughts are captivate our attention or focus or our concerns, is equivalent to being asleep, in that we don't see reality as it actually is. We see something different. When I was a Zen student, in the meditation hall, the zendo, they had a rule that you could not cross across the middle of the zendo in front of the Buddha image. It was like here in this room here, there's a Buddha here. So there'd be a line right down in front of the Buddha to the wall. There. And you weren't allowed to cross that line. You got no

one sitting in front of it, this is the line right straight to the wall. And you said, Okay, that's Zen. And, and the Buddha was actually kind of a little bit away from the wall quite a bit. And so then it was a walkway behind. So if you want to get from one side of the room to the other, you'd walk behind the Buddha, because it's disrespectful to walk in front of somebody, right? You walk around. So there was just kind of slide down the middle of the hall. And I knew about this rule about not crossing in front. And, and my sense was this line was this kind of forcefield very powerful because, you know, you get you get a little bit closer to it, and you've kind of felt nervous and you felt like they got to be careful now and you know, and you didn't really want to get too close because you kind of stepped over by mistake and you know, and there was no, I don't know like I was afraid to get electrocuted or something. And I didn't think about this this much. But that was kind of like the way I related to it. And I was always very careful to walk around. So was everyone else who's everyone participated in this rule. And so idea that there was a line you didn't cross. So one day I was in the meditation hall, kind of just in the back of the hall doing something on off times, and there were some tourists would come to visit. And they were just what they would kind of checking out what the zendo looks like, they didn't know anything about how to be in a zendo. And they didn't know about this line. So I was just watching them, and they kind of were talking and they just walk casually past that line, as if they were like in the train station or something just kind of walked right by as if without any thought about it. And at that moment, I had a little awakening. I realized there was no line there. There was no forcefield there. It was all in my head, you know in our collective heads and we've created this thing and it didn't exist. They're really in nature, it was just kind of this idea that we had, and I was projecting and relating to this, you know, this idea, the force field was in my mind, not there. And, and that was kind of awakening for me, oh, you know, I'm living in this mental construct. And it doesn't really exist. And so the question is how many of us are living in mental constructs that maybe don't really exist, but are like force fields, or we have very powerful, powerful relationships to them. That could be otherwise just, you know, there's not in nature to be that way.

So and also when I was a Zen student, one of the, when I was at Sahara, which was a beautiful Zen monastery, deep down in Los padres National Forest, kind of wilderness area. And we had this Zen dose meditation hall, that there'll be about the 40 of us there. doing our Zen practice. And there was a lot of chanting in Zen. So we every morning would have the service of service, but 40 minutes of chanting and ritual and bowing and offer incense and many things. And there was kind of kind of a atmosphere that creates 40 people together, involved in the spiritual practice and battling and chanting and being devotional, or whatever people were thinking or feeling. And it was really lovely to be part of it for me, other people hated it. But you know, it was kind of it had a certain, a certain kind of power or certain kind of, or atmosphere, certain kind of sentiment, certain kind of feeling to you know, what we were doing. And so, at some point, I decided I would try to see if I could shift my soul, my mental construct, but what we were doing there, and I would imagine, would it be like, if the 40 of us, were standing at the Sahara before there were any buildings built there, you know, 150 years ago or so. So there was no buildings, no Buddha, no zendo, no nothing, just these oak trees in this river and this dirt ground, and the sky in the mountains around us. And we were all facing each other because then you face to two groups facing each other. And we're doing all this bowing and chanting and, and it would

