

2005-01-23 Blind Spots

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SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

So I want to offer you some things I've been thinking about a lot this last week, and some of my thoughts around the topic as a way of perhaps having some exploration, some discussion in the whole group about this topic, different people's idea. And that is how do we discover about ourselves? Things that we don't already know. So how do we discover aspects of ourselves that are, you know, that are there, but which we don't have a clue that are there. The you know, if someone came to you, someone you trusted a lot and really was really perceptive. really knew you well, and came up to me and said and said, you have a huge blind spot and then the person left town. But But you know, the person didn't tell you what it is. How would you go about figuring out what that blind spot is? What would you How would you look into it? In the Buddhist teachings, there's a teaching about what's called English latent tendencies, dormant tendencies under saya. And these are tendencies which are dispositions that we have habit formations, dispositions, tenants, tendencies to react tendencies to impulses to act in certain ways, which lay there kind of resting in the background, and they can be resting there for decades, without even knowing they're there. And then in certain certain circumstances, they get triggered. And you find yourself really surprised by the degree of hate, you could have a degree of anger or the degree of desire or greed or confusion that can be there. But those seeds, those tendencies towards desire or hate or, or confusion, kind of, we're always kind of linger there. There in the background. It's not so unusual for people to do Buddhist practice in some intensive environment, like going off and being a monk, some monk or nun someplace where it's a very ideal environment, maybe very quiet, very or ideal, but at least a kind of specialized environment. And, and you can get concentrated get very peaceful, very wonderful, and people that they have got to get to the conclusion, Boy, am I a hero or boy, I've really kind of, you know, I've arrived. So this is really great. You know? And, and I remember once it wasn't in the Buddhist context, but when I was 20, or 21, telling myself, Oh, I'll never get depressed again. And that was just before getting more depressed than I've ever had in my life. But you notice we get these conclusions about, you know, and so it's cut, you know, it happens in many domains of life. But, you know, Buddhist monastics, sometimes have this They leave the monastery. And lo and behold, they find it they that you know that they haven't overcome their

certain clinging or attachments or fears or certain kind of habits. It's just been dormant, it's been laying there for a long time resting. So if any of us probably we get put in a radically different environment than we're used to, might be surprised at some of our reactions and responses that come out of us in that radically new environment. Oh, I didn't know I had that ability to respond. There's all kinds of beliefs, we have assumptions we have about ourselves about other people. Some of them are very deeply embedded in the kind of cultural matrix that we're in kind of cultural viewpoints that we have, and sometimes very hard to see the kind of even our language sometimes seems to be built into certain kind of cognitive processes, that kind of structures that are hard to see because we're kind of like, it's hard to put Fish to see the water it's in or something, it's hard to see some of the kind of underlying structures of our society. I was very surprised to sorry, I've often told practicing in Japan at the monastery and living with a group of about 35 Japanese young monks for about five months. And it really, really kind of included in their life which is embedded in their life. They forgot they forgot that I was a foreigner, they just kind of lived their life and I was just there with them in the monastery living a very intensive life. And every morning we had this template cleaning session for about 1520 minutes. And I would go ahead and do it with them and I loved it. It was kind of engaged kind of work very brisk activity of cleaning. If you clean that quickly at home, you'd be finished in real time. And we just clean and then one day while doing it at about halfway through My time there, I kind of woke up or kind of suddenly I had this realization. I don't know how I got this information, but I'd been there taking in the cues over a long period of time. And suddenly I understood that I was operating a different universe than the other Japanese monks. And the different universe was just it was I was operating as, as an individual doing the cleaning, and individual, kind of in a group. They were operating as members of a group, they were meant as part of an organism, the entity that they weren't, they were the group. I was an individual among many individuals. They were elements that made up an entity called the group. Make sense. So I was one among many entities, and they were part of a bigger entity called the group. And so they had a sense of who they were, as an individual human being a bit It became use that language but who they were as a person was they were part of a community, very intimately part that was kind of, and as a mostly person who got very much influenced by Western culture and American culture. I saw myself as an individual first, not as a member of a group. And it was, it was a surprise to me. I had no idea that there could be a different way of understanding what a human being could be. And I luckily to me, at that time, I didn't think that one was better than the other. I just thought that these are really different, how amazingly different that what it means fundamental understanding what it means to be human being is different in different cultures. And I hadn't seen it. While I've stayed in our culture here, I kind of assumed this is the way it is. But because we assume it the way it is, there's a lot of things that follow on that. That seemed very logical, logical follow on that But the world's not set up, it doesn't have to be that way. So in the West, we tend to, we tend to certainly start certain segments of our culture to overvalue individualism, and self Self Realization, realizing ourselves realizing our potential for ourselves. And it's a beautiful part of Western culture. There's also one that can be lent itself to a lot of suffering, especially when we give it absolute value. And that's part of the challenge of some of the fundamental structures of our understanding what it means to be human being needs to be in relationship to others, isn't we get fixated on it. It causes suffering. It often causes suffering for people don't participate in it, but even people are participating in it cause

