

2006-11-13 Silence

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SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

This evening, my wife asked me when I was going to speak about the talk. And I said, I was going to talk about silence. And she thought that was pretty funny. Silence is one of the qualities that I've come to very deeply appreciate. Over the course of my meditation life, Buddhist practice life. And I spent a lot of time in silence for a variety of types silence, but meditative silence.

I spent long periods of time where months and months on end where I didn't talk to anybody really, except maybe a meditation teacher, a few minutes each day, but long periods of silence. There were some of the richest The most valuable times in my life. Can you hear okay? So the most valuable times in my life and I, you know, silence is not so far for me, I feel like it's always been close by and coming here to sit with you tonight. It felt also like your refuge to come here and enter into the silence with you and I really cherished this the quiet time here. The variety of silences that I touched into being here. There's a tale of a Zen monk who spent many years happily in the monastery and someone asked him, What brought you to the monastery? And he said, Oh, when I was before I was a monk because the lay person in the world I noticed at some point that I lost my silence. And so I had to find it again. So I came to the monastery. So the idea of finding your silence is something that's precious. I think that it's possible to write a dictionary with all the different meanings of silence, all the different ways in which people can interpret it or receive it or express it or use it. And you know, there's a silence that comes with shaming someone or disapproving someone, or being, you know, critical, or the silence of embarrassment. There's a silencing of people, a lot of people get silenced. They somehow they're not allowed to speak are not given permission to speak. They don't seem like account. So the topic of silence can be very painful. But also, I think that silence can be very beautiful, bring a lot of joy or depth to life. The perhaps one of the first times in my life where I felt something really profound about silence that I can remember When I was 18 and I went to visit, I was traveling around France and I went to visit once on the show, and it's a Catholic monitor, it's built in this kind of an island off the north coast of France, and it's just kind of top this little mountain mound, big tower and kind of Disneyland kind of cow castle kind of monastery. And I went for you know what they have

this tour, they take you around, and part of the tour they take you to the oldest part of the monastery, which was a chapel that was originally built on top of the mountain there, the hill and, and then just before it was all this kind of grand monastery built around it, so very simple stone chapel, and everything. The whole module is built around that's built out now on top of it. And we went into this oldest part of the building on top of the hill and as soon as I entered the room, I was overcome by the silence there was kind of a presence there stillness, a piece that was kind of kind of forgettable for me. And I never kind of walked into a space a place and suddenly were hit by this kind of very powerful piece in silence. And I arranged it so that I would be the last person to leave the room and kind of lingered behind as long as I could soak it up. Once I went to Nepal, and was going to, and I was just going to say that we possibly retreat from Nepal. And I had some extra time and on the way to Asia, and airport in Seoul, some Americans come over to me. I was shaved head kind of Buddhist monk. And he came over and said, Oh, I had no plans when I met him to go to Nepal that they said, Oh, if you ever go to Kathmandu, look up this Tibetan monk, he speaks English. And so I somehow interpreted that to mean that this was like an ordinary monk address. So then it turned out I have happened to go to caughlin do this retreat at the time, so I went to see this monk and, and no one's monster spoke English. I showed them the address the name was upstairs of the stairs and went up the stairs and came to this floor and they looked down right there and there was a small little room like little monastic grimsel. And so I just kind of knocked on the door and he invited me in I walked in and sat down in his chair, he was laying in his bed. And we had a wonderful talk for a while. And, and then all these disciples, especially Western disciples, started showing up at the door, get on their knees and crawling in on their knees. And they realized this is an ordinary monk. And he was the abbot of the monastery turned out, very highly revered. You're sitting there chatting with him when I started asking him questions about Buddhism, and finally he said, Oh, you have to go see His Holiness. And he pointed out the windows that go down, there's a building down there, the monastery over there. And his holiness. holiness was was anything So, okay, I'll go see him. And since you know, as these questions are coming over something, and so I went to see cancerian prosze no dead, but one of the great Tibetan teachers, and it took a while to get an audience he was doing some kind of teaching for the Tibetans, it took a while and I got to go and come back. And so the end of the day, I could go and see him. And I was ushered into this kind of look like to me as far as I could tell the closet. You know, that was kind of a platform in there like three or four years, Tibetan teachers up on this platform in the closet, and there's somehow talking through the closet into the room where people were, were listening. So I have to kind of get into the closet. closet, many using bell to him. And as soon as I did that, I was in his presence. And there was a silence again. And presence with him in that room with him. They were it was very palpable and very powerful for me. And all I wanted to do was to soak it up, take it in a sense. And they asked me you have a question. And I wasn't ready for question. I was just ready then to just take this, take this in. I just you know, and then they should be out. lost that opportunity to ask a question. So kind of taken by the silence for the presence that was there, the stillness. And then one more kind of story from my life of the first time I spent a lot of time alone. I spent a week alone on a farm. Small dairy farm farmer's wife left. I was supposed to take care of the farm for the week. And I was about 21 I think 2021 and I never spent time alone. There was no one no one came to the forum, the distance, you know, I can see the postman kind of walking up the road