be a feat when I did that imagination, in a sense, separate myself from the atmosphere we've collectively created. I didn't see it from a different perspective. And I felt it was very freeing. And then I go back into the atmosphere, and then everyone smile, I pull myself out and see, see the difference? I don't know if that made sense to you, but it makes some sense, was kinda like what I did when I was 20. I'd go to museums. And maybe this is a terrible way of judging paintings. But that's what I did. I would look at these paintings on the wall. And I stand there, look at them for a while and imagine that I was what they would look like instead of hanging in a museum wall. They're hanging on a tree in the forest. And then if it's if it still would keep my attention, then I would say look at longer for the forest was more interesting. And then I'd move on. So if anything, I'm trying to convey the idea that we have these social constructs, perspectives frames of reference, by which we understand our experience our life, and they're flexible to fluid, and we can change them, move them around. So to wake up is in part to wake up from the social construct that we have, that we think is inherent in reality itself in nature, how things actually, actually are, and to realize they aren't that way actually. And to wake up, oh, things are different. They can be different. It's an interpretation. And what's the amazing thing that we discover, I think any kind of deep spiritual practice is to what amazingly large degree the world that we live in, is a world of social construct the world have our mind and ideas and concepts. And the very seldom that we actually see the world as it actually is that we painted with our concepts. And this is one of the first insights I had when it came to Tassajara was doing the Zen practice was how much of my reality was being painted by my concepts, I would see something and already, you know, immediately have some idea of what it was. And I painted in a sense, I would see it just almost anything, I would see a bell, and I would paint it with the idea what a bell is what it means with associations with it. I wouldn't see the bell in and of itself. For there are certain things that are quite flexible. They are certain things in one context and other things in other contexts. There was a particular chair Tassajara that wasn't always a chair or sometimes a stool, sometimes a stoop, sometimes to kind of use it to kind of stand on to get up to higher shelf. When was it to kind of when was it as chair, when was it a and all the associations have Chair when was it a stepping ladder? When was it you know, I would paint it with different things. We do the same thing with people. And it's when I was on how old I was I was 19 I went travelling in Morocco with a couple of friends.

And I noticed when I'm traveling around Morocco was the first time I'd been to a non western country isn't as kind of basically an adult kind of on my own with my parents. So I was paying attention in new way to people and reality and things. And back then in Morocco, I don't know how it is now. People still were very much the traditional clothes. The men wore these yellow bows they were called these kind of like these color dresses but these morning coats kind of these these coats these dresses, these. Think you love us And the women often had their faces covered. And I noticed after being there for a while, that I felt a certain kind of way of being more relaxed than I usually am walking around streets and I was wondering, why am I more relaxed with this more extra little piece of relaxation in the corner of my mind. And I realized that the reason why there was this corner of relaxation was that I had no categories by which to judge these people. In America, I could judge people, you know, all the time, you know, I knew who they were, you know, that person was, you know, back then we had all kinds of words for them. They were jocks and squares and hip. And, you know, it had these were pretty really

put people into categories, you know, who they were, what kind of background they had, what kind of social status, what kind of economic class they were kind of, kind of like peg people in science. But back in rock, I didn't, I didn't have any way of doing that for the people there because I didn't understand probably if I'd lived there long enough. I noticed You know, the differences in how to, but there wasn't any of it, I was freed from that piece of kind of painting people with my concepts and ideas. And it was kind of very nice to do that. It's very happy. Freeing, you know, personally, certainly a better way than going around kind of always judging people. So, to understand this idea of waking up, I think it helps to understand how how much of our life is spent in our thoughts and our ideas. So even something as simple as a bell. So maybe all of you can see this bell here, cuz I'm holding up. And so it's a very nice bill. And I could have the desire to have this bill, I can really want this I can cling to these I really can have all these ideas. You know, if I have a spell at home, then I can have really deep meditations. I can ring the bell, the end of meditation, and then mean, then I'd be really be spiritual because I have the right Bell, and or whatever, I have all kinds of ideas about what it means to have this bell and I can really want it feels really important. And I could cling to the idea of the spell. And I could ask him wondering, you know, maybe I could buy it from the center, or maybe I'm the teacher here, maybe they wouldn't notice if I just took you know, or you know what, maybe I can replace it with another bill or, you know, I can get carried away with my, my ideas and thoughts because I'm clinging to the spell. I really want this bill. But the interesting thing about clinging is that I'm holding it up because I want you to see it, but I'm actually not cleaning it physically. Like was cleaning and things that physically as well like this, you really hold on tight. But the cleaning is not in the physical world. The cleaning belongs to the mental world, right right now. I'm obsessed with the I am clinging to the idea of the bell and the idea of what the bill will do for me. And if that clinging exists right now it's belongs to us. In your world, the psychic world, the mental world, there's nothing physical about it. And if we don't realize that, then we might not understand where the freedom lies in relationship to this cleaning of the bell, the freedom is also in the mind. In the relationship that's formed in there, the cleaning is not to the bell, the clinging used to the idea we have. And that's actually true in a lot of different situations in our life. We cling to people, we cling to possessions, we cling to all kinds of things, we say things, but more often than not, it's not the things that we're trying to, but there's some kind of clinging in our mind towards some idea and concept that we have about it. To wake up is to see the clinging is to these ideas and concepts and not to the literal electrical thing. And that's very hard sometimes to see. So we have a spell and I ring the bell

