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SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

So this evening, I would like to talk about contentment and contentment is a very important part of Buddhist training. Very important part of what supports meditation practice in Buddhist spiritual practice in general. It's seen most explicitly in the training of Buddhist monastics monks and nuns, who are specifically taught to practice contentment. And, and it takes various forms. It takes contentment with the few possessions that they're allowed to have to be content with those things with the bare requisites for having what would have considered a comfortable life. But that's not a comfortable life in some of the places we know around here. But they have just enough food to support the body in a good way. So it's good energy now lethargic not eating too much or too little, just the right amount to have just the right amount of clothes to do what clothes are most importantly need to do, which is to keep us protected from the elements. So we don't get too cold. If you know we have enough good enough clothes to keep us warm enough and protected from the mosquitoes enough. And things like you know, having the right clothes to attract the right spouse or partner is not wasn't a part of this part of the idea for monks and nuns. They can content with what looks like just kind of a curtain draped around them. And then to be content with very simple dwellings just enough just to just the right amount of dwelling kind of size and shape and everything to sleep properly and be protected again from the elements and the key few few possessions that you had To be content with the medicines that Buddha allowed, the Buddha allowed the monastics certain kinds, certain number of medicinal plants and things, and to be content with that, so be content with very little. So it's pretty much a pretty sparked in life, from our point of view kind of lay life in the West. But from his point of view, as I've said, it was a life that had everything that person needed to be comfortable in order to live a life in his life dedicated to spiritual practice. It was certainly not meant to be an ascetic life. Though that's what might seem like from our point of view, they didn't have VCRs for example, DVD I guess. The other thing was to be content with what was given. And when and that was specifically had to do with with number of things but Buddhist monastics lived on more On what was given to them, they were not allowed. They're not allowed to keep the food that they are given every day after 12 o'clock noon, so

they have to be given food before noon. And they can buy food for themselves and they can grow food for themselves. So they're completely dependent on the goodwill of people who want to feed them. And so they wake up in the morning and they don't know where the food's gonna come from, and they put on their robes and they have this bowl and they go walking through the villages or the towns of the countryside. And at least in Southeast Asia, people understand what this what's going on and they see the monks coming in the morning with their bowls. They know the monks are out on their alms round and people will then put food in. And here in the West if you started you know, walk down the aisle camino Where are your Buddhist robes? There might be some people who, who understand the Thai restaurant El Camino and Broadway. I went in there to eat one day only to find out the owners know Ajahn Amaro now just know you know the two monastics in our tradition who live up in Ukiah. So you'd ever know you know who you went into El Camino when I joined semedo did this in, in England. He was walking through some park in England was alms rounds, and mostly in walking in on England. In London. They didn't get anything in the 70s there was part of the tradition to walk the alms rounds and they came back empty and that's the way it went. But one day he was walking through London and this jogger bicyclists saw him I thought he was kind of odd. You know, this guy was shaved head and this orange like robe and sandals probably and probably stuck out a little bit unusual in England where people are dressed a little differently.

And so the guy stopped and said, Who are you What's going on? And I don't submit us I said, I'm a forest monk. And I every day is my custom to go out and alms round in case someone wants to make a donation to feed me. And he said, Well, I don't have any food to give you. But since you're a forest monk, can I put a forest in your alms bowl? And he had a little as a property in someplace in England where it was, it became chitters I guess in shitters thing, I don't know exactly how it works, but the names of it, but he had this property, this house and some woods, and I guess next to a pond and he gave it to him. And it became the first monastery and this najem submitters tradition in England and that grew and eventually they had like six or seven places monasteries in England, thriving Nesta community. And so the monastics are kind of just given things and sometimes they're given a lot you know, they're given monasteries you know, property with Sometimes given very little. And the practice of monastics, is to be content with what's given. And if what you're given is poor quality, use content with that. If what you're given is not as good as the other monk down the street. You don't get envious and jealous, because that just upsets your own Samadhi. But you just content with what you do what you what you have. So he had the content with what you have. Nowadays, there's a kind of a cliché, almost a piece of wisdom that I think is kind of profound.