sometimes, but otherwise, no one came. And it was this really marvelous time as the days went along. My mind got clearer and clearer and clearer and Stiller's doing Stiller and, and everything kind of in the everything around me start to sparkle. You know, like, somehow clean my eyes. And, and then just, you know, everything with everything comes in a certain highlight. My mind didn't stop thinking. But the thinking got really thin, but also same time very clear, and felt this great intimacy with myself. And I realized how much the social and economic By talking to people and keeping that kind of social thing going, kept in the mind somewhat agitated, and preoccupied, and having us all fall away, just kind of brought this kind of clarity cleanness purity to the mind. And so after that time of being alone, with my friends came back, then that clarity and stillness, that I felt silence kind of vanished pretty quickly. But I realized that something very important that had happened to me. And so it became my question. My question then, after that was, how can I be alone with others? I didn't think I should just be a hermit, that someone didn't seem to be in the cards, but something somehow their way of being alone with a stillness and peace and intimacy could be there while and with people in the rich way and not just aloof from people been involved in, you know, in a rich way with our world. That became for many years. My question Like my credit, my spiritual question, how can I have this sense in community? I once read someone who said, if you want to have a spiritual life one of the ways to do that is to go to bed early and get up early. That was it. It's that easy. And now I don't know what time you guys get up, but I mean, I think she meant early. And I spend a lot of my life getting up early, really early. And I love it. And there's something about again, the stillness and the silence of You know, around that before the day begins before people start moving around, and life happens and you know, stuff happens, that calls for three police for me it kind of intimacy, a kind of presence, that kind of stillness kind of peace, a kind of perspective on my life. That's very different once I kind of get caught up in all the things that have to be done. And I think some of that has to do with a silence. So that time stillness of that time. And so rather than thinking of spiritual practice is something you have to do, which can be this very important part of it. It's some some some situations, it's kind of what happens to us, we kind of avail ourselves. We're receptive, make ourselves receptive to something that's here. And one of those times it can be felt very, very, for some people very tangibly almost, isn't it very early hours, just get up early and sit and have to look out the window in the dark where the stars are just going to be there. If you do it like that, so soak that in. And see what happens. One of the things that happens is this kind of meditative, you become very aware of probably your thoughts and your feelings. One of the reasons some people don't like to have silence is because they have to become aware of their thoughts and their feelings. Right? Busy, just keep it busy. So how to see these things. But I would suggest that it's actually very valuable to stop and see this stuff and really see what drives us what makes us tick and see them. Because if we see a clearly stop for it and hold it, the silence, it allows it to unwind and kind of dissolve or something happens, allows us to see it in a deeper way. And that depth adds depth to us. But also, it gives us a chance, perhaps, a verse to realize there's an other game in town. There isn't only the content of our thinking. There's not only the content of our emotions we're feeling, but there's the awareness of it, or the stillness that holds it. The silence. That's kind of Bigger than it, that's there as well. And so it's kind of like realizing that there's more to your life than what you usually think it's about. Life isn't what you think. And there's something more to it. And that still that just kind of stillness which doesn't require us to solve our life, but puts it puts our life, our thoughts and ideas in a

