

# 2006-07-23 The Spirituality of Imperfection

Fri, 7/17 9:54PM • 43:36

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

imperfections, settle, people, fire, problem, spirituality, meditation, limitations, accept, thinking, suffering, buddhism, important, perfection, world, peace, deal, pain, meditating, agitated

## SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

What do we do about the fact that things seldom work perfectly? There is an expression that someone coined, that I'm fond of expression is called the spirituality of imperfection. And it comes to me through mostly through recovery through a, I believe it's an expression that's used in some circles, a spirituality of imperfection in some spirituality that somehow acknowledges and begins with the recognition of our imperfection. And rather than beginning with some chasing after perfection, or assumption of perfection, and it's a very humane form of spirituality, because it begins where we're at. Because there's a fair percentage of us who are here this morning, who have some imperfections I won't get Do you what percentage of you are but the and, and if it's not in perfect in the Word Perfect in all kinds of ways, there's ways to we're human beings, we could say are inherently imperfect, and that we have limitations there sickness, old age and death. So many of us have some kind of physical limitation or some kind of the mental limitation on who we are. Or we have some kind of emotional or psychological limitation, that maybe we were born this way or somehow it evolved over time. And sooner or later, all human beings are going to encounter their limitations, because it's going to die, gets old, sick. And then so there's literally the imperfections of limitations, and there's also the inherent in who we are and there's also the Psychological hang ups we have that often are quite embarrassing to have for set to be had we're trying to reacting to having it. So the spirituality of perfection begins with acknowledging, seeing what we've what could be called our imperfections. And the reason so and it's not unique to far from unique that Buddhism would emphasize this. And as you said, some of this comes from a but all I think most good spiritualities has some way of acknowledging our imperfections, in a way that helps to settle us, to help us come to peace. And for people who are involved in meditation practice or any kind of wise spiritual practice, especially meditation practice, there needs to be we need to come to some kind of relationship to what we could bring out call our imperfections, so that those imperfections or our relationship to those imperfections, doesn't keep us agitated, doesn't keep us spinning out, caught up in our concerns. Can We have some relationship to our imperfection. So it helped us to settle down. And meditation practices, among other things is settling practice. Settling out settling down, letting some kind of agitation spinning movement of the mind, settle down. And so how can we use?

How can we relate to our imperfections in order to settle down? One of the ways not to do that is by trying to run away from our limitations or imperfections or agitations our fears or worries, to run away from it. And it's so easy to run away. We run away in our thoughts, we start thinking and problem solving or thinking about something else. And we spin away so quickly from what's really important in operating here. So I mean, this is a very simple example. But I'm not many of you noticed, but quarter to 10. Someone came in here to make an announcement about moving a car out in the park. A lot so that the bloodmobile truck and get in here. And so I see come up here and when he's making announcements in the middle of a city so then there was just kind of tension between well, disturbing all of you. Or, or disturbing the good people who bought the bloodmobile truck, right? Which you Where's who gets who gets the worse where's the solution? And so decide not to say anything. And but after the left, I could feel that I was kind of a little bit agitated around kind of energizes more. We're waiting. I've been sitting very quietly, this concerned and energize my mind. And it took me a minute to sort of realize that my mind now could be energized with us spinning out thinking about the solutions to this parking problem. And I was spilling out away from myself. And here I was meditating. I supposed to be settling myself. So what I did was I turned around and then brought my my attention, my presence, right smack in the middle of where that energized healing was in my being. And really acknowledge this was going on I'm energized, concerned, problem solving really acknowledge that very clearly. And in doing that, it's kind of like going in and then allowing me to settle down into that experience. I wasn't pushing it away. I wasn't trying to fix it the problem out there, but I was bringing myself very clearly to realize, Oh, this is how I'm agitated right now. Let's feel that let's be present for it. And that allowed me to settle. So, part of the reason talking about the spirituality of imperfection, is that we need to find some way I think, to relate to what agitates us, what keeps us kind of fragmented from ourselves or are in pain or in some way that keeps us from from settling. So the spirituality and protection is one that willingly looks at Foreign perfection sees it understands it, and in some way or other acceptance, to see, to understand and to accept. And so one way we spend out is by thinking about a lot of it in other ways to run away. We're trying to run away from it, or we try to blame it or attack it, or we try to deny it, or we try to fix it or it's all kinds of ways in which we don't get settled around something, but we kind of in a reactive relationship to it. Ajahn Chah teacher said, If you run away from your suffering, it'll chase you. So, one approach to our limitations or imperfections, things that bother us is to turn into it, turn towards it, and to turn towards it, not to attack it, but to turn towards it. To find, can you sit in the middle of it and allow it to be to enter into it just as this just like I did with this image, I state this this I'll sit there with that. And so and I believe it My impression is that one of the definitions of a spiritually mature person, at least a limited to Buddhism, at least I shouldn't speak what other people's spirituality is one of the one of the definition, one of the aspects of maturity is to be very accepting of one's own limitations, without condition. unapologetically, on defensively, and I've seen a lot of people now who had practiced for years and years. I know people have teachers who people be practicing for 3040 years, who are friends of mine now. And right different people. And I still find it really refreshing. When they'll talk about some foibles, some difficulty they have. And they'll do it completely transparently. Because it unapologetically they're not trying to make themselves look better in anybody's eyes, not trying to present some good front and who they are. And they're just very relaxed at ease. About Oh, you know, I'm still dealing with that. I'm still feeling the fact that I get angry.