Which is

happiness doesn't come from getting what you want, but from being content with what you have, being happy with what you have. So rather than looking beyond yourself and beyond the present moment into some future present, into some future situation where you get something or get what you want, or you know, you're putting Happiness often the future, you find your happiness here and now, or you

contentment here. Now, the word Pali word for contentment is, is also can mean happiness or satisfaction. So to find your happiness or your contentment with what is already here, and this has been very important for me in the years of my practice, the idea of contentment, the practice of it, the experience of it and it's been important when I can experience is when I'm in touch with it. It's also been important when I not in touch with it's when I feel the opposite. I feel Miss content discontented. And it's been important also when they both kind of coexist together a feeling of contentment and a feeling of discontent at the same time.

It's hard for me to kind of describe what contentment is. For me, maybe for each person is different. Maybe a different situation is different. But I sense of it as a almost physical experience. So it's kind of almost like an emotional experience. It's not just some kind of idea of being content with how things are. But it's a deep sense of well being that arises, it's almost like a feeling of a smile in my body, not a smile on my face, but kind of smile kind of like, you know, in my torso kind of, or a sense of well being or a kind of peacefulness, a sense of being a deep sense of satisfaction or peacefulness that somehow seems to permeate when it's really strong, but permeates kind of my torso, my body, kind of my, my being. The first time I had this kind of experience was not through Buddhist meditation or through Buddhism at all. But the first time I had it in a very No, maybe that wasn't the first time I've had it, but I guess I've had other earlier times in my life, but the one time it was very imminent. For me, it kind of opened the door for me that was very important was when I was 18. And I was traveling around Europe by myself. And I came to in France. Monson. Michelle, Michelle. It's kind of like, looks like you know, Walt Disney built it because you're going across the plains of Brittany, I think it is or Normandy of something you're going across you and it's all flat. And then you suddenly see in the distance this this kind of like palace or castle like thing that kind of is arising up to a spiral point, as I remember, rising up this high thing. And it's a it's a piece of land. It's kind of like a when a tide is in. It's an island where the tide is out. It's kind of like connected to the mainland. It's kind of this long, flat. Title flatlined or something. And it's kind of this, this huge monster Cathedral built on this mountain or this hill, this little mountain. And apparently it was a sacred site before the Christians came to the area. But as Christians had had a custom of doing, they often appropriated pagan Christian sites and made him into you know, Christian sites, churches. And the first thing they did on this site was apparently they built a small little chapel out of rocks, rock chapels stone chapel, and it was relatively small, like, I don't know how I was inside of it. It was probably you know, 12 by eight maybe that you know, pretty small, maybe a little bit bigger. Maybe some of you have been there have you been inside the, the little teeny chapel, the middle of it or even over the centuries, they they, they added to it, add an add an add an edit until you have this huge You know, I don't know if the monastery Cathedral what it is but monastery. But the original chapel is right still in the middle still there. And so that they had this tour of Monson, Michelle, and when they took us into that little chapel, as soon as they enter the chapel, I was just flooded with a sense of well being and peace. Kind of maybe was the was a cool place, I don't know, or power place. I don't know what it was. I never thought about it what it was exactly except that I felt this tremendous deep sense of contentment, of peace of well being there was just here. And it showed me a possibility of what that I had never really taken seriously before that time, a possibility of some very deep abiding physical sense of being at peace or being contented or being at

home or being kind of satisfied with this very moment. Now. With this body now the situation right now when I came to meditation, starting meditation, some years later, I started feeling the same thing there, sometimes in just small hints of it, the quarters and, and at times, it became stronger and stronger meditation. And, and, and to this day and now it's become very important part of my meditation practice, not that it's always there some powerful way, but even my daily sitting, you know, I feel some level of contentment and peace but it becomes a reference to me, for me the idea of contentment, the idea that it's possible to be content to be happy right now without anything happening without acquiring anything without attaining anything. And it kind of strange way of saying this without experiencing anything. You know, even though contentment might be kind of an experience, like you know, you're trying to be happy or trying to get concentrated or Trying to do all these things. It's not about trying to get something out there. But rather it's almost like relaxing into what is already here and being okay with it being okay with this, so as I was sitting with you now today this evening there was a my mind wasn't that settled today sitting here. So my mind was wandering somewhat. And I had some choices I could have to my wandering mind. One was to be upset. I should, you know, this shouldn't be happening to someone who's been meditating as long as I have. You know, and I'm an education teacher. And if these people find out you know, obviously it's pretty embarrassing and