It makes the sound and the perception of the sound is relatively simple affair. All of you probably heard it without any effort, just the experience of hearing the bell just arose and in the hearing Oregon but what's interesting is not right now what the sound of the bell is. But what happens to us when we hear the bell. And what happens is that there's often there might be and depends on your background, all kinds of associations and what that sound is like. For me, when I hear a bell, it usually associated very strongly with monastic life, it means actually do something. So I always want to hear a bell. Okay, what I have to do now, I have to bow I have to go to meditation. Nothing in my meditation, what does it mean? And a good way to get a, you know, a Buddhist monk to stop doing what he or she is doing, just ring a bell. And they'll get their attention. And so I hear the sound of the bell and I think about, you

know, monastic life and that this means this mean this means that I supposed to do something or change what I'm doing or he's supposed to bow. This reminds me of how wonderful it was to be at the Sahara at the monastery. And maybe if I tape record these sounds, I can bring them you know, play them on my tape recorder, tape deck in my car and, and just hear wonderful sounds and just getting a nice mood and be reminded to always be present. And to be not to rely on any external world part of the world. And there's always ideas associations with a bell means other people might have other associations or what a bell means. Some of you might. Bell means might mean It's time to you know maybe on bells you heard growing up or school bells you know it's time to go to school. And the last thing you want to do right now is to be reminded that you should go to school and so you have a little bit aversion to hearing that bell you don't like it because of those associations. What other associations might you have with the sound of a bell helped me out here? Fire so you think oh, maybe there's a fire somewhere? Yeah. Yes.

Great.

You find it pleasant. Yes. Yeah, yes.

So all kinds of memories, all kinds of associations might arise. And then once an association is born, it sometimes gets born to a second Association, or a third. So I hear this bell reminded of Tassajara and how nice it was a Tassajara. And, and how nice it would be. Everybody can go to Sahara and, and then ask me to go back to Sahara. But I have all these responsibilities and a family now and it's kind of hard to go to Sahara. And why did I take on these responsibilities in this family when I couldn't, could be a monk. And, and, and, you know, what would it take to renounce the world again and be a monk and and, and well, I can't admit this, you know, to, you know, to people that have these thoughts and now embarrassed and, and now I'm frustrated with myself for being embarrassed and frustrated because I had this idea that'd be nice to go to Sahara, and I can't do it and I'm angry with myself making the choices I'm making my life and, and on it goes, you know, these these thoughts just that's all it was, you know, a sound of a bell. So I'm hoping again, but the gist of what I'm saying, and sort of wake up is to realize, you know, this whole world, mental world associated world concept of stuff to see and how it gets born in our mind. And part of the, the, the opportunity of mindfulness practice is to use the calm that you maybe get through meditation, or the inside of the mindfulness, to begin noticing the response inside of us to the stimulus in the world. To see how we, how we construct this social reality, how this mental constructions come into being and paint our experience in certain ways. It's very hard to see that A lot of things we, we don't see unless sometimes we go into very radically different environments for a while and see that things can be different. One of the things, for example to do, though, there's a saying I like, I don't know, I've heard that the saying they say in England, and the saying is, you don't know it to teach English, say to each other. They say you don't know England, until you've left England, somehow leaving a situation that you've been embedded in for a long time, can give you a perspective, what's going on there and you realize, wait a minute, there's a social reality here that I bought into that maybe it doesn't have to be that way. Going on retreat is that way it's

