

# 2002-04-28 Assumptions - Reflections

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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## SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

to some of you who are involved in mindfulness, practice meditation practice for a long time, some of you for a short time, some of you are involved in a spiritual practice. Some of you have heard of your life experience or whatever, you have some deep seated knowing or belief about life or reality or what it is to be human being. So, the question is, what is it that you hold to be most true? What is it you know to be most true

in the realm of spiritual practice or mindfulness practice, what do you know to be most true

And then the interesting question is, once you've kind of get some sense so you know what you know, which is most true for you is upon what authority was the authority or the evidence for you knowing if this is true.

On what authority or what evidence do you know this to be true?

Then Are there any assumptions

that go into knowing this truth

Some article of faith or assumption, connected to this knowing.

Now I'd like to switch the topic of reflection. And for you to think back to an earlier time in your life, to the beginning of your involvement with maybe meditation practice or spiritual practice, or maybe you were involved in some in some kind of religious tradition, Buddhist or other. Remember back where there were there some assumptions you had about what a practice life or religious life a spiritual life

was about, or is about. That you no longer have To be true. Are there some assumptions back then, that you've outgrown or seen through? no longer see as being valid?

What was it that you came to see through these assumptions? What happened to you? How did you learn to realize these assumptions were not valid, you could let go of them.

Letting Go that reflection the final one is to think a little bit about There aren't there are assumptions you carry now. What assumptions underlie your practice life, your spiritual life? Your deeper understanding of reality. And how might you test these assumptions? I'm like you find out whether these assumptions are valid or not valid.

In the Buddhist tradition, there is a tradition or time honored practice, of reflection, and of thinking and contemplating about different themes and better life. And a lot of Westerners sometimes think too much about their lives. And so sometimes you go on retreats, and you're mostly told you don't think don't think, you know, just practice quietly. But thinking, thinking in a contemplative way kind of deeply about our life in ourselves and what's going on in the world is a very important part of the Buddhist spiritual life. And you see it in kind of enshrined in a very important list, a lot of lists in Buddhism. And it's called the four factors of stream entry, as people mature in a spiritual life. There's a particular kind of stages of maturity that people go through. And one of the first major important kind of stages of maturity, spiritual maturity, is when they call stream entry. And there's a list of the four factors that support are the conditions that make it possible to attain stream entry become the data of maturity happen. And the first of these conditions is having good friends, good spiritual friends. So right now, we all have that very nice kind of, you know, have sitting with people somewhat like minded. And the second is to be able to listen or read back then the old days, listen to the Dharma to the teachings. And hopefully you had that. We have a lot of different teachers that come through here in our center, and hopefully some of them you know, have good teachings and so listen to the teachings And the third which I'll skip for a moment, the fourth is to practice the Dharma, according to the Dharma to practice according to the Dharma. So be engaged in practice like mindfulness, practice, practice, practice, practice of ethics, and generosity and wisdom in a whole series of practice in Buddhism, your practice to do something be engaged. The third, so that also a lot of people here we do that we sit here in practice. So these first three conditions that I mentioned, are all kind of fulfilled by many of us. But the one that I left out, is the one that I think is probably the weakest in our tradition. And that is, to reflect would have wise reflection is a condition for extreme injury. To have this wide, quite wise contemplation, wise thinking and engagement in a thoughtful and contemplative way, about different things about reality, truth or life, the Dharma to engage And can challenge and army here. So you hear certain teachings, and then to engage with it in an active, challenging, you know, serious way, you know, what do you think about this? So reflective practices are important. So I offered you some reflections during your meditation time. And what I like, suddenly changed. It's changed speakers. So suddenly there was a little change over this side of the room, maybe. What I'd like to do this morning is before I prejudiced you anymore with ideas. I would like to suggest that you form little groups of four,

