

2006-01-15 Letting Go In Prison

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SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

So this morning, one of the things I'd like to do is tell you about an outing I had on Thursday, which was very inspiring for me, inspiring for me, kind of in terms of my Dharma practice in terms of the Dharma. And it was a field trip to visit San Quentin. And I've never been in San Quentin before. And I'm leading a chaplaincy training program for Buddhists type people. And so we did a field trip to San Quentin. Because that's one of the places where people do chaplaincy work is in prison in jails. And, and it was both to get a tour of parts of San Quentin and also to meet with the San Quentin Zen group, the Zen sitting group. And it was meeting as the Sitting group there in San Quentin, it was so inspiring for me. The turns out the San Quentin is probably better considered is going to be a series of prisons all next to each other, because they're so segregated the different elements of it. There's like the death row section, where I didn't know that there's 600 people in California and death row. They're all there in San Quentin. And 10 points and all sorts of processing center for I think everybody or at least all males, who are received a conviction, state conviction in California. So there's like 2000 people that come through go through every month, when they get processed and sent off to different places where there's going to be and the tickler section that we went to, was called level two, which I guess is a security level. That is the I don't know if it's the most At least secure part of settings least secure part of San Quentin. And maybe there's level one somewhere. And it's even better. I don't know so much how it all works. But for the kind of prisoners we saw, as the best they could hope for, was to be in San Quentin and level two security. Turns out San Quentin is one of the parts of the bipartisan coin. It's one of the best places to be in the state prison system. And Clinton has an aura For me, being bad, difficult, tough, but they're very proud of the prisoners and prisoners and also the warden we met for how San Quentin historically has been often first in doing all kinds of programs for prisoners first and having us Hospital in the prison grounds. First, we're having some kind of educational facility first for all kinds of things. The warden was very proud that 966 he pointed us point to us look to the law library and said this is where Prisoners organized themselves and had organized a class action suit in order to get Muslim Islam recognized as an official religion, because before that, prisoners of Islam faith were discriminated against as being somehow terrible or bad or something. And they were then given

spaces that were in religion. And then we went into the cell blocks where they, you know, mostly sleep I suppose with a Hangout. And it was like chicken coops, you know, it was it was five five storeys high. It's like being kinda like outside but it's actually inside because outer wall, building a shell that covers it all in this inner cellblock and there's five layers of these walkways that you go up, you look up and see all these five layers and then They see all these cells, you know, hundreds of hundreds of cells. And if any of you have a walk in closet, I'm quite confident your walk in closet is bigger than the cells for two people to guys and probably many of you, your bathrooms are bigger. We have a small bathroom and I think probably our bathroom is bigger than some of these sell sell rooms. And these two guys in a small space and it was very interesting to see it all and see all the different kinds of people who were there. These types you know, just like you find types everywhere. And so then we went we had this little tour and then we went into the to the room that's both the I guess the Muslim, Muslim Chappell, Chappell, Chaplin chapel and Jewish chapel And there are two doors going in and above each door. One was a Muslim black and one was a Jewish black. And then we were asked which door you want to go in being the Buddhist and so we went into this room that was a big room. And let's set it up to be a look like a presenter like Zen Meditation a little bit. And they had the Elisa batanes mats like this for sitting on. But they were kind of proud of their mats, because they're probably the most luxurious meditation masters sit on anywhere in California, because one of the prison industries is mattress making and pillow making. So they had made their own really thick flesh. And so then we there were about 20 prisoners and 2016 of us, I suppose 20 of us, and we all sat together in the zendo and the first thing we did was meditate together. And it was quite quite interesting to meditate kind of in San Quentin. And then and then we were invited to ask them questions. And so we asked some of these prisoners questions for a while and one of the questions that was asked, you know, what benefits have you received here prison from having this mutation group from meditating? And it was very interesting to hear the responses. A common response was that it really helped them to deal with their strong emotions, with their impulse control and with their anger. And then the first guy who spoke talked about how, you know, he was kind of got into a lot of trouble because he didn't know how to handle some emotions and learning how to be a little more peaceful into that his emotions go through him without getting caught by them and made all the difference for him. And in this prison life, is very grateful for it. Some of them talked about how it was the only time really when they really had some quality people. sense of peace. I came in there to get some peace. And one guy spoke about how Oh, he said, Oh, Buddhism doesn't give any answers. Buddhism is just a mirror. Just holds up a mirror. So you see yourself and we sit doings we sit and meditate because it gives us great mirror, just see who you are see what's going on. And he found that very helpful to have that near mirroring effect. And they talked a fair amount about learning to let go about how important it was to let go. And one of the most common themes about letting go was learning to let go of the past. And we didn't ask details, but what they were letting go of exactly. But it made a big difference for them to be able to let go of the past. But also, it's very important to learn to let go in the present, because they said in prison there's nothing ever you can ever never And dependent, anything being the same. And so suddenly you're, you know, without any real notice you've told him get up and pack your things and go to another prison or change rooms or something, there's a lockdown or suddenly you're told to strip and all the guys have to go out onto the yard naked lay down. One of the prison guards go through those cells to see if