different perspective. And there are a few precious times in life when we kind of somehow get this kind of broader, more spacious view of things, stillness or silence, that kind of everything seems okay even when it's extremely strong, everything's okay. People, spiritual people sometimes talk about sensing or feeling that everything's perfect just the way it is. Even though I feel lousy. Or even though, you know, there are things that shouldn't be happening, they're happening. It isn't that we condone them or accept them or you know, but there's a kind of fear And it's a silence of stillness spaciousness gives. That gives us a different context. One Zen teacher said that when you really feel the silence that's always here. You begin experiencing life, seeing life through the eyes of a Buddha. So something about the silence. You know, some of you might know that the name for the Buddha one of the names is Chucky Muna Chuck Chuck Mooney. And it's really a title, and it comes from the Chucky clan. So he's the money of the shopkeepers. And money is a Sanskrit word for sage. But it comes originally from a Sanskrit root meanings, silence. And it partly was used for Sage because it was a tradition in ancient times for sages to take vows of silence. And so became a kind of commune extended to all kinds of stages, not just the silent ones, but the word Mooney as root and the silence Buddha was the silent one. The Silent one is the shock your claim. Probably many of you are familiar with the famous quote, Mozart, where someone asked him what was the most famous, the most important part of your music. And he said, The pauses and some of you are familiar of them, maybe send poetry can be so short little Japanese in poems where they can't take any kind of highlight silence for saying showing it silence highlights the sound of the bell. You know that or just great emptiness on the scroller on the, on the scroll, and there's a little picture of a bear or something. And, you know, rather than filling this role with painting, this, the emptiness kind of highlights the simplicity of the bamboo or the flower arrangement, Japanese flower arrangement emerges just one flower, rather than kind of, from flowers with just bursting full, you know, with abundance, just one that really highlights something. Silence can highlight so much from from our lives. And so to give her a chance to have silence, we appreciate it, I think is very, very useful and very helpful. In some ways, if you can cultivate enough silence, have to work a meditation is done for you. Now, when you sit down to meditate, you'll find that one of the challenges is keeping silence because then the silence maybe it's not the sounds around you, which it's possible to tune into, and it's possible. It's very, very helpful. If into it, and it helps fill the mind. But when you sit down to meditate, you become aware of how much chatter there is in the mind. And sometimes like I've meditated and just kind of wanted to say to myself Shut up. And it's amazing. And of course, if we kept a tally of the kind of things we're thinking about I wonder how much what percentage of is profound. And so you know, this you know, so we get caught up in the content of our thoughts. There's a which in Buddhism is called noble silence. And noble silence in the teachings of the Buddha refers to a stillness or silence in the mind. When the normal discursive activity of the mind is settled down. And it's really a that's another really precious thing is when discursive discretion. fears of the mind quiets. And we have an inner stillness or inner silence that begins to kind of show itself. It doesn't necessarily mean that all thinking is stopped. But our involvement are caught up in discursive thoughts and trying to figure things out and plan the day and remember the past and this and that because our thoughts kind of just kind of thins out quiets down. And we realize that there's space or silence or stillness in the mind as well. Some teachers give the instruction that when the mind gets filled up, it's fill in meditation. Look for the space of silence between your thoughts. Most people have

maybe a hard time finding out because just great continuous stream. But I suspect occasionally, there's a period at the end of a sentence in your thinking, or is it just a burn on sentence in your mind you know, in that little period or a comma You know, there might be that, you know, there can be there can be gaps, you know, and especially meditators can feel that the mind gets quiet and still, and to look for that, and kind of enter into a kind of sense or feel the silence that's between your thoughts, or your stillness and the silence, it's behind your thoughts. Sometimes in meditation, you can get a sense when the mind is quiet, that there's a tremendous field of stillness or silence, and thoughts kind of arising like bubbles up out of it. And you realize there's something much more than the content of thinking. I think if there's a Hindu tradition or Hindu teacher who once said that all something like all creativity, all beautiful things are created, arise out of silence. And I've certainly found that when I can do have some degree of silence and stillness That my mind also becomes very full. Rather than diminishing myself and feeling like I'm less than some investor or then losing something, by the silence, there's a way it actually is depth and fullness and something very rich begins happening. And that richness that's available. I can tell you under watch my mind, and sometimes I can see when I'm caught up in the discursive surface chatter my mind to that want to that place that has this surface chatter, it seems like a surface chatter is really important. Or it seems like it's important to be engaged in the door, you know, why should I give it up? But if I can kind of struck below it, and says something deeper, it's really rich. And so my suggestion is that silence is a place that gives birth to a richness of footcandle richness and the fullness of who we are. And then when we're ready to speak. We can speak from that place, speak from some places with deeper motivation than we can if we're just kind of riding the surface chatter of our life. It lacks the kind of excitement that can come. always doing and doing and getting and having and kind of being in conversation. You know, it's wonderful conversations you can have a wonderful energetic ways of being in the world. And I don't want to knock that i think i love it that as well. But sometimes we can be addicted to that and not be willing to let go of it always kind of looking for one more hit. One more hit. And I think to some degree, some people live on psychic, psychic caffeine. You know where they're going, what they're always doing in gauging in, activating and feeding the mind and just can't keep them up and going and part of the process Meditation I think, is getting decaffeinated. And you can do that takes a while there's withdrawal, you have to go through. And then once you get through the withdrawal phase, then you can begin discovering some natural states perhaps, like you wouldn't have stopped drinking coffee maybe. So, now I have a question for you. He heard my thoughts but silence. And I have a question for you guys. Those of you curious, say something. What are some of the beautiful things that you have touched? Through silence? With the help of silence? What are some of the beautiful things that you've been in touch with This in the back.

I remember once, several years ago, it was for kind of cloudy and feeling very wintery. Or for some reason I went outside, I feel the silence.