Can you believe it's normal? I can't believe you know, I still have to deal with this fear. You know, that's the way it is for me. And, and they just say it and it is something very refreshing to me to hear it because I don't feel like they're troubled by it. Or oppressed by it. Or, or, somehow, dare I say the word limited by it. It's just what is this is what their condition is, and then there's the dealing with the best I can. But they're not making it a problem more than it is not making it a problem more than more than it is. Now, if we come back to meditation practice as a reference point, for then we're meditating here. It's very helpful not to make anything a problem. Because when you make it a problem, you tend to agitate the mind. And you're going in the mind opposite direction, that we're trying to do a meditation which is subtle in the mind. So in meditation, in particular, is a very useful place to enter into what is actually happening now. What is happening if for you, and if it's some kind of limitation or imperfection, which is the operating big thing? What is it to enter into that and then find yourself in meditation to settle through that as opposed to trying to bypass it? Or I think I'm gonna get concentrated my breath so I wanted to feel so sad or so upset. You could do that. Sometimes. If I facet but what about just coming into the upsetness and feeling it and taking a good posture composing yourself on it and then seeing Can you can you work the edges of it so that all the ways in which you're reacting to the upset this can first fall away. So you get permission for the upset that just to be there I am upset that's what's happening okay. I don't like being upset embarrassed by being so upset, mainly subtle, those kind of peripheral things. And it can it possible just to be upset and then sit in the middle of it. So that helps a settling process. So there was a poem that I referred to last week. That's tonight did it this morning, I'll read one of my imperfections now is putting my note in my glasses, the edge of my nose so I can read. I have progressive lenses I have any wearing but I don't like them so much. So I got my glasses out so now I can read one dervish, this is a roomy one dervish to another, what was your vision of God's presence? I haven't seen anything. But for the sake of conversation, I'll tell you a story. God's presence is there in front of me. A fire on the left, a lovely stream on the right. One group walks toward the fire into the fire. Another toward the sweet flowing water. No one knows which are blessed and which not. Whoever walks into the fire appears suddenly in the stream. A head goes under on the water surface, that head pokes out of the fire. Most people guard against going into the fire, and so end up in it. Those who love the water of pleasure and make it their devotion are cheated by this reversal. The trickery goes further. The voice of the fire tells the truth, saying, I am not fire. I am Fountainhead. Come into me. And don't mind the sparks. If you are a friend of God, fire is your water. You should wish to have 100,000 sets of Mach wings so you could burn away so you can burn them away. One setting night The moth sees light and goes into fire. You should see fire and go toward light. Fire is Word of God is world consuming water world protecting semi each of each give the appearance of the other two these eyes You have now with looks like water burns. But looks like fire is a great relief to be inside. one molecule mode second thinking of God's reversal of comfort and pain is better than any attending ritual. That splinter of intelligence is substance, the fire and water themselves accidental done with mirrors. So it's quite an impressive imagery. Go into the fire into that which is going to burn you go into that which you're afraid of whatever the suffering is, the pain is Can you go into it? I think a lot of Buddhist spirituality involves willingness to acknowledge the suffering, the fire, the introduction, and then in certain wise way, learning to go into it, and there, find the relief, the release there find the peace. This is from Rumi. And just to get a sense that, you know, he has a kind