there's any, like there's been a fight, then they have to go see a knives hidden away. So all the guys have to be naked, right? Because otherwise they could have something hidden in the clothes. So there's 6000 guys. So 6000 guys naked I guess. And, and in, there's no privacy and all kinds of things. So they talked about how important it was to learn to let go. You always have to be ready to let go. And the practice has taught me how to let go. And without that ability to let go. I wouldn't be able to be happy here in the prison. One of the people I met, and then we had a chance to talk with him kind of informally for a little while. And one of the men I talked to and had gotten married while he was in prison. And what happened there was that he had there was there's a program that brings troubled teens into the prison. They're so great to meet the prison, the prisoners, and the prisoners have this program for them, like a teach them conflict resolutions, things and different things. They kind of work with these teens, besides just really frightening them. Don't come to don't do anything to get you in here. And this guy that I met, he had read his poetry. He was a poet, so he read his poetry to these teens. And one of the women kind of teachers who brought these teens were smitten by him when he wrote his poetry. And so they courted them in the visitors lounge. You know, Visitors who's probably you know, other people, they're in this visitors lounge. And that's where they had their whole life together with visitors lunch. But the longer they got to do after a few years or some time they got married. So I told them, so you told me you mentioned something, but Oh, in April, his project was coming up. And some of these guys have been the projects have come up 10 times, you know, not now, not now. And so, I said, Oh, you must be I said, I said, I said to him, I guess it's best not to have your hopes up. Am I getting parole? And he said, his reply was, oh, if I get parole, I'll be one happy man, boy. But if I don't get parole, I'm going to be happy anyway. Because I'm not going to allow the parole board to dictate my happiness. Because these people don't even know me, just paper trails they follow. They don't even know who I am. So I'm not gonna let them dictate my happiness. And I thought that was really beautiful. You know, such an important significant thing, but paroled in together as a wife, maybe the first time in some way. And I'm not gonna let that dictate my happiness. And he seemed like a happy man. So his ability to let go this ability to make choices about where happiness resides, and what's going to influence your happiness. The so we talked a lot about this ability to let go. And it seemed like one of the, one of the themes for them in terms of their understanding of practice. But in letting go and talking about it, I was really struck by the strength and the dignity that these guys had. And it was somehow that the letting go itself was not letting go into some kind of amorphous blob of nothingness, you know, self-effacement and, you know, but rather in the letting go, there was actually strength and actually became stronger In letting go something was some, some some inner capacity. And I think it required a lot, quite a lot in the prison requires a lot of inner strength to know how to let go. It also is very consequential is very meaningful. They the, you know, some of the things that maybe we let go of here, outside of prison. Maybe they're not as consequential in prison in prison. So maybe it's a matter of your life, you know, there's this dangerous there on the yard. And so somehow, you know, they're there in the intent. They had the seriousness, they took their practice, the intention behind the value they had, but the simple act of letting go was actually feeding an intention, feeding a principal purpose that I think made them stronger people kind of build character. So letting go isn't just something that makes you kind of a weaker person but actually can make you stronger than the Right Way strengthen something. So, that was my choices. My question