suffering. There's the kind of things we don't know about how we see other people, or prejudice or bias are all kinds of ideas that you know very good Different ways of understanding life. And remembering now, George Lake cups. Some of you may be read George Lake off recently, where he analyzed the differences between liberals and conservatives in America. And he argues that they have very different ways of understanding what it means to be a person what it means to be in society and in the world. And they can't talk to each other. They think they can talk to each other because you use words and logic. But these miss each other because there's the basic assumptions are kind of invisible, maybe to each of them or how different they are from each other. And probably most of you have had some kind of experience of waking up and realizing, wow, things are not what I assumed to be. Wow, I see something new about myself. I didn't see before. No, how could I missed it for so long. And also in the Buddhist tradition, they talked about seeds, that somehow in our psyche, embedded in our psyche in places that are hidden ourselves. Some of these are latent tendencies, but also seeds to different how we behave and the influences that affect our lives, plant seeds. And those seeds lay dormant. And then sooner or later, when conditions are right, they can blossom. And so some of those seeds are seeds of goodness, that if we act on kind acts or generous, then with planting seeds, so in the future, there's more likely that those will sprout those seeds. If we act on hate, or ill will, or fear that they lead embedded somewhere in the psyche, certain seeds, and those seeds sooner or later can sprout can come to the surface. So kind of what's kind of not what's not seen, but there that might influence us. And one of the things I'm trying to say here is often things influence us joins us, often we don't see it. So if that's the case, how do we explore it? How do we discover that? And one of the first ways, I believe, is to be interested, is to have a kind of working assumption. Maybe it's a kind of humility. I don't think I know myself very well. Just parts of myself, maybe I don't really know. So that kind of like, you know, okay, maybe I'm open to feedback. I'm open to questioning myself, like, if I'm rather being super confident in my beliefs, my views, what has to happen, my needs, maybe some openness of questioning what's really going on here kind of look more carefully. So having a willingness to question is important. Another thing that has been very useful in my life, and this is one of the reasons why it's come up this week is to put myself in situations where There's some risk involved, where I kind of push the envelope in a sense push the limit of what my understanding is or what my, my, who I am. In other words, don't be too polite. You know, if you're really polite all the time, you might it's very nice for other people perhaps. But if you're really polite, sometimes you hide from yourself. And I find that with certain friends, certain situations that I really value when people are much more immediate and direct, and maybe not so polite. if, if, in the context of that conversation, there's a willingness to be open and get feedback and talk about what's going on. So that if I'm being really careful, I get different feedback from people that have been a little bit careless. defending a little bit careless. Someone said, Give us notice what you use? Did we all notice? And sometimes, you know, maybe not, you know, I'm not, I'm not, you know, I can make all kinds of mistakes, misperceptions and come from the wrong place at times. And if I'm really careful, don't take risks, I might not see that. So there's a place at a time for taking risks and kind of having a kind of a kind of, kind of rough and tumble of things to clarify what's really there. I think sometimes, I've been involved in diversity trading, people look at racism and things like that. And it seems to work a lot better. If people are not too polite. If they're in the training, what we're trying to do is expose our basic beliefs, our views, and once they're exposed, then they can be