very powerful to be together with people in silence, not being gone, social interaction, talking and all the various things, intellect, all that kind of part of our mind kind of rest. And then when it's all over the retreat, it's to see how we reconstructed our concerns about being liked by people are not liked. We are concerns about approval or how our concerns about, you know, all kinds of ways in which when we relate to people or all kinds of things get reborn. And from that kind of background of silence of letting go of all that those kinds of concerns. Sometimes we can see all the extra ways in which we interpret ourselves and our lives, which aren't inherent in life itself, but is a social mental construct, which is invisible to us otherwise, it's very helpful to find some way to step outside of the mental world we create for ourselves. So we can see how we can how we do create it. And that's one of the things that meditation is trying to point to, is that possibility. I told this story a lot. I apologize for repeating myself, but I think it's a good story. And it kind of points to this. What I'm trying to say here today. There's something on on retreats, we possibly retreats that's called Vipassana romances, and I call them virtual romances because they often have nothing to do with Who that other person is. So I was in a three month retreat, which is enough time to get going. And can you do it in a shorter retreat can be done in one day, just one minute you know, India retreat, but it's called vipassana romances because sometimes you have all the silence and concentration is stillness, the mind sometimes kind of gets carried away. And so I kind of was attracted to this woman on the retreat, and I'd never met her never talked to her. And so I started formulating this, you know, this fantasy about who she was and what was going to be like to meet her at the end of their retreat and talk to her and take her, go for a date and then go do more with her and you know, hang out with her and like living with her and getting married and having children and getting divorced.

And it was, you know, three months is a long time to kind of shift long enough to you know, to go through all those things. So I so the retreat came to an end, and we were finally going to break silence and breaking silence involved in a hearing people speak for the first time. And the first time she spoke, I heard she had this really strong I think French accent. And that moment I woke up. Because at that moment, I realized that all the whole fantasy was built on the idea of her being an American. And being an American, I had some idea what kind of person she was. But as soon as I realized she was French, you know, then I realized I didn't have a clue who she was. You if she was American, I wouldn't I wouldn't have had a clue. But because you're so different than anything my fantasy was about. I kind of woke up from that or startled, and I realized, I don't have a clue who this person was, I woke up. So I would like to ask you all, have you had this experience of waking up in this way? What would you like to tell us a little bit as a group, some examples of how you've woken up. Doesn't have to be the big awakening, just, you know?

Just this past few weeks, three weeks ago, I decided to test out my belief that I'm addicted to chocolate and I simply cannot have it in the house. Because whenever I do, I just gobble it all up until it's all gone. And so I bought a one pound box of seized chocolates, and I've been having one each day. No problem. No, no temptation, no craving No, it's fine. And so now I have this How many other beliefs Am I claiming to that simply aren't true a great



friend of mine had it many years ago had a gleam in his dream. He was holding the snake by the by the neck so they poisonous, deadly poisonous snake, so it wouldn't bite him. And the problem was, he won't let go of it. But he couldn't let go of it because then the snake would be free to kind of, you know, turn around and bite him. So he didn't know what it is holding and you don't really want to let go of it. And the dream he finally let go of it. And that moment the snake vanished. Yes.

retreats.

say, Oh, he's that first day here. And I mean Huge projection on things.

You hear their story and I very

personally as good as they are for a moment gone through total.

Yes, is a movie that I saw that comment.

It's an Australian. And that's what the movie is all about. It sort of plays the audience with all of our expectations and what happens to each of the characters based on these conceptual I guess you call it stereotypes almost

like this

woman she she dies because she had this

shattered

Cuz it's very interesting twist

to share is a puzzle

totally confused by interpretation and nice judgment of people that they evoke within me. So I feel in daily life that I have to work on myself and my needs kind of misinterpretation about the world at the same time to screen all of the needs.

Yeah, that's good. I think that we can have where we have some control over in Buddhist practice where the point is To see what's going on inside of us. So even when people other people are doing terrible things to us, is there some way in which we're augmenting the problem by our own relationship to it? So that message, it's a difficult thing to discuss briefly, but, for example, the issue of, of what we

think we need in relationship to others. And for a long time, I was very much driven by the idea of wanting people to like me and wanting approval. And I thought I didn't even know that I had this issue. So it was kind of invisible to me, but it was kind of drove me and, and affected me in my emotions and what I did a lot. And at some point, in my practice, I started seeing it, partly because it became too painful. And then I saw clearly and I saw at some point, that I didn't need people's approval. And that was really helpful for me. And I still sometimes get caught by that, but I know I have in my heart that in my heart, I don't really need people's approval. That's not really, you know, I don't want to offend people, I listen to feedback that's really nice to get. But my what my my kind of core sense of well being is not dependent on how other people are gonna see me or not see me. And that was really helpful to come to that reminds me of a woman I was reminded of this woman who, who told me this some years ago. She told me that she was kind of in her late 60s, which when I heard this, and she said that she kind of woke up finally and realized that she didn't need a man. And she had grown up with the idea that she needed a man or take care of her in life. She was a very competent woman. She worked into all kinds of things. She could take care of herself quite well. But it wasn't till her late 60s she actually could understand that was the case and wasn't always looking for a man to protect or take care of or do something for her and she woke up For that,