so,

or I could kind of, you know, feel like you know, this is, you know, I can have all kinds of negative attitudes towards the wandering mind, but rather What I did was to was to be content to her, where's the content fit with this right now? Can I be content not necessarily content with a wandering mind, just content in this moment to this situation as it is including the wandering mind. And when I come back to that sense of being content with how things are, then it's actually a lot easier to be mindful and be present. And it's a lot easier for the mind to let go of the wandering mind. That distracted mind. But if I didn't do enter into a conflict with my wandering mind, and are fighting it and trying to push against it and trying to stop myself from doing it. I find it doesn't often work very well for me to get the mindset the mindset of the mind settles and becomes clear when we're not in conflict with it. And so, asking myself, where's the contentment here with this or can I be content with this also, this situation here was important just in the last sitting for me At times of my life where I feel discontent, discontented and then the reference of having knowing that contentment is possible that I've had a lot of experience in my life of finding contentment, situations where you know, we're unpleasant. Where can I find the contentment in an unpleasant situation now? What does it take? What do I have to understand about myself? What do I have to look at what I have to be honest about? What do I have to relax into? It becomes kind of like a question or kind of a probing. Challenge. We're, what is it? It is a take. It's possible now. And in this difficult situation, where is it? And again, to just just a couple hours ago, I had to sit this this question is challenge. We came back from the East Coast after being there for 10 days long enough for my one year old and six year old child To be acclimatized to that timezone. And by five o'clock this evening, it was at eight o'clock. It was eight o'clock back east, and they're in bed by that.

And it's five o'clock here. And a one one year old, a six year old who's ready for bedtime? It is, at least in my family. It lends itself to unpleasantness

and it's one thing to have one unpleasant but when you have to unpleasant this connected to children, is a kind of exponential growth of unpleasantness. It's not like one plus one but it's like one to the 10th so where you know how to be content here, how to be at peace or at ease with this, to accept this, to relax this to be with this or just this, just this and engage in it and try to take care of it, you know, you can't just, you know, just letting go doesn't quite work. You have to also kind of act you have to do something. There's a big surprise to me as being parents, you know, was the shortcoming of my years of retreat practice. And, luckily, I was trained in Zen. So I got the other half pretty well, but I've see this in people who haven't done then, you know, people done a lot of the positive practice, which is what I teach nowadays, right? They, they can be really good at sitting there on the cushion on the retreat, and learning how to let go let go let go let go. because nothing's asked of you. I mean, no one's asking you to entertain a six year old Or, you know, change their diaper have a one year old who doesn't want you know, if you ever tried to change a diaper have a one year old who doesn't want to change your diaper? I mean, I didn't I didn't didn't teach me wrestling in high school. And you can't reason with them because and any how to change the diaper, you know, it's like and there's a there's a, there's a term called blowouts when the diaper hasn't, you know, contained and then the baby doesn't want to sit still right. And so you can't just sit there, be quiet and say he's okay. I'll just be content with the situation. I just let go. I know how to be peaceful. You know, it takes certain kind of to do something And, and I've seen in some vipassana students that they that they fall back on just kind of just being receptive mode. And in zen, what I learned was there's also a way of being active and engaged. And so where is the peace? Where's the contentment? Where is it is engaging in a situation that needs engagement? How do we do that? And I find it's still to this day in certain situations, you know, the wrestling situations, you know, very difficult, you know, to do that, but the reference that it's possible is very important for me. And then I pay attention to where am I? Where am I anxious? Where, what's going on with me with it's not the contentment. And then, you know, can I relax, I can't let go that I had a conversation today with a woman who's done a lot of meditation practice. Very good practitioner. done a lot of long retreats. And she was telling me about the recent retreat she's been on and she's learned a lot. You know, she's learned a new technique, she learns different techniques different, you know, times, learn new technique, a meditation practice. And that technique helped her a lot. And she read some spiritual book and she had a new understanding that helped her a lot. And all these things that have helped her lock into practice. Now listen to all this, I was happy for her. It was really great to hear how she'd been helped. And then listening to you know, as at the end of the conversation, so this is all really great, makes me very happy. But listening to this, what I've heard it don't take this wrong. I said to her because it sounds simplistic or reductionistic not meant that way. But what I've heard, is that you've learned all these techniques, these new techniques, this new understanding, and what they've done for you with each of them has done for you. Is it helped you relax. The technique helps you relax. This understanding helps you relax. And you just needed to relax. And, you know, we went to these expensive retreats and you know, learned these wonderful techniques, they've been honed down through the centuries. And it just gave me just with a way of encouraging her to relax, it's okay,

