

# 2003-10-26 Not Knowing Mind

Sat, 7/11 11:36PM • 36:16

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

knowing, people, zen, mind, question, buddha, practice, appropriate response, ideas, situation, monk, teaching, die, zen teacher, thought, belief, person, death, happen, authority

## SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

What I'd like to talk about today is a practice that I've familiar with, mostly from the Zen tradition. And though it's kind of found its way into kind of American Buddhism, American Buddhism and it kind of, uh, some places are very important kind of Central stage for some people. And that's the practice of not knowing. I first heard about it from the, maybe from the first times from a Korean Zen master, who some son him who had a habit or teaching habit, I don't know if he still does for a long time, but just teaching don't know. And the people who study people who studied with him, would then give Dharma talks and they kind of imitate his geek Korean voice, you know, which I can do. Not only don't know, only don't know, you know, you've haven't getting a second third hand And then not knowing mind. It's a very effective practice the practice of not knowing. And they get a sense of how it's effective and when to use it and how to use it. It might be useful to think about all the ways in which knowing gets in the way. We, we think we know what's going on or even know what's going on. And we know best and everybody else wishes that we didn't know so well. You kind of whisper to them, you know, they whisper to you. Practice don't know, now. But I'm in control. Or I want to be in control. Yeah, that's the point and the Cisco Zen center they had a very common expression called beginner's mind, Suzuki Roshi taught very similar to being a beginner. And the teaching was that someone who was an expert in theory, had all these preconceived ideas of how things are. And so they only, you know, would do things certain ways. But someone who's a beginner wouldn't know the way it's supposed to be done. And so then you could do it in a very different way. And it seems like every time I kind of heard the news in the last few days, there was always discussion about three days rest, some, you know, but three days three days wrestling, you already need to have more than three days rest if you're a major league pitcher. And so, you know, a lot of opinions about you know, what's supposed to be and so and then it was the is this coach has been a coach for 55 years or so who is the expert he was wanting to know we can do it. Three days. But the not knowing mind is a mind that doesn't come with preconceived ideas and fixed ideas. And not knowing mind this attitude of not knowing it can certainly be useful in big questions of life. And I've heard plenty of Buddhist teachers have been approached, and they've been asked, you know, you know, what about rebirth? That's a big question, right? What

happens to me when I die? And they say, you know, I don't know. And the ones I've heard, who said that seem very comfortable in not knowing these kinds of big questions, and not knowing the answers. Don't know, is it almost as if those is irrelevant to what their spiritual life is about? rebirth? You know, I don't know. There's a story that's told in the Theravada tradition. On the weavers daughter. I don't know if she has a name, but she was 16 years years old the first time she'd heard the Buddha teach. And the Buddha talked about how important it is to reflect on death. And to think about that to do death, meditation, reflecting on death, contemplating death a little bit, so that you kind of face your issues around death, perhaps and face your fears and your concerns about it. And the Buddha said in this teaching that you heard was that those who contemplate death will face their own death without any fear. And so she took this to heart and for three years, she practiced contemplation of death. And the Buddha came back to her town when she was 19 years old. And she was in his assembly. He was about to teach, but somehow he could feel that how much he'd been changed in those three years. And so he asked her, instead of teaching everybody they got crowd that had gathered around he had is now an 18 year old girl. And he asked her where you're coming from? And she said, I don't know. And then she said, He's Buddha said, Where you going? I don't know. And the crowd of people started getting a little bit kind of, you know, restless. Now he's kind of 19 year old girl speaking kind of his way back to the Buddha didn't seem very polite, nice. They'd come to hear the Dharma and there's just impolite in polite conversation. And then, the Buddha says, Don't you know or do you know, do you not know? And she says, I know. And then the Buddha says, Do you know? And she says, I don't know. And then the people are really kind of getting upset and The beginning to deride her and criticize her for treating this great spiritual teacher in a very disrespectful way. He was asking you, you know, you know. And so then the Buddha said, you know, quiet down and let me ask her further. So she said he would ask her, when I asked you the first time, why were you from where you're coming from? Why did you answer? I don't know. He said, Well, I knew very well, that you knew that I came from the weaver studio where I work. And that's not what you're asking. You're asking, you know, where did I get reborn from? I don't know where I was reborn from. And when I asked you, where are you going to go where you're going? But you know very well, that I'm carrying this bundle of cloth that I woven and bring it someplace. You know that that's not what you're asking. You're asking where will I be reborn? And so I said, I don't know. And then when I said, Do you not know why did you say I know Because when you said that you're asking, Do you not know that you're going to die? Because there's a way in which a lot of people don't know they're going to die in some. We all know, right? But this is said that a lot of people don't really take it in in some profound way to really live their life knowing as if they're going to die. So she's a no, I know that I know I'm gonna die. She's been three years doing this contemplation of death and dying. And then when when I asked you, do you know? Why did you answer I don't know. Oh, because when you asked, Do you know this time? You're asking do do I, you're asking me if I knew when I was going to die. And I don't know when I'm going to die. That's why it's so then everybody was very impressed by her and her wisdom and all that. And the Buddha taught her some more and she attained some degree of enlightenment. And some time soon thereafter, was struck by one of the shuttles in the loom and died. I don't know why she had to die in the story, but you never know, right? So you have this attitude of not knowing in the big questions of life. And sometimes it can be quite profound around something like death. We don't know when we're going to die. We live as if