worked with. But if they're not exposed and everybody's polite and holding back, then no one knows everybody's afraid of each other. Who is that person? I don't know. Sometimes it's better to people to know who you are, than it is to kind of be polite, and you don't really know what's going on, and you're going to get it to, you know, to come to you through the back door. So there is a time and a place for being impolite. And hopefully, you're very wise about how you do that. Maybe it's a time when you have permission to ask the person, you know, can we have permission not to be so careful here. And maybe, maybe we're not so careful to kind of do kind of active give and take people will kind of reveal things that we don't really know. And so they've been those kinds of circumstances where it's kind of set up to do that. There's a saying in England, I've been told that you don't really know England unless you leave England. And so this idea of if you're always in a particular environment, step outside of that environment, allows you to look back and see it in a new way. And a lot of people To go to another culture, especially if it's a very different culture from American culture, come back to their culture they're used to, and they talked about having culture shock. It's just so different. It's so shocking. So like, suddenly they see things they didn't see before things that they accepted. Another thing that I found to be helpful is an is something like meditation practice. meditation practice, when it's done thoroughly, well especially be passionate practice is seen as a process can be seen as a process of deconstruction, that we have all these formations, all these views, all these assumptions and beliefs that we operate on, that sometimes drive our emotions sometimes drive our intentions and our views in the world. And we think that they're just kind of there effortlessly. We just see see seats. We'll look out there and we see we think it's up This. So never when I was 19 I went to the first time as an adult and alone without my folks, I went to a non Western culture, I went to Morocco. And I was surprised that after being there for a while, that I felt kind of when I walked on the street, I felt the kind of strange feeling that I kind of called being refreshed. I didn't quite understand why I was kind of refreshed, kind of a little more ease my mind that I normally would have. And I tried to understand what was going on. And this was my understanding. I hope it's right. Was that in Morocco back in a long time ago and set early 70s a lot of the people there were the traditional costumes or do additional coat clothes in Morocco they wore Galapagos these men wore these kind of robes. women wore their thick robes and stuff. And there were very few people wearing Western clothes. And I had no basis upon which to put these different people that I saw on the streets into a category. They weren't, you know, jocks, or they weren't, you know, they weren't conservative conservatives or liberals or they weren't, you know, I don't, you know, I couldn't put them in, you know, normal category. And what I realized leaving Morocco was that when I went around in the West, back then, you know, I was very quickly, very effortlessly, seemingly had an assumption about who people were, or put them in a category. But it wasn't so effortless. It took a little bit of effort. And so when I walked around the streets of Morocco that effort couldn't happen. And so I felt a little bit more refreshed because of that. So there's there's activities in the mind that seem effortless in one context, but take efforts. So when you do meditation well get concentrate and get still. It's understood as a deconstruction process, when you begin letting go have the efforts to hold your worldview hold your understandings in place. And there are a lot a lot of understandings that are kind of floating in our minds that we're keeping there in place that are invisible to us. And as the mind gets Still and quieter, it has to let go of a lot of that effort, and a lot of those views. And slowly, slowly the deconstruction process will begin to deconstructing the worldview,