everything's okay Just relax. Just relax and let things take their own course. She discovered that she had a capacity to have a lot of joy in her practice, if she just got out of the way of the joy, she'd been resisting it not likely a cheater, feeling that joy was not an appropriate thing to feel because whatever. And

relaxing is a real big key to meditation practice. And part of relaxing or kind of part of that family of things which are connected to relaxation is being content with how things are Is it possible And then honestly look at why is it not possible? Why do you think it's not possible? What do you feel like you need? Where do you think happiness is found? is happiness found in chasing after something or seeking after something? Or is happiness something that is expressed through us? is happiness something that arises? Because we get something? Or is it happiness, something that is simply an expression of some inner sense of well being. And I think the path of Buddhist meditation is to begin discovering the happiness, which is an expression of who we are rather than an expression of having gotten something that makes us happy. So what is that? How is that define that

So part of contentment is a for me at times if met at the best is a kind of relaxing into

maybe what can be called the spacious mind or still in mind or a transparent mind or

open mind. Mind that has no boundaries, a mind that has no awareness which has no boundaries or has no Inside no outside mind which is at, at home worth peace with itself.

One of the remarkable things for me about spiritual life as I've learned it is that is the difference between motivations or intentions are activities of the mind are things that I want to do that come from my egotistical mind or my self centered mind or the mind that feels like it has to control things or make things And or, or a seeking something outside of itself. So that's what one hand versus the kind of motivation or active action in the world that just seems to arise seemingly spontaneously on its own. Sometimes I call it the innate intelligence of the mind. So not figuring things out or planning or see, but rather kind of trusting that what needs to happen will arise on its own. know if no one's going to pay for you. So, you know, most of us know that when it's time to pee, you know, we have the intelligence to do it. The way we trust our innate intelligence for the most part to pee right. So can we do that same thing with you know, with other things, and having a conversation with someone either to plan the conversation ahead, or we can just let things just arise by itself, out of a mind which is relaxed, out of the mind, which is already content with how things are. If we feel anxious or discontented by how things are, and then act or speak out of that discontentment. I don't think the chances are that the our actions and our speech is going to be as wise and as conducive to peace, as if we can speak and act from the place of contentment. But to do that requires a certain level of trust that what comes out of contentment is adequate to take care of ourselves take care of the situation.

So to practice contentment with the things that we have. Now because it's a moral thing to do in Buddhism, but because if you can let your mind start becoming content, for more often, it's a lot easier to dive deep into the spiritual dimensions of our minds and hearts. When the mind is discontented, discontented with your bank account, or your house or your clothes or your partner or lack of it, or whatever. There's not much space to experience the depth of our spiritual psyche. So it's not a moral thing to practice contentment with, things we have. But rather it's a strategy, that if you can be more content with how things are in your life, it kind of opens the door in your mind for some new possibility to happen, of being able to relax and go deeper into some deeper sense of peace and well being. So let's continue with the kind of things of your life, and then there's contentment with what's happening in this moment. And then there's contentment with what's happening in meditation, with your distracted mind or with your breath when it's uncomfortable or the quality of your breathing right now, you know, to be content with how things are, as opposed to looking beyond what's here and now for something else or seeking beyond the present. So they may that's enough. Hopefully, my innate, spontaneous intelligence and contentment was adequate, enough, you're contented with it. You leave all contented with the talk. The talk is going to be good for you to be contented.