we have, you know, 50 years or 20 years or 10 years or whatever, we have time. And I've known people who regretted they didn't realize he didn't have so little time you have time to say, I love you to someone or to take care of some final business or do something with that felt very important for themselves, because they're always putting it off. So not knowing, you know, to remind you don't really know and then how do you take your how do you take that into account as you plan your life and live your life? So it's the big questions. Not knowing there's a place for that kind of mind that kind of approach. But also the not knowing mind and to not know the practice of don't know. Don't know. You know, there's a there's a one meditation practice which is you sit in meditation. And every time you notice you're thinking about something. You say to that thought you have a conversation with yourself and you say to that thought, I don't know. I don't know. I'm not having a very good time meditating today. I don't know. I think that I'm gonna go afterwards to 100 Park and go for a hike. I don't know. I think that I need to plan my finances for the rest of my life. All the starts to bubble up, right? I need to fix that relationship. I don't know. I need to I need to, I need to, you know, just everything. I don't know. I don't know. It's kind of like questioning everything. The bumper stickers are like taking the bumper bumper sticker question authority. And we question the authority of everything we think. Don't know, don't know. When I was when I went to, after I'd practice the Zen for a few years, and went down to Tassajara Zen monastery for the first time to be a monk there for about three years. And I was driving down through Carmel Valley and over the mountain to Tassajara. And then I was there for the first few days. And in that drive in, in the first days, and the first first weeks there, one of the very strong view senses I have or impressions or perceptions that I had was that I painted everything that I saw, with concepts with ideas with interpretations, and I would see these trees as beautiful oak trees or see rocks or it's the people or it's the buildings, and I could see you know, there there was the building the rocketry And then I could see there's almost like this veil between the rock or the tree and me, of my ideas of what rock is with tree is or what a person is or what a building is. And there were a lot of ideas that, that, you know, I was constantly doing it, and I still do it. But I had never been aware until that moment how much I was doing that. And I became kind of amazed to watch this painting, I call it painting that was constantly going on. How much do we live in concepts and ideas of what things are, as opposed to how things actually are? How much do we believe in beliefs of what we think needs to happen? Rather than in really seeing what's happening in the moment. There's a famous Zen story of someone going to a Zen Zen teacher and saying, He's an old man by now. I've been teacher for many years. And yeah, I guess You're probably my imagination is a young whippersnappers stepper kind of monk comes along, who knows everything comes along and says, you know, what's the? What is the teaching of a lifetime? So you've been teaching all these all these years, you know, given all these years of teaching, what is it teaching that you have all this lifetime? How do you summarize it? What's the, you know, what is it teaching of a lifetime? What do you have to say? And there's the Zen teacher says, an appropriate response. Imagine that as an answer. The teaching is a basic thing. You had to teach the teaching of a lifetime, what a lifetime of practice was summarized in appropriate response. That somehow his expression of Zen, or his realization, was not in a teaching exactly, but in his response to any particular situation he found himself in and you don't know ahead of time, what is the appropriate response? So the summary of a Lifetime practice and teaching isn't any situation you find yourself finding the appropriate response. And so then having a not knowing mind perhaps is very