of a wider, wider currency in the world than just in Sufiism. Socrates said, pain and pleasure are never present to a person at the same instant. And yet, the person, the person who pursues either is compelled to take the other. Pursue pleasure and you end up with pain, which we play pain, you end up with pleasure. I don't know if we want to make that into a solid rule. It's kind of an interesting thing that I hear Socrates also says the same thing. Or Carl Jung says, one does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light. But by making the darkness conscious. Again, we're the darkness that what you don't want to look at what you're trying to avoid that make it conscious. So how to do it in a way that is enlightening how to do it in a way that's settling to brings peace. That's really the art that we're trying to find here. And so each of you has your suffering, and what does it like to turn into it? And in doing that find peace, rather than be re-traumatized, rather being agitated even more more troubled by it. This is another Rumi poem. It's very famous. So, some of you know this being human is a guest house. Every morning a new arrival, a joy, a depression, a meanness. Some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor. Welcome and respect them all. Even if they're a crowd of sorrows, who violently sweep your house empty of its furniture, still treat each guest honorably. He or she may be clearing you out for some new delight. The dark thought, the shame, the malice, meet them at the door laughing and invite them in. Be grateful for whoever comes because each has been sent as a guide. The Part of the willingness to see, understand and accept our imperfections is that it has an effect on us, which I think is often quite helpful. One effect is that it can be humbling, creative to kind of healthy humility. And I think that that's always good. The classically, Buddhism is not so much about imperfection, it's more about perfection. Buddhism is it is heart, kind of spirituality of perfection, unfortunately, because we're we're asked to do it with a path that Buddhism is pointing to a possibility of complete peace, perfect peace. So it's not simply accept your imperfection, accept your suffering, and then just suffer you go through life suffering and happily. It isn't that kind Acceptance we're talking about, but we're talking about learning to turn into where they're suffering learned where there's imperfection, so that we can settle it, and move beyond it into some other new level of peace. And that's the pointing towards the areas of perfection for Buddhism. The perfect person in Buddhism is someone who's able to move beyond the peace are settled and have been beyond has the right word, but settle it to resolve it. So it's no longer there. But why? Because Buddhism has this kind of an emphasis on perfection. It's not a few Buddhists who end up being arrogant. Look at me. You know, I have reached, you know, certain stage of attainment, you know, I've managed to get into the fifth jhana. You know, and it's so great my concentration level and I have known people who kind of have a chip on the shoulder about their attainment and where they're at and to kind of irritation for everybody else. And, but then more More, more More importantly, it's a kind of a way in which we can't really we don't really meet people in a healthy way, healing way, heartfelt way, if we have that kind of arrogance, humility, I think more often than not has the effect of allowing us to meet more as humans meet more completely as who we actually are. We don't see ourselves as being so separate and different is better than everybody else. We're all in the boat together. Everybody's struggling. Most people struggling with struggle some way or other, and to recognize that they're doing that perhaps also becoming more tolerant of each other. infinitely tolerant of other people's struggles and difficulties and imperfections story I like to tell, sorry to repeat myself is in 1982 I was ordained as a Zen priest and monk. And I was kind of i didn't i didn't relate to rituals much and rituals had no meaning for me, but it was a ritual you

go through speaking reading. And I was struck at the impact that ritual and ordination had on me that I hadn't expected and wanted to impact was that it made me much more aware of my shortcomings. And partly because then my head was shaved I was a public figure people looked at me a certain way and that kind of represented practice and so, you know, I better live up to it in a sense. So I became much more because it had become much more acutely aware of my imperfections or my my shortcomings, I call them men. And the same time it was more okay to have them. Somehow the image they the language I use for myself back then That I was now a child of the Buddha. So I was kind of accepted by the Buddha in a sense. And so I was more aware of my shortcomings and was more okay to have them. And that combination i thought was lovely. Really great. And it wasn't, it was okay to have them. So I can just kind of merely go along with, you know, bulldozing over people, whatever my imperfections were, but then I, you know, had to work with them, I had to kind of enter into the world and try to settle them and resolve and deal with them. But I wasn't troubled by the fact that I had not been troubled by our problems.