I have another response to the phone rang the other day at right about the time when the telemarketers always call kind of a little bit of agitation to begin with, answered the phone and it was kind of a pause and then someone sort of shuffled around and tried to get the name out and the names ended all distorted. And I think the average person at that point would have hung up, but I have this thing where I feel like I have to at least politely, you know, go through the motions with these people. And that become the center of saying, this was somebody I actually call calling to deliver some good news to me

by Mrs. or Miss or whatever. You know, I had all this education and assumption.

Yes, yes. Not sure how this is working. I have a daughter while

she was homeless and

a lot of the stuff that we're dealing with

interpreted it as

if things are going badly, she has to she has to learn herself that that's that. That was just an incredible awakening for me when when I realized that I had to let go. I didn't know what was different. But I'm still making even though those that let go. I'm still making still

making the assumption that I still have the answer. And it's not that I had to let go of making her see



what I had to wait what I woke up to was I had not a clue. Having to turn on the turf that was right for me was not necessarily going for her. And that was incredibly freeing.

All the assumptions that I made. I have the answers are I know what the right way is?

Somehow the decision not to have treatment about something and then a friend of mine made

a different decision to have the treatment to the system. But I was letting go. And I

for a while. It was hard to let go

of letting recognize her decision around her treatment.

But you could be making the exact right decision.

This is my decision and work from the app.

Suzuki Roshi said they said something like you can simplistically said something like you can understand Buddhism in three words. And those words are not always so bill

because I performed in a play called waiting for girl which is a very special leader.

Very difficult.

And

I was my parents were living in Washington DC and I finished school. back. So I travel back and forth. You know, every quarter and I had a relative who with my mother sister who lives halfway in between Spartanburg, South Carolina. She was married to probably the biggest redneck Hi.

Very interested in

philosophy. Very, very good. All right, I showed up there, and my usual like, shut up late at night

and was talking to my admin. She said, Well, what have you been doing?

I said, Well, we've been I've been working on this. And

she said, Well, why?

Don't know. Check your legs a few minutes. Anything.

I said, Well,

she not only read it, but she talked to me for several hours but intelligent. And that's it. That's sort of the point at which I realized that every human being

there was something about them that you

needed to know and understand.

For many years, I played this game.

It was defined the thing that I didn't expect about them. That was interesting. I call it the interesting thing. What What about this person, in my mind that I've already typed but but I didn't at that point, I didn't know what I was doing. But I spent years playing this game, which kind of prepared me to meet people in a different work.

Very nice. Thank you. Okay, the last thing I wanted to kind of a little piece I want to weave into this is that it could be this idea of waking up from us, mentally constructed world doesn't doesn't entail a rejection of it. And it isn't necessarily bad or wrong. Sometimes people reject one mentally constructed world or socially constructed world only pick up another one. And sometimes they you know, the one they pick up is the, they're rebelling against it, they pick up the opposite as a way they think they're free, but they're really reacting to the, to the, you know, the original one. I think the idea in the opportunity for us is not necessarily accept or reject, but rather to use the mindfulness for help us to be in conversation with the mentally constructed world with a socially constructed world. To see it, see it as that and then to think reflect on it and see when it's useful and when it's not useful and To see where we're at, you know, to, to have a company in conversation with it. And I think that's really the necessary thing that a lot, a lot of times people practice, Buddhism will reject that world entirely for some kind of idea of emptiness. But it doesn't need to be rejected at all, just needs to be seen clearly for what it is. So that in essence, you're in charge of it. It's not in charge of you. So May your practice help you become freer, more awake from

the world of

mentally constructed projections that we have on the world we live in. So thank you all very much. Have a wonderful week.