important. We don't necessarily know the preconceived idea what's needed here. I've caused a lot of grief and a lot but certain amount of grief by thinking I knew what was going on. And, and then, finding out later that I mistook the person I did understand what's going on. Maybe one of their strong times when this happened was very innocently. I was in a changing room in the restaurant where I worked, and we were change of shifts. And I was leaving and someone was coming. And this guy was friend of mine came in, and I engaged him right away, we kind of jovial kind of fun kind of banter. And I didn't take the time to kind of like take, see who he was, what was going on what was happening at that moment. And, in a sense, I had this idea of who he was from the past and Our relationship and what was allowed in our relationship and I just went into it just like that, based on history turned out one of his best friends had just died. And that was, you know, it didn't feel so good for him for me to be joking with him at that moment. So, you know, to not know and I've been very impressed once I started as an adult, finding out the depths of people suffering and I don't know who I'm encountering, you know, maybe I could assumptions beforehand. One of the again is for the first time so in this kind of struck me was after I left Tassajara having been a monk there for three years. I did a weekend death and dying workshop with Steven Levine. And it was in Marin County in the early 80s. And there were all these I don't know what to how to characterize them because But they're all these ordinary people, they're the kind of ordinary people you'd seen if you walk down the streets, any place, you know. And you see them as ordinary people, you know, you just say hello, or they ask for the directions, you talk to them or, you know, you dismiss them or, you know, whatever we do with people, but there is ordinary people, the kind of people I wouldn't think much about, in some ways, you know, not and then they started speaking. And, you know, one of them, some of them were dying, some of them had their children had had died recently and parents die, you know, all this suffering. And I was blown away that the people that I thought I kind of knew or kind of just treated as ordinary, ordinary, what's ordinary, and, you know, so you know, had all this suffering, all this, you know, drinking tragedy in their life associate of not knowing when I encounter someone, I don't know who they are. I encounter someone who I've seen before. I don't know who they are. I do a lot of interviews with people. Sometimes I do interviews with the same person a number of times. And then sometimes, occasionally, someone will come and want to correct the view that I have of them. You know, because last time I said, they said something to me. And you know, you want to say, Well, that was a little bit wrong then or you want to clarify what I meant, and so you can have better view of me, whatever. I appreciate when people do that. But I really have kind of what I practice in interviews is, in a sense, I try to meet everyone fresh and new. And as if I don't know them, and so even though I kind of, hopefully remember something in the conversation before, it's like as if I've never met the person before also, because like, what's here, what's new here? What's going on here? Because I know I don't want to carry with me the bird Oh, I know, because of some past. So, you know, I paint the world with concepts live in that world of concepts. And is it useful sometimes to question them? to question their validity? And I believe it often is, I believe that often we don't question very deeply the authority upon which we believe something. Or, and so almost every thought train that we have imagine, has some kind of implicit belief that supports that train of thought. How do we, is it possible to question the authority of the train of thought and what not knowing what belief is addressed? So to go back again to being in the Zen monastery, what are the big lessons there for me, which I talked about is working in the kitchen being in charge of