the self understanding that we've had, that's come from our lifetime experience, our culture, our family, sells all kinds of things. And so that gets deconstructed, deconstructed, and eventually you come close to zero, where there's almost no question structure going on at all, almost no kind of that kind of formations or views or overlays or not experience fun, all kinds of very, very deeply rooted ideas of who we think we are and what we need, or let go. And then the challenging question question is, when those are not operating, who are we, and we find it's possible to operate, it's possible to be alive in a very alive, vigorous, happy way, without the presence of us which the past or were inconceivable to do without. So meditation to this deconstruction process, and then once you Well, these could be constructed. And then the fascinating thing is to notice how you reconstruct it. There's an opportunity to how you re import or recreate or bring up all the old things again, and some people get really disappointed in this process, because they feel Wow, so peaceful and all this stuff. comes back. But it's a very important part of mindfulness practice is to when you're able to deconstruct well, is to pay very careful attention at the reconstruction process. Some people will overvalue in mindfulness, the deconstruction process because it's common for the most part. And there they overemphasize being calm and peaceful. And then they don't pay enough attention at the reconstruction process. So coming back from a three month retreat, there's a lot of that I would imagine three months, you know, reconstruction, and that's a really important part of practice is to start noticing how the beliefs, the views, the understandings that pop up, because it's an opportunity to see something when it first pops up, that might not be possible. Once it gets overlaid by a lot more constructs. It gets too complicated in the mind. You can't see the simple building blocks of it. So one of the reasons to do long intensive retreats is to do like deconstruction process. And some people report it's really liberating to have so much disappear. That just kind of was burdensome to be carrying around all the time. The other and then related to that question, that issue of retweets, I wanted to say that some, some commentators of people's teachers will differentiate between what they call a fast path of practice and what's been called the complete path of practice. And Fast Pass paths of practice are those which are fast, you know, supposed to get you to enlightenment really quickly, you know, immediately, you know, just really quickly. And so, in our tradition, for example, sometimes if you're focused on a lot of concentration, let's just get as concentrated as we can just go deep And just have that transformation that enlightenment. The end, but there's a lot of Buddhists to offer fast practices, it's reasonable, you know, if you want to be efficient. And you know, especially Americans like to be fast, you know, so they'll be about all kinds of other things we want to do with our life besides get enlightened. So, you know, let's get it over with and, and, but then there's the complete in contrast to that there's the complete path. And that's the kind of focus where the emphasis is not on some narrow and quick approach to being strongly concentrated and having some transformative experience. But rather, it's to incorporate or include the width and breadth of our life in part of the practice, to refine ourselves to purify ourselves to understand ourselves, at our emotional level, a cognitive level, a physical level, or interpersonal level, to understand and address all those issues. In practice, to include all of it as part of practice. And what I've noticed is that the people who tend to take the fast approach or the narrow approach tend to leave out huge parts of their life in the practice, or you know, you know, all kinds of places which are unknown or kind of kept at bay. And that when there's an attempt to try to be more complete, and to look at the emotions and look at our interpersonal life, to look at our cognitive beliefs

and assumptions, that those people are a lot easier to live with. They tend to be know themselves more, they tend to be much more refined or balanced or, or just kind of more mature in many ways. They might be less than likely. Because you don't have I've known people who've gone You know, in, in the understanding of some Buddhist traditions to take in the fast approach. And it has some really significant experiences realization kind of experience, but they actually became kind of here I get afterwards and you know, look at me I'm special and it's hard to do that if you take the complete approach where you're actually willing to look at all of yourself and work on it and you find it I want to offer two other things that I've ideas I've had about how to work with this unknown parts of ourselves. And then I'll open it to you and you guys can talk about your experience and what you've learned in your life. But this one is, I found it very important to pay attention to the physical body. The body holds a lot of different things. And, you know, I, I've almost come to the conclusion that nothing happens without the body participating. You know, even you know, even the subtlest thoughts have physical aspect to them. And If you pay attention to your body, there's information there, there's kind of access points into what's going on. That is sometimes much more penetrating, then if you're trying to think your way into things, thinking is often kind of one sided or blinded or kind of partial. And the body kind of is an access point. So much so that, to paraphrase I think you'll I would say that the royal road to the unconscious is the body to go into the body feel what's going on the body used to accuse us attentions of the body, the holding patterns in the body, to places of softness and, and vulnerability in the body to kind of go in and explore what's going on under the radar of your thinking. That's one thing. The other thing I found similar to this, I got the same is to use our suffering as a point in that Suffering is our stress or tension, places where we feel uncomfortable to use discomfort our place as a place to stop and look more carefully. We get to become really sensitive to discomfort or stress tension. And to study that and look at it and go behind it and see what's going on here. What's prompting most problematic ways in which we don't know about ourselves, ways which we don't know ourselves. That icon is causing problems for ourselves and others will express itself subtly or grossly as some form of tension in the system. And so if you pay attention to tension and stop working, look at it. You'll learn a lot about yourself. You'll learn probably everything you need to know by stopping and looking. And I know in many situations where I'll feel tense or stressed or something, and for some reason or other, I don't really stop and pay attention to that. Other things More important, or I don't want to look, I don't want to bother or something. But 10 should just stop and look at what's going on here. You'll learn so much by stopping and looking at that. And it's a doorway to feeling the opposite, ladies. So those are my thoughts. I'm very curious to hear from you. Do you think about this topic? For those of you whom it's relevant?