four, maybe five people and discuss what arose for you when you had these reflections when I go through these reflections and what your reactions were, what thoughts what reflections you had and so well scratchy is maybe turn that speaker feature that speaker off. I think it's that speaker in it, or the speaker out in the hall, they have a sense of worth. The problem is, is the speaker here, it's possible to turn just one speaker off. Okay. Be patient with me, because I'm going to stop really soon. So, you'll do that for a few. So we'll do formal groups about four, I think four is a good number but could be five and, and discuss what came up with it within each when you do the reflection meditation. And then be careful with a time you have about 20 minutes. So make sure that you all have a chance to speak one person doesn't dominate. And, and then we'll gather together as a group, and then we'll continue and I'll say more, some more words and give a very short dharma at the end and For those of you so you came in, missed the meditation part. So your group can tell you what the questions were. But I'll repeat some of them

are basically three categories of questions one had to do about what do you know as being most true? In your spiritual life use the word spirituality or your practice life or, you know, your philosophy of life in general, what do you know is most true? And upon what authority do you hold that to be true? What evidence do you hold that to be true? This is a very important issue in Buddhism. The Buddha addressed this issue a lot upon what authority what how do you know something is true? You know, that Buddhism kind of challenges that over and over again. So since we're doing our challenges itself, you know, Buddhist teachings, you How do you know Buddhist teachings are true and supposed to be really, you know, explore this topic not to take it as an article of faith. So what do you most know to be most true apart? What evidence do you take To be true, what what basis do you take it to be true? And then, in the past, when you first got involved in the spiritual practice, or somehow in the past, are there assumptions about life or spirituality, which you no longer hold that you see I've seen through? And how do you see through it? And then are there assumptions in the present that you hold about life about spirituality? And how might you test it? How might you find out whether they're true or valid or invalid, these current assumptions that you hold, so you don't have to address all of them, but whatever seems juicy for you, as a group. And, and maybe as you talk in your group, it'd be kind of bundle of clothes so you can talk more quietly so the room doesn't feel a lot of people talking at once, gets kind of noisy that way. And, and then we'll together so please form formula groups.

might be nice to have a few comments about what that was like to do that reflection and the discussion. Yes.

Consciously

Speak louder.

It felt like yeah, that's what I was doing to help

the discussion

Great. Thank you.

Sorry, yeah, resist.

So Kathy had resistance to doing it but then discovered how helpful it was to do it. How many of you felt some resistance to the idea of forming groups and talking about it?

And should I have you know, recognize that you were resistant to doing it and kind of left you alone to listen to a regular Dharma talk. I shouldn't yes next to someone else.

Participate now

So like you had a lot of talk about in your group suddenly you're quiet so I'm not gonna you know, I'm I'll just stay ignorant in the dark about what that was all about

arcade was we started talking about what we felt might be the answer and loved of course that compassion and, and maybe the difficulty of even finding an answer but that's what we ended up with. For one of us mentioned Connect connection with other people, which is, I think a nice way of bringing all that together because even if you don't come up with some huge truth, just the connection that you can feel what other people maybe all you really need.

query for the bell rang? Yes.

Maybe there are a lot of areas that we could talk about. We seem to be coming to the same place. We also need to start off

nice.

In our group,

the conversation seemed to move towards

what was the process of practice and seemed like just these questions and just looking at what is what is the authority that we're looking for. seem to be what really attracted. Most everybody in the group to Coming here

and also

finding Sanya to support that. Yes.

think the idea of community really feel a part of

and also, hearing each person's

thoughts is like a crystal. See the light of each each

experience

The I pose these questions Friday to a group of people. And part of the one of the groups of people that this question got posed to was a group of five other Dharma teachers. And so we sat together as five or six, six, there's six of us sitting around the circle, discussing, you know, our own takes on this, this question and how we responded. And there are a few different things that people said that I want to share. One was amongst teachers. One was, in terms of assumptions they had early on. It was one of the several people said that they had the assumption that they had to become like someone else that there was so they met some teacher or some great practitioner, and they said, Well, that's how I'm supposed to be just like that person. Once I kind of get you know, some attainment or develop myself in practice. I'll be just like him or her, you know, and then they realize that that wasn't Not a valid assumption because that was just their personality. And you know, they're had their own personality and their can have their own way of expressing their own spiritual maturation. The other was idea of some kind of purity, that if you practice you're going to be able to get rid of all this terrible things inside of you, and become, you know, morally and spiritually completely pure shining light. And, and when people said that that was kind of a burdensome assumption they carried because built into that assumption was a lot of aversion, and feeling of kind of worthiness that they have to somehow make themselves more worthy.