Not great. This is who I am. I'm someone who gets angry.

So, I'm working on it.

Cheer me on. This is this, I saw this, you know, back then it was the case, you know, back then, it was dealing with anger. And so, it This kind of spirituality perfection requires being very honest about ourselves. This is what this is what is going on for me, this is what I'm struggling with. This is what's happening for me. And now that I see that, can I understand it in a wise way? Can I understand it with compassion with care, understand that it's part of the human condition that everyone has limitations of some kind or other. And this is what I've had, for whatever reason, this is what I have. And then can I accept it? So that not fighting it or struggling with it, making it more of a problem than it is? Can I accept it? And for meditators, as I said before, this is very important, because we were trying to do is to come some kind of peace. in meditation, meditation, you don't want to kind of be spinning up your mind thinking all the time thinking and thinking and trying to fix and analyze it, and go back over the rehearse, to pass over and over again and try to figure out why is this happening and what's a better rejoinder in the future and you know, trying thinking, thinking thinking think, because that, that thinking world, going out and out now doesn't help us to settle. Actually meditation is the opposite direction. Rather than spinning out into thought, we want to some degree settle our thinking. Put it all aside all the attempts to fix and improve the world and turn the attention the energy of attention inwards so that all this can settle down. Like the agitates, you know, like the waves of the ocean. If you are a pond you know, if you're sitting there kind of the edge of the pond with your feet in the pond, kicking the water, the waters never going to settle. You have to stop kicking and in the water to settle down become clear and translucent, transparent. So there has to be some understanding in this meditation circles, how important it is not to be caught up in the world of thinking. That's the kind of But to kind of turn the attention in the other direction. So one of the ways that it requires though in their spiritual imperfection is to recognize I am thinking a lot. That's what's going on my mind is out of control, if that's the case,

and then learn how to enter that in a meditative way to acknowledge it. Oh, thinking thinking is happening. Here's a person's agitated. This is what's happening. Now, here's a person is consumed with thinking about the future. This is what it's like, this is what it feels like. This is what feels like in the forehead and the tempo says what it feels like in the jaws and the shoulders is what it feels like in the brain. These are the emotions that are in the present moment are seem to be fueling this kind of thinking. Come back, always come back here. Come back here, come back here. What is here? And then can you be with what's here without making it a problem? spirituality action is trying to stop seeing things as problems. So we can settle. This is written by a non Japanese Buddhist nun from the 10th century, Izumi Shikibu. Although the wind blows terribly here, the moonlight also leaks between the roof planks of this ruined house. Whenever a Japanese Zen monk or nun writes about the moonlight or the moon, you know it's symbolic. This house this ruined house with herself. Although the wind blows terribly here the moonlight also leaks between the roof planks of this ruined house. So what are the winds that blow through your ruined house The cracks, cracks of your life. It's painful. I'm not gonna I don't want to deny that it's painful part of the reason we avoid it because it's painful, but in the very pain in the way in that in the gaps in the house, also the moonlight, moonlight symbolic of enlightenment is kinds of poetry also shines through.

So in the talk with a challenge to all of you. And the challenge is what area of your life could you more fully accept and become transparent about what area of your life could you just kind of even do this is how I am acknowledge it, see it, accept it, and in accepting it, find some deeper degree of peace, find a path to peace in that acceptance. That's your challenge. So we have a little bit of time. If anyone has any questions or comments like to make

I guess this came up for me because I feel like whenever I hear Rumi poems are sort of like a, it seems like everything in the world is a sign.

The sign. Yeah. And I feel like I've met people who, like,

I mean, like they, because they see everything in the world as a sign. Like, it's kind of they they tend to overdo it or like, I guess I felt like a little skepticism. So I don't know how directly this relates to your talk, although I think when you're working on your imperfection, a lot of times like you have that issue. You're like, is this a sign or is it an assignment? Or is it just like, a piece of paper going down the street or something like that? You know?