I'll repeat it. I couldn't agree more. I'm really touched by gills talk today because so many of you know, I've had a history of a brain injury about three years ago now and, and I felt like in a way, I had a profound experience of

my

sort of whole sense of who I was. got shocked, if you will. And I went through a process of acquiring sort of the short term memory problem. It was sort of rediscovering since that time. who I am and what Gil said about constructing myself. You know, I have strong memories, some of some of the memories I have of who I was before. And I have little cues to tell me where those, you know, ideas came from. But I'm also discovering that there is a constant constitution, if you will, of Who I think I am happening all the time. And another interesting thing about this is that because my, my brain has been tested to say that I don't process that fast, I feel like I've got sort of a excuse me a, an advantage in that I'm unable to see it for more, he's way more.

Anyway,

I just wanted to share that, that, you know, even even even the mind and the brain are able to heal itself and you can see something good from it doesn't have to be so negative.

It sounds so poetic anyway.

But I'm just so glad to be here. And I'm so happy that we have such a wonderful teacher and Galen, you all are here. Part of that. Thank you,

Cheryl. The thing about slowing down the mind. So you can see it's partly why concentration calmness is a very important part of meditation, you get calm enough, and you can see more clearly, you see the beginning of things that are arising of thoughts and ideas and formations. If you really speedy or agitated, it's hard to see. And then also, if I may, maybe it's a little bit too personal, but with Cheryl, and I knew him for a long time before she had a very dramatic brain injury. And, and one of the things that I saw is that she had a really good practice before re injury, and those planted really good seeds. And those seeds survived. And, and they kind of, you know, you know, like, like all these good seeds, kind of like what was left and they kind of, they kind of, you know, so who knows, you know, when your mind is gonna go the rest of us, but, you know, you might want to think about the seeds that you're planting. Because some days you might need those seeds. Everything else is taken away. If you don't mind taking the mic to other things you don't know.

As you were talking, I was thinking about a documentary I watched on TV last night, which some of you may have seen is called doing time doing Vipassana. And it's about teaching Vipassana to prisoners in India. And one of the things are for several of them. They realized in doing the practice their feelings, I guess for the first time about what they had done, the crimes they committed, and some of them sought forgiveness from the victims like if they killed Someone and they, they sought forgiveness from the family, but they had these feelings of guilt for the first time. So they that was the kind of self realization and very extreme level of what you're talking about.

Sometimes if you if you deconstruct enough or get common enough to let go enough, that allows deeper movements to happen, they don't happen when there's no space because the mind is so filled with, you know, anxious activity. And so sometimes deep movements of forgiveness or deep movements of purification can happen, which is an example of that. And we have that movie, that video in our library here. It's a great video about so you might check it out from the library here.

I'm not sure this is exactly the same kind of thing, but I know that when I found myself in situations that were Very foreign to me, that it made me aware of shortcomings and brought about change and a couple of things that come to mind. One when we were traveling in foreign countries, and you see signs that are in the language you can understand or posters, how how uncomfortable that can make you feel. And what it did it, it made me realize, saw my shortcomings or tolerance for other people that were in that situation and made me maybe change some behaviors when I came back when I see people in that situation more wanting to help or asking if there's something I can do. And then another time was when we were in China, what it felt like to be a minority to be walking down the street and really be very different than everyone else you're looking at. And it brought about different feelings in me and changed I think brought about changes in behavior.

should state like it best to keep the mic on once it's on? It's on.

I found just asking

the universe show me with blind spot. And the next day something comes up and

if I'm aware, awake or really well look at it.

It's right here.

It's asking you nubert universe. And also you can ask specific people. somebody knows you well, what is it? pass it down, right down to your left.

Oh, it's on Okay. Um,

sometimes I'm painfully aware of my,

my weaknesses or my horribleness or whatever, my mistakes and I think it's also important to think of blind spots in terms of blind spots about how loving we are and how wonderful we are, and what kinds of ways we can become more aware of those blind spots as well. Yes.

Yes, I agree. Very good point.

I think that we all

do our practice or it progressive in different ways. There's a lot of personalities and whatever that affect that. And when I started about 20 years ago, there was just so much emotion that was all that I was practicing with. And slowly some of the emotions just started balancing and then there were my thoughts. And almost 20 years later, I'm working in the body. It's because that's what's more prominent but I have the seeds of working with the emotions and the and the thought And now that's being related to what comes up in the body very directly. And so whatever you whatever order we take it in, it's all there. And I, I've been hoping the last few years as I age in that never knowing if the mind is Alzheimer's or what's going to happen when, and I was hoping that the seeds planted in the body would be a place to practice if the mind changes.