I don't think in the time that's remaining, I want to give much of a talk on this topic because I feel like I just, you know, need much more time maybe next Sunday, I can give a talk on this topic and my thoughts about it, and much further. But I wanted to maybe give you a couple of of since it's you all are sharing some like personally, something a little more personal about from my point of view, but these kinds of, I'm for, for maybe Buddhism, we say karmic reasons. For some reasons or other, I'm keenly interested in the question of the authority or the evidence or the basis by which we hold certain beliefs and ideas, and to always kind of be searching for the underlying assumptions. And not to kind of be complacent about what I know to be true or what I teach, but to always be looking at other assumptions here that I haven't really understood that underlie it. And from what evidence do I know those assumptions to be true or not true, whatever. And part of the reason is that you're okay with the sound. You're getting like to put up with it a little bit distracted by it but partly I'm distracted because I'm concerned you're going to be distracted. If I'm reassure, reassure that you're fine.

So

speaking to So, the my undergraduate degree is in agronomy, which is the art and science of field crop management. So another ag degree from UC Davis and a little bit different than how I ended up and the and I was kind of chastised is the right word, but I was very sobered are very experience was very important for me in how I'm relating to Buddhism. Because I went to UC Davis is kind of a fundamentalist organic farmer. And I was born again, you know, organic cyst. And I was one of the I was an agricultural activist on campus. And it was I did a lot of good, something my friends, who are also fellow students, we did some interesting things. It's still continue at Davis, as legacy of our work back then. So we're kind of agricultural activist alternative agriculture. And, but I had various ideas, but what I thought was true about conventional farming, organic farming. And as I started taking the classes in chemistry and soil science, the different science, assigning science that kind of underlied these kinds of beliefs that I had, I was really surprised to discover that some of my fundamentalist ideas about organic farming conventional farming did there was no scientific evidence to support it. And, in fact, some of the beliefs I carried the opposite was true. So I realized that I had a tendency to generalize, and then to hold my generalizations as being true. And then you know, get on the bandwagon and kind of try to convince everyone else who is true and upper, you know, kind of be a burden on people in general kind of way.

And so, when I got involved in Buddhism, this history of mind remained with me. And as a generalization, I think. I think religious people make a lot of generalizations. And the world of religion is filled with it. I believe people generalize and have fundamentalist ideas and hold them to be true and occasionally religious people burden other people with their ideas. It's been known to happen. And so I was very interested in, you know, looking at, you know, staying awake and attentive to where do I generalize where the generalizations not to fall into that, I still fall into that, but at least I'm interested in understanding and exploring it. That's one. The other is I became also here, because of my experience at San Francisco Zen Center, and my early years have still to stay my years of Buddhist practice. I became aware of how there are often underlying assumptions about the spiritual life and religious life practice life, that were also kind of a burden, that coffin cause suffering for me and for other people. One of them I was one of those people who thought I was supposed to be like one, like what it was one of the priests in center who I was wanting to be like, and I thought that was the whole point of Zen practice is be like Him and, and then I went left left Zen center for a year and I came back a year later and met some other teachers there and they were a lot different from him. radically different from him. I thought this is weird, why aren't they like him? You know, and I realized the point isn't to be like that person. But the point is to let it unfold in your own personality in your own life and not to mold yourself in some personality way like someone else. They one of the assumptions at the Zen center back in the late 70s, early 80s, was a little bit cultic was true. Buddhism only exists at San Francisco Zen Center. And occasionally, there were people who left and center to go practice at other

Buddhist centers in America or in Asia. And we felt sorry for them. You know, it wasn't really where the truth was, he was kind of like a

little bit off.