And I did, I did. I did think I did. It was thinking earlier today. I was gonna be Talk about contentment. And when I did I thought about it, I thought, oh, maybe that's a nice topic to follow the last two months, the theme of the last two Monday's. So do you have any questions or comments?

Can you wait for the microphone please?

I kind of hate to bring this up in a way because

I am and I'm sure several others in this room are politically active.

And if we get to contented, Tim, what happens to what good we can do with reference to our government?

So I someone told me that in Thailand, I've heard different stories. One person told me it wasn't the 1950s and someone else told me is more recently that the government in Thailand had a law passed, I guess whatever, decree that Buddhist teachers had this we're now no longer to allow to teach teachings on contentment because then people wouldn't be you know, industrious. You know, you know, work hard to build the economy and all that. And someone I gave a talk on contentment, you know, some years ago and someone afterwards told me that this is this is not good for corporate America because what they want they want you don't want you know, you know, if you if you have in your resume, you know, your good qualities you say, you have a great capacity for being content. You're not gonna get hired because they want someone who's driven and just vicious and wants to really, you know, be competitive and all that probably. So there could be you know, some problems

with contentment. There's a lot to be said about it. Maybe the benefits are greater than the app and the problems. But the most important thing to say in response is that a deep abiding sense of contentment doesn't preclude being politically active. It means that when you're politically active, that you're not doing it from a place of anxiety, despair, agitation, concerning what's going on.

Can you say that acceptance is leads to contentment,

does acceptance lead to contentment? the right kind of acceptance does.

Acceptance of situation, whatever situation you are in, you just accept it as it is.

Yeah, yeah, it's a little bit dangerous. I mean, it's kind of like what, you know, when Dick was making, right? I mean, we just, you know, someone's hitting you with over the hell hit over the head with a brick, you know, oh, I'll just accept this one too. You know, it's kind of silly, right? But the individual wonderful book now called radical acceptance, that kind of uses that term radical acceptance as almost a kind of a description of mindfulness practice of how it unfolds. I like to think of, I like to think of non harming or non violence as being a good, better, better expression and acceptance, to not be in conflict with what's going on, as opposed to accepting it. Because some things we don't want to some things are important not to accept. But even when we don't accept it. We don't have to be in conflict with it even more Trying to stop it. Even we say no to it. So maybe it sounds a little strange to talk this way, maybe explain a bit further. There's a difference between what we do with our speech interactions and what we do with our mind. The mind can get contracted, the mind can can shut down the mind can get filled with hate and aversion and desire. The mind can do all these things. And acceptance is primarily a quality as a spirit as a spiritual as a Buddhist practice, the quality of the mind, the mind itself, is going to be open and accepting and receptive to this experience. The mind is not going to get contracted, or tight or aversive to the situation. What you decide to do in terms of acting or speaking and situation is a different question. But you're not going to sacrifice the peacefulness of the mind. Even when you have to say no, even maybe when your life's at stake, you're going to you still might say, No, you still might, you know, put up your hand and stop the brick. You might do all kinds of things. But the mind itself is accepting of it. So the mind is accepting, but not our actions or maybe not or judgment is maybe not. Is that distinction helpful? Is that helpful? Or is that too complicated?

Yeah, you could, I guess I would put it this way that we can accept it and do some action, not because I don't accept it, but because his wisdom is wise to take an action, whatever it is, right. But I accept first thing I accepted in and then I take action, not because I'm not accepting, but because it is wise.

Beautiful. Yeah. So. So I would say the greater the acceptance, healthy form of acceptance, the greater the wisdom and the greater chances of wisdom has to operate. And this is what this thing I'm pointing to this idea of the innate intelligence. I have a great kind of confidence that comes from innate

intelligence, innate wisdom that sometimes can operate when we're relaxed enough for accepting. But I've made a fool of myself enough to know that. So, set enough, you're contented enough. So I hope it's been helpful. And you might take this as a challenge for this next week, to see what the role contentment might have in your life and how you can use contentment, the theme of contentment, the idea that an experience of it as a way to facilitate the deepening of your happiness in your life. So thank you