a crew of people in the kitchen and realizing how much I wanted to be liked. And how much of my behavior was oriented around getting people to like me and being a manager of people in the kitchen is not the best place to get people to like you. It's possible but but it's not an easy place to do it and so it was a very stressful place to get you know me to try to figure out how to get everyone to like me and I had to kind of just you know, and remember one person said, some years later, he sent me he said, I need to talk to you. And he took me outside and he said to quietly said, you know, if you weren't so sincere, I punch you out. And but, upon what authority what belief system was I operating on? Right believed it was important. They're people like me. There's a belief there, right? I was operating to believe it's important people like me, why? Can we question that? Or at least bring to that recognize that? Don't know. Don't know, don't know. If it's important people like me, don't know if it's important to have that, for me to have that desire. And there is inherently this neurotic desire for that to be the case. I don't know. I don't know. I find that saying that question. Almost like a mantra. I don't know, in response to what I think what I believe things would come up. It has been a very effective way for me to create space in the mind, to open it up to relax it because of the how often the mind is operating on some neocons. treated knowing as if I know when often that knowing is in the way, or is a problem or holding me back or keeping the mind contracted? So this question is a little weird. I don't know. I don't know. It's very, very powerful. There's no there's no story. A monk has been wandering around kind of a pilgrimage, which Chinese monks often did. And he's taking a leave of the last temple he's been at. And then master asks him something like, Where you going? And the monk says, I'm going wandering around. And there's echoes in this, come on, with the idea of some SAR wandering around in samsara. And wandering around. And then the Zen teacher says something like, and how are you going to wander around? How are you going to be as you wander around? And the guy says, I don't know. And the Zen teacher says, not knowing is most intimate. And then the guy's enlightened as they are sometimes in the stories, but this quote and not knowing is most intimate. It's a very intimacy is sometimes in Zen and Chinese and it's almost equated to enlightenment itself. So not knowing is very intimate, very precious, very deep. Not knowing to meet something with a mind that doesn't know that it's open to you know, possibility that is not the Ending situation to be a certain way, not requiring ourselves to be any kind of way. not putting limits, not contracting with our thoughts or our mind is and not knowing mind and mind which is really spacious, relaxed at ease without things are open to possibilities. Not knowing. And then the Zen master Suzuki Roshi said, not knowing doesn't mean you don't know. So it doesn't mean that you have to kind of forget everything you've known. It's not a you can certainly be naively going around with and not knowing mind. But if you kind of begin recognizing all the ways in which knowing has gotten in your way, maybe there's a way of learning the art of carrying with you carrying with us the knowing we do know. But not holding it too tight, holding it lightly, so that we're ready to kind of let it be different. Doesn't have you know, it's almost like a tentative interpretation or knowing, oh, maybe it's this way? Or maybe not. Let's find out. Maybe it's this way, maybe not. Let's find out. I don't know. I only don't know. It's interesting that the Zen teacher by the name of Bernie Glassman, who started a peace Zen Peacemaker order. So it's kind of like a new order of Buddhist monastics, whose focus is to be peacemakers in the world, not sure exactly all the things they do. And they have three principles, I believe are precepts or something three principles of how they're supposed to be peacemakers and Three are practice not knowing, bearing witness, and



healing. So those are the three aspects of Bernie's ideas of peacemaking entering situation with a knock, knowing mind, bearing witness to what's there, and then somehow offering healing in that situation. So imagine that going without knowing up knowing what's called what's needed, not knowing what the appropriate responses. So I can imagine that not knowing is often a very frightening place to be. Are the people want to know because to protect themselves from being the fear, the uncertainty, the insecurity, we know then things are saying. There certainly is a place for knowing. Knowing is a very important aspect of Buddhist practice. But I hope that today I've conveyed a little bit the importance of not knowing And suggest that you experiment with this practice of not knowing little bit to see when it's useful for you. It's probably more often useful more often than you realize. And, but if you do it really well to try for a few days or per week, really carried with you and see how deeply you can probe with this question. What is the statement? Don't know? Because you know, there's like layers and layers of beliefs in our mind. And so you take a statement as innocent as sitting here and thinking, you know, you know, I need to have a Caesar salad for dinner to make us you know, that's innocent, right? So don't know don't know if you need a Caesar salad. Right? But then you can keep asking he keeps saying statement don't know See you. So you realize, Oh, the reason why you thought you needed to see the salad was you're having guests over and eat, impress them with your wonderful Caesar salad recipe. Do you really need to do that? Don't know, you need to impress your guests don't know you needed to be Caesar salad. It means or underneath that means that you feel like you need to be someone in relationship to someone else. You need to repair yourself and be certain persons. So when you encounter them, you know, they see you a certain way. And it's manifests itself in making Caesar salad. Don't know don't know you need to be anybody Who told you that? That you have to be someone present yourself a certain way. But where's the where's the manual that says no human being has to be this way or any kind of way or prove themselves says you have to be a success or you have to be a failure. You have to be this way or that way. Don't know if you do it For a while, you probably find it doesn't leave you with much as a basis for authority, question authority and apply, you probably be a lot happier and other people will be a lot happier around you. So that's about all I know for today. So anybody have any comments or questions?