And so that's the kind of assumption that was built into the kind of system there. Another assumption was, if you really understood zen, if you really understood the deep teachings of emptiness, you wouldn't have any questions. And since you're supposed to look good as a Zen student, you know, you want to be a good And students, so therefore you wouldn't have any you wouldn't have any questions. So when time came questions, anybody have any questions? No one had any questions because, you know, they would let on that you didn't know. And if you didn't know, then you weren't a good Zen student where you're wasting your time. So there are assumptions built into the system. So one hand there are people who generalize and become sensitive to that tendency, and the issue of assumptions that became sensitive to that issue. And the third issue, which is a little bit different, more difficult to kind of give you an example for you should be easier, I think. But that kind of makes sense, but is very also interested in the topic of the beliefs that we hold. Are there consequences for holding us beliefs that go beyond the immediate, obvious domain of that belief system? So for example, if you have some religious belief, you hold some spiritual belief or belief about life. Does it have sociological consequences? in the community, your involvement with the community and how you see other people. So, for example, one of the, one of the teachings at Zen center was the teaching of emptiness, you saw the emptiness of things, that was to be a point of it. And so people didn't really address and talk about their anger, for example, in Zen center, because you because you see the emptiness of it. And if you understood the empty side of it, then there was no need to talk about it. And if you had it, then you didn't see the emptiness of things. So you didn't want to show that. So there's a whole kind of shadow side of anger that then spilled over into the kind of the way the community related to each other kind of undercurrent. Some sometimes I've kind of that. I don't know that was a good example. But the best example I can maybe give you is for my dissertation in when I wrote a dissertation, early Mahayana Buddhism, I wrote dissertation, a particular text called the perfect perfection of wisdom in 1000 lines, very early Mahayana discourse is considered to be the kind of like the prize expression of the Mahayana philosophy of emptiness, very important kind of fundamental teachings of emptiness, in Mahayana tradition. And they're also kind of like Zen Center, the over and over again, this text wants to emphasize everything is empty, some kind of that nothing has, things don't have an abiding character, essence. If you understand the, the impermanence, the condition for the nature of things that they're impermanent, they're empty in their core, then you can be liberated. And it's a very profound and interesting philosophy. But this text and holding this philosophy did awake entirely with the earlier Buddhist teachings on human psychology. And early Buddhists have had a very sophisticated teaching on how the mind works, and the factors of the mind and the causal relationship between things in the mind, cause and effect relationship. This early Mahayana book had almost no virtually no or no teachings about cars. On how things one thing causes or conditions, something else. They used to everything's empty, everything's empty. That's what you have to understand. They almost like they wanted to deny or push away causality. as being belonging to kind of a superficial



realm of reality, just go down to the essence which everything is empty. One of the consequences of this in that you see in the text is that this text which is considered to be a text of great philosophy, and most people don't, kind of gloss over that part of the text, which is not philosophical. There's a lot of it. The, the causal world has to be explained, somehow or other for human beings. And the way they did it was then was to sit not sit by reference to human psychology and causal connections there. But the progress in your practice, or if you kind of back slate in your practice, was attributed to the great kind of celestial cosmic battle between Buddha and Mara Mara as the Buddhist devil and somehow you are players you know, and your your practice was affected by this mythic mythological world. So in focusing on the great philosophy, emptiness, somehow or other, they opened the doors for this mythic explanation of causality, which was mostly absent in that kind of way, in the earlier tradition. And there hasn't been this whole mythology became a central part of the tradition. So, the belief of emptiness, which is very profound, had other consequences, beyond the actual belief itself.

And so that in this, you think these things so, so, the generalizations the assumptions and the consequences, involved in their beliefs is something which I'm very interested in exploring and understanding and, and part of the delight in doing this, I think comes a little bit maybe from my Zen training, my understanding of Buddhism, and that is that it's really great. To have the rug pulled from under your beliefs, because if you really want to be free, you don't want to have you don't want to be clinging or holding to any beliefs at all. clinging to them, you can have, you can have general kind of orient understandings that you orient your life by, but to have your beliefs pulled away from under you is really great. And that's kind of a Zen thing. You don't stand anywhere. So that's, you know, you know, I really delight in this where other people are, you know, terrified not to have a belief not to hold on to some point of view. So we'll talk more about this next week. And if you have any, you know, if you want to point out how I've made terrible generalizations, assumptions and consequences, what I've said so far, you can tell me next week