Yes, it's a hard it's a hard I don't know the answer to that question. I mean, people often have a sense of, there's always lessons that come from things happening in serendipity that happens that teaches us something. And sometimes, you know, I've noticed that I have some kind of issue that's going on, my antennas are up in a certain way. And so I'm more likely to pick up something that seems relevant than they were before. And or make it or make it relevant. You know, it's like a dream, right? It's a dream for me interpret different ways, perhaps reinterpreting it, it's useful for us. So, so, you know,



have certain that my intent was up a certain way and as a concern, and I'm looking for some understanding, you know, that that helps me or not, that was what was originally intended. You know, so the signs parklea are interpreted, right. So, sometimes, sometimes the inner psyche, you know, so called unconscious perhaps, has certain kind of wisdom that our conscious mind doesn't have. And so the way in which we interprets things in the world might be coming partly out of the subconscious that seems to know, I know it's it's

Think that more to the point of my talk. The every reaction we have is a sign. There's a lesson. And the question is, are you willing to use that lesson? So I don't know about the paper blowing in the wind out there. But if you have a reaction to the paper, then that reaction is a sign that there's less than that for you. Just pay for myself. I don't know. Is that helpful at all my comments, to the point? Yes.

In Rumi's tradition, they talk a lot about ecstasy and the ecstasy of union.

How does that in we talked a lot about suffering. But how does the idea of ecstasy See, with Buddhist thinking.

The word excess is seldom used in English, in American Buddhist circles. The what is what's the Greek etymology next, assuming someone know, outside oneself. So you know, that's kind of not so didn't work so well for Buddhism. So, the, but words like bliss, rapture, happiness are all words that are very important in Buddhism and the path to liberation, to go through Joy has to be part of it. And it's a very important part of it. So it's expected part of the path. And so the emphasis of suffering is not so we could just suffer better. But rather it's, it's to do what's in between the saying, did you go into it, so you can settle it either resolve it, you can release it, and a path of releasing it is one of the joy. Now, part of this thing about turning into something in meditation, what's going on and thinking about it more and more and more is that if we can get settled in meditation, and in the present moment, just be contented, happy with the present moment, and put aside the problems which are in the past or in the future, outside of this particular time and place. They just be here for this experience that provides a person who can provide a person with a degree of well being and peace that gives them a very different perspective for understanding the problems out there. And so sometimes very useful to do If you really have the ability to sell something really deep so we can experience look at it from a different level and one of the deeper levels is the experience of well being it could be joining something like that so this address your question enough for us if you have more particular issue of union was the idea brought up also that's important for you? Are we just accessing part and the and it you know, the, it's not uncommon for some people who meditate especially people who meditate a lot. And when they get into that, that they can have a strong habit of it's a momentum gets built over time, to report that the degree of joy or rapture, happiness they feel in meditation, so passes anything they feel outside of meditation. That's possible. They're the difference between some say this way, in Buddhist spirituality, it's very important not to take rapture or bliss or happiness as the as the end point. It's it's steps along the path is nothing bad is not the point. Yes. Yes, yes if you have a final close then don't don't go into

the fire. And so some of us carry with us issues and ways of being that will just make make the foreigner stronger if we go into it, some people got re traumatized, for example, if they go into their trauma or into their pain. And so hopefully, the practice of mindfulness will be self correcting these triggers, try to be present for your suffering. And you realize that actually, you're suffering more, it's actually getting more difficult and doesn't seem wise, then hopefully you do, of course, correction, realize this is not a useful approach for me. And I need another approach in order to deal with this. And so for example, one approach is some people rather than going into their self loathing, and self despair, self criticism, finding more useful maybe sometimes to do loving kindness practice for a while, do the antidote set really subtle, some kind of create a different attitude or understanding of how they relate to themselves, and then they can open to that later. So there are definitely Times says It's very important, it's very important to be unapologetic transparent, very accepting that, you know, I can't do what Gil said today. You know, go ahead and talk today was turning into right, going to the fire and but sometimes the limitation is I can't do that this is not useful. I need to do something else. And I that's not that's really why it's not it's not an inferior thing to do with can be very very wise to know this is this is this is my limitation. This is my situation. And I need to take care of this to do something. This is what I have to do.