This tree that was there was really had some presence to it. It wasn't like it was beautiful or anything but because it was reflecting the same wintery mood, but it was still in the silence. Thank you

Speaker in the back of the room capacity

recently somebody silent has come into my life and our neighbor's pet bunny escaped and was caught a few times and returned but escaped again so I'm hanging out on my art so I decided to probably wants to be free at this point and

I feel it turns out to be a she and I A Canada Day and she lets me better a little bit

and

Think about a rabbit. I've never had a pet in my life apart from my daughter

who was never very silent. She's sort of

doing that now. But

she's the funny thing about a rabbit and like a bird or a cat or a dog is that it's silent.

And so it's all about just watching each other and

just very gingerly, maybe getting a little tactile touch, but there is no speech and

are just really it leaves a lot of space for my

heart to just look at her and just

be filled with law.

Because there is a space that's nice. That's always with us. What you said. reminded me that You know, when I've done meditation retreats, they're done in silence. But sometimes you're sitting next to someone you don't know, perhaps you have met them before you even know the name perhaps. But they're sitting next to you for a week in silence. And sometimes at the end of the week, I feel like I know them really well. There's a kind of a depth of familiarity. Knowing them and connection that probably in some way is probably deeper than if we spent a week talking. And it's different than I want to just like orange and apples, perhaps that comparison, but, but it's just quite something quite quite amazing. I've fallen in love with people in the silence just sitting next to them. Something happens there.

Recently accompanied my ex on his dying journey and When I was with him in the hospital, when he was awake, we were kind of busy chatting and talking and knowing that there was our past experience and a lot of love in the background when he became unconscious and didn't wake up anymore. I sat by him for 20 hours in silence, it was

so easy for the love to just

be there with the breath.

Yes, very different than

talking. And imagine what it would have been like if maybe could have had the silence when he was still awake. The sometimes it's very profound. What happens when we're silent together with people if we allow it, we were comfortable with silence. People aren't. People are uncomfortable with silence, but then we lose opportunity. When we maybe I've told the story to many of you before, but when we bought the church here before we bought it, there always pews here. And I met the ministers who were selling it for the first time. And it was just me and the two of them. They gave me a tour of the building, and took 1015 minutes for me to walk around, talk about the building. And as we went along with this little tour, there were more and more gaps in the conversation, longer periods of silence. And so finally we came back and we sat in the front pews are up here, and then we sat down and then we had one of these gaps of silence. And they continued for about 15 minutes. And that's when I felt I really connected to them. It was just really a cover of something really sharing something very significant. And then some of our people came it came to to the rest of the community came to see it. And so when I went over to the minute one of the ministers and said we got up and Talk to them. And then I went over to one of the ministers and said, you know, someday we'll have to pick up where we left off. Thank you, for someone else. something beautiful, you've touched silence.

On Saturday, I was on a ridge in Santa Cruz Mountains. And it was storming pretty bad at there. But but it was at a time where it wasn't raining very hard. And I remember just keeping a gaze on the horizon. And, and just seeing as I was just still and being quiet and still just seeing the movement of the clouds and then noticing the feeling and noticing the grass in front of me. How is about the grass level and seeing that move? And then seeing the trees and, and just seeing all the movement happened and then feeling the connection. But I couldn't see it that the same thing that was moving, the energy that was moving the grass and the trees in front of me was moving the clouds and just kind of being with that and just filling, filling it moving, I kind of thought of that empty space that I couldn't see.

Silence but

I guess just that's just what it was just feeling the connection through the flow of the clouds and the vegetation.

Beautiful.

Sometimes when I play tennis like in the morning, you with if I'm just playing with one other person, there's no one on the surrounding corner. It's so quiet and you can just hear the bounce of the ball or you hear when he hit the ball. But it's kind of like a an act of silence, you know. And whenever I'm able to be in an active sounds, I play a lot better and more fun play.

Thank you back.

I was, I was in Connecticut. And so hospice nurse driving to patients house in some remote town that I hadn't been to before and I was a little bit lost. running late, I didn't have a cell phone at the time. And out of the woods, a woman came.

She was crying.

And I thought,

drive on now stop.

And I stopped, got out of the car. And I went up to this woman

and we hug

and she didn't speak

English.

And we just

cried together.

And then she turned around and went back into the woods. The house way back there and she just went her way. I went back into the car and it was so perfect. found that we we had experienced each other's essence. And it's like angels coming together.

What is it to be comfortable with silence? What is it to take the opportunity of silence to experience richness there. That's the other side of maybe impatience boredom.

Anybody else to speak.

So for those of you who've been huffing and puffing

and your spiritual life, draining and striving,

trying to do your utmost to be a good diligent practitioner and counting your breaths and doing loving kindness, practice and frustrations, reading sutras and you know, going to sit in groups and just kind of exhausting yourself with your spiritual practice. Maybe the characters Stop at all. Go to bed early and get up early. Thank you very much