Cuz it's also

interesting to see, sitting there during the day, how many things the mind brings up a certain thing is going to happen a certain way that the wife feels uncomfortable.

Not knowing what's actually going to happen and what you want and actually believes it

Maybe that way, maybe not.

Yeah, so and so we don't know how things gonna turn out. But we often orient ourselves around belief that we know some way or other. One of my, you know, one of my sources of wisdom has been one unfortunate ways of developing wisdom is from familiarity. And unfortunate means that you have to do

it over and over and over again, until finally you get it, you know, but one of the ways for me was I used to worry a lot about the future and planning and you know, how I was going to be certain. And I still plan to some degree, but so many times, how I planned is going to be, you know, the event didn't even happen, the need to cancel the meeting, or I came to the meeting or whatever, and it was all different than we expected it to be and all that planning. I went spent a year planning something it didn't happen. I mean, a lot, not just you know, casually once in a while. But like, probably spent probably two hours a day, I had a lot of leisure time. And I was convinced it was going to happen. Didn't happen. So I'm a slow learner.

Yes. I just want to thank you for your talk this morning. seems very appropriate to where I am right now. And I guess the question that I've been asking myself in the last couple of weeks is

the difference between control, containment and

the difference between wanting to control a situation and creating a container where it can be what it is

and yet I still find

I find the need for

Otherwise?

Yeah. So are there like, in between?

Well, that's that's a great question the difference between control and containment, if you're engaged in some kind of situation, it seems like something needs to be contained, but one is as controlling it. And it's a great question. It's a little bit vague. So I'll answer the best I can, with what you've given me. What occurs to me is that controlling might be wanting things to be a particular way. And kind of maneuvering or manipulating things to be the way you want to be. containment to me, resonates with the idea of setting limits what's allowable, so you know, you can be the way you are up to these limits. They don't say no. And so it's kinda like you have the veto power. You don't control In situations like labor, you're saying, you know, you know, within these bounds and behaviors appropriate, but beyond that, so like with kids, that's often the occasion, you set the boundaries, you know, you're not going to control the kids so much. But you're going to say, you know, you can't go beyond this, these bounds, and then there's, you know, consequences or, and sometimes the mind is like way, right? Maybe you don't have credit, right, try to control your mind, but you have the veto power over your mind. And that's the way of containing is you know, I'm not gonna I'm not gonna say that or go there, do that. So that you think of that.

I wouldn't say I know this, but I suspect that Socrates realization that you don't know something is the beginning of wisdom.

Always like

Socrates said, The realization you don't know something is the beginning of wisdom. Someone said recently maybe this is a common cliché but I heard only heard it for the first time. Education is not feeling a pot. It's lighting the fire. Like lighting a fire. Yeah.

I'm not sure who said this, but it was. It takes a long time to learn nothing.

here that takes you said that. There's a Zen saying that. That goes, it takes a long time to learn nothing. Yes. Did you have an answer? It's got the greatest this depends on the intonation of how it says right? What do I know or what? Yes.

It's not what we don't know. It's what we know and just being so

great, thank you.

Participant experience study

more you know, more is to realize

that this focus is

just a little piece in this there's so much more as an as a spouse thing. essential to become comfortable with us.

I've heard of doctoral students and, and professors at research universities like Stanford, for whom it's a problem that they never going to know enough. Yeah.

Seems like this

response.

So perhaps not knowing his path of acceptance, because you don't even know who you are. And yeah, maybe so maybe it's more profound than even acceptance maybe something more profound and self acceptance. Yes.



What resonated for me on a personal note into this talk was  
the I'm currently  
trying to fiddle by the concept of actually getting before my  
escape snake.

And being able to say no, and be not like,  
as opposed to

think it's a I believe very strongly, it's a very, very powerful practice, especially if you do it thoroughly. If  
you only do it, you know, if you try to do it seriously, but only do it halfway, you know, then it might  
leave you kind of hanging. But if you do it really thoroughly I think it's You know, you'll forever be  
changed. So please enjoy your night not knowing mind and good luck