Says the idea behind walking into the fire and being a little moth and keep burning your wings is that ultimately the big inside all that Suffering all that you're dealing with gets burned off and eventually it's gone. Or is it that you just become accepting of the fact that it's there?

I think Bruce in Buddhism, they The aim is to actually free yourself from suffering. Not just to be accepting of suffering, you know, not the world class acceptor. You know, but, but the, the path to that one penance is very passed. But one pass I'm offering today, which I think is very helpful for many friends, is you start by accepting the security situation, that's the beginning as the as the entry because if you're reacting and running away, you're not gonna be able to settle there, work with it to resolve it. So the first step is to is to see it and understand it if you can, and accept it. But don't leave it not leaving just acceptance which you know, and then then go further and And some things you know, are accepted so they no longer become a hindrance to the mind, concern of the mind, then the mind could settle into a deeper place, and then eventually deal with the roots of the very problem itself. So for example, if if someone suffering has to do with Oh, man, I'm sorry. It was a joke I thought about earlier earlier. I was gonna say earlier, but I censored myself. There was an executive saying when these big Silicon Valley corporations, who was a great executive helped the company a lot, but he had one problem. And then when he got up in front of very important to meetings to make big Presentations like to the board and stuff like that. He would pee in his pants. And so the CEO of the company came up to me and said, you know, you got to do something about this problem. And so, you know, you're really big important to the company. So we're going to send you the psychologist. So he goes to therapists for a while. And after a while, he comes to me it comes back and the CEO says, Are you curious? He said, No, he comes back and says, I'm cured. And the CEO says, Oh, you mean you don't pee in your pants anymore? And he said, No, I'm no longer embarrassed. So maybe there's foolish kind of acceptance to sometimes you have to deal with your problems. But the so



Sorry.

Yes, so the point is not just to be accepting, suffer more, the point is to be accepting so that the way we are with our issues is not adding more trouble to it not adding more fire not adding less clarity, but rather to find out how to be at peace or accepting or ease with our difficulties, how to turn into them and not get agitated because of it. So we can see them more clearly with more depth, so we can settle them. So we can go into meditation and put those aside in the sense, not that pushing aside, like sort of settling into them and through them into some deeper place. And that deeper having a deeper perspective then shows us a very different relationship to our problems. I think I think I'm most anybody who meditates to some degree probably has the experience of being caught up in some kind of concern, something important to all those things to do and all this and then meditating and coming out of meditation say, what was the problem? Why was I so caught up in all these things I have to do and run them around my problems and, you know, suddenly the mind meditation creates much more peace or space in the mind. So the way we kind of wrap our skin wrapped up around our thoughts, gets unwound a little bit. At the last one,

while you were talking, an image arose for me, which

kind of clicked for me and understanding. It's sort of like if I were to imagine that I'm this like, column of gold. And what if all of these impurities You know, when we go to purify gold, we usually put it through fire and all these impurities get dissolved and transformed and pushed off. It's sort of like identifying with the gold coming into the and then all those thoughts

burn up, if you will just kind of

way

this place where,

you know you're fully what happened but you're not. You're not you're not taken aback by it, you know, you just do this no, this is the process. So anyway, I just sort of made me

Yeah, the Buddha had a similar analogy with gold for a minute as well concentrated.

So

this idea of the spirituality and perfection one of the reasons I like it, is that in my mind, at least it's it says it's a proach to spiritual life, which is well integrated, because it doesn't leave anything out to release. It kind of allows us to connect to who we are really and accept who we are. Rather than

saying, Oh, this shouldn't be part of the path that shouldn't be, I shouldn't be dealing with this. But rather to everything gets included in this way. And I think it's much safer to be engaged in Buddhist practice, if it's integrated. So, thank you, everyone, and also a special thanks to those people who are here today in order to offer their blood to people who need blood. So, that was wonderful. That was people set that up and thank you for doing that.