I very much appreciate your distinction between the group identity of the East and the individual identity of the West, having grown up with that dichotomy and I just wanted to comment

very intimately on this Telling the group how intimately that Academy exists for you. You might telling the group how intimately

I was raised in Thailand. And that was when my group identity glue. And my father, my mother being English, was teaching me my Western individual identity, which I then had to make manifests when we moved here. And my comment was that when you have the group identity, your little idiosyncrasies of the body in your preferences, your food, preferences, your sleep, preferences, whatever, a much more accepted in the group.

Whereas in the western

where we are individuals, it seems as if we end up conforming Much more as individuals that was

my comment, the alert the illusion of individualism. And

interesting as

a percentage of kind of letting go and observing how one acts in different situations. And I think I found for myself

that

people seem to be a very powerful catalyst for seeing different parts of myself come out, challenging

my view of how I am the teams

that you're working with different people, I tend to it brings

up different things. And

yet sometimes, I'm really surprised I'm like, wow,

I'll see you soon and say something I really don't Don't care for them. And I noticed that these bring up the same things in myself kind of playing with him

or in my relationships, you know, sometimes

they got experience of coming back from the trainer with the summer and it's very peaceful. Setting up loving kindness to the whole universe, this fake compassion and my girlfriend's like, wow, you know, you're sort of very withdrawn. Good to get feedback. The when prompted a couple of stories to my my life. When I was about 20, early 20s. I lived for a while, as a large spiritual communes in the early 70s called the farm in Tennessee. And when I went there, I was kind of We've kind of dropped in by chance kind of stayed for a while. And I loved it there. And, and I felt very much at home there and, but after a while, I started feeling uncomfortable. And one of the reasons I left was it were like 800 people there, these, you know, hippie commune. And, and I felt like we were too homogenous of a society. And everyone were all these white, mostly white middle class hippies. And with so many, you know, shared views and values kind of from that time, and I started, you know, even though I shared all these ideas and values with them, I think this is safe, to be around people who all have the same ideas as I do. I think it's really safe to be around people who have different views and different ideas to get the feedback and the challenges. I didn't feel safe to be in that's kind of homogenous group. And then the reasons I went to San Francisco Zen Center to kind of be there and live there was that I found that when I went there that people there mirrored me in such a way that I could see myself much more better than I could have my own friends who kind of supported me rather than veered me kind of, you know, codependent kind of thing, right? And, and so I'm really good to put myself in situations where I was challenged where I was got to see parts of myself that normally wouldn't be seen by the people who are because of immaturity, or whatever it was.

Someone else said something.

I guess my thought is to look at the situation I'm in and see what it asks of me. And usually my idea of what that would be, is smaller actually, then what what is needed. And I guess like recently I talked in front of a group of 207 People just because I thought I needed to do it. And that wasn't who I thought I was at all, you know, prior to that. I guess it made me realize I really don't know who I am, you know, that I just have to show up and see what's elicited from me. Like, just now I turned my ring around upside down, and it looks really strange. And it seems like it looks like there's something wrong with it

to me. And I guess that reminds me that any behavior that I do, that's not my normal thing seems strange, you know, and so I have, I guess I have an idea of myself that's smaller than I am in. So if I just looked at the situation, it seems like maybe I'll expand a little bit beautiful.

Maybe like this.

I've been teaching in prison for two years now. And when I go there down, it's all dead. Everyone looks the same. They're all dressed the same. Same haircuts, all shaven. And it makes me aware every time I go there My mind is got this running chatter going all the time. Excuse me. It's basically making up my world around me. Based on all kinds of assumptions, the large number of which are incorrect. And it keeps me from seeing life as it really is. My mind is just

it's good to know that. So we practice, some of us practice mindfulness meditation, in order to see that much better see or see it better than we would if we didn't meditate, and we practice mindfulness in order to get calm enough. In order to have a better platform from which to see, and perhaps a kind of inner stability that allows us to see uncomfortable things or difficult things or strange things, and not be thrown off by it. So, I hope during this next week, all of you will find a good appropriate way to get uncomfortable as you discover new aspects of what's really going on. So thank you very much.