for you What experience do you have, have some inner sense of well being some it some inner sense of strength that you have that you can establish for yourself or out established for yourself, or you can value for yourself that can stand independent of the conditions of the world. So, if someone comes along and says, You know, I don't the house you're living in, you know, I'm sorry, but we're gonna move you down the street to a small apartment. Are you moving to another house and you can only take what fits what you can carry in your hands? I know you have a lot of stuff you've accumulated over your lifetime but can only take what's in your hands or you know, all kinds of things that can happen to us in life, we get sick and all kinds of things happen, because our jobs and do you know anything about some place some place of inner some inner well being some inner strength, some inner quality of beingness that stands independent of what happens outside of you something so that if you let go of the conditions of the world, you let go of something that that letting go doesn't diminish you, but actually might actually strengthen or enhance some some place of inner strength or inner inner independence. Can you like go in the letting go not be the Finish but actually be left with something that can't be taken away from you. The left is something that's actually quite beautiful and profound. So what I saw on these prisoners that in his in his in group there was they had learned to let go. And were were had become better in the process. So what about you? So that's the question. So what I'd like to do now and this is because I would like you all to break into groups of four or five people, introduce yourselves to each other. And then say something in response to this question I brought up for you. You know, do you have a place do you know something stands inside or within The sense independent of the conditions in the world, such a way that if you let go of things that you're asked to let go of, or things that you could let go, it doesn't diminish your life but actually enhances it and connects you with something very valuable. Something maybe sometimes we lose touch, we lose touch. If we get what we want, you know, sometimes if you get too much, you can get a credit card with a big account and you get to go shopping. You know, you have too many of those things. You know, you might actually lose touch with something that's very important. So some people don't like it when we do this break into groups to talk to each other. It's an act of letting go. I wouldn't be surprised if some of you decide just let go of IMC and head for the door. So I acknowledge that some of you might not like this and are a little bit anxious. about doing such a thing, it's pretty common to have some feeling like that. It's also very common that people are grateful to have done it after they've done it. So, we're going to take about 20 minutes for that conversation. And then we'll come back here in a bigger group for a few more minutes in order to kind of kind of close up on all that. So if you would, please find some, you know, groups of four or five, and have a little discussion about this. Some of the groups didn't seem to learn much about letting go so any comments? My name is Liz. And one of the things that came up for me that seems important is to let go of needing to know how to like just to figure that it will emerge. My name is Leslie and one of the things that came up for me and it's realizing we all struggle with the same thing. So it was interesting hearing other people's experiences and seen the sameness of all the things that we experience. My name is Blaze. I guess what we noticed was that if you listened long enough, you'll hear someone else tell your story. And there seems to be a sense that letting go of objects and possessions is a lot easier than letting go of relationships with other people. And there's also I think, a common struggle with the distinction between indifference and acceptance. Okay, thank you. That Zen city group in San Quentin, was about six years old and

meeting for six years. And the person who more or less started, it's still they're still in prison. So he's still part of the group. And as fewer people started into there, and they said, initially, they had no sitting group, or they had no place to go meditate. And so the only place they could meditate was on the yard. And so they would go off into a corner and sit together as a group. And the greatest danger they talked about was basketball ball basket, last kind of, you know, loving the direction or hitting him in the head. But I don't know what it's like, I don't know what it's like in the yard so well, but closing your eyes, I guess. And then you keep your eyes open. So maybe it's safe around the yard. And but what struck me here was the motivation that they had is something that they wanted to do against these odds was quite difficult. They, they rose to the occasion there, but they're quite motivated in that in being able to then week after week I was sitting group over six years that it allowed that motivation to kind of strengthen them because they can follow through follow through follow through. And one of the guys spoke about how the guy who started the group sitting group he said that he gets up at three o'clock every morning to meditate for an hour. And here's one of the ways roommate is one of the people to sit in groups. So I guess it's okay then to wake up. And, and the only time he says really quiet and quiet and so he gets quiet sitting time. And then someone else spoke up and said, well, just to give you a balance I have a cellmate who is just kind of young and wild and noisy and, and I could never get up early and sit with him in my room doesn't work. So what I do is I try to, you know, find target times during the day I tried to find, you know, little breaks at work, I tried to do it then various things and they do. So it struck me, you know, repeating myself where there was a degree of motivation that they had. And but the motivation was partly borne out of how important it was for them. And the consequences are so important. And that what they'd found was that what I saw was that, this sense of strength in being able to follow through on their motivations, and I think it's a strength that kind of gets reinforced by acting on it by doing it. And then the last thing is this thing about letting go letting go It can be a dangerous practice that can be done inappropriately. But if you think of letting go as being a practice which nourishes something inside of you, there is your peace nurtures that your capacity for love or forgiveness, or for telling the truth to yourself that letting go is actually not not you don't let go for its own sake but you let go because it actually waters the seeds of something very important that you have that you carry with you. Maybe then letting go won't be in difference with letting go will be something that you'll definitely appreciate that muscle that you want to develop. Turned out actually there revisited the Zen group, it turns out there's many meditation groups in San Quentin. So something I don't know, 6000 people. So that I guess is a lot of people, many, many veterans, that means in terms of overall population, but but you know, there's a large population of prison, people who find great value in this practice that we do in some day, convicts really, really get released from prison might show up here. And that was actually a big concern of theirs was how they received when they leave. And they actually do fundraising drives within the prison to help their friends that people have been there. transition out because transition is quite difficult, especially if you've been in prison for 27 years or 30 years. You know, it's quite a big thing to come out. And last year, a few community connections in the world. And one of their kind of I think one of the requests of us by the Buddhist community outside the prison was to understand the challenges they have when they finally leave prison. And they would have, they'd be really quick. They didn't ask us but you could get a sense that they would really be delighted if the Buddhist community would somehow be receptive or

supportive of the people who come and leave prison and end up coming visiting and spending time in our communities. Someday, maybe it's already happened, some of you so thank you