

2008-11-16 Mindfulness of Speaking The Value of Silence Part...

Sun, 8/2 1:23PM • 40:14

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

silence, people, stillness, feel, thinking, retreat, deeper, thoughts, mind, solitude, tragedy, meditation, monastery, chaplains, sense, mooney, capacity, feelings, bubble, exam

SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

So as many of you know, the last month or so I've been giving a series of talks on speech, mindful speech, why speech? Right Speech. And last week, I touched briefly on the role of silence. And so for today, I'd like to say some words about silence. And before I go on with that, I'd like to invite you all to reflect for a moment. What are these first associations you have with the idea of silence? What comes up for you? When you hear that's gonna be the topic or your relationship to silence? The evening so just reflect on that because it's interesting, I think is how many different ways in which people relate to silence and partly that's because I think silence is Not a single thing. I think you could write a dictionary of all the different meanings of silence be very rich. And so some people have very negative associations with silence. They've been silenced. Some people get silenced by our society, and, or by history or whatever. And so silence is a form of oppression that they feel. And other people feel that silence is really a positive thing. Some of the greatest feelings, emotions, spiritual experiences they've had happen, the context of some profound silence. Sounds is very inspiring. When, in years past, I've given a series of talks, three talks with last talk is on speech. The second talk is on listening. And the first talk is on solitude and silence with the idea that the solitude unhealthy capacity for solitude lends itself for supports a healthy capacity to listen. And a healthy capacity to listen is a good foundation for speaking. And one of the places where I learned first learn about the value of solitude and silence was when I was 20 or 21. I was living on a small dairy farm that had five cows and, and the farmers I lived with, they went on vacation for a week and left me to care for their farm. And it was lovely. Take care of my five girlfriends. And it was a quite a rural place. So for that was that week I didn't see anyone except the mail carrier would come walking up or driving up that long. rode the distance, I'd see the mail carrier, but otherwise I didn't see anyone. And it was, it wasn't intentional that I was gonna be alone Exactly. Or it wasn't intentional, I wasn't gonna be speaking to anyone for a week. But, in fact, that's how that's what happened. And it was the first time in my life, where I spent that much time completely alone. And that much time without any kind of any conversations or interacting with anybody else. And as the days went along, I noticed that that I became more and more acutely aware of my environment around me. And I had the sense that the things that I saw, were starting to glisten shine was quite something to kind of kind of stood out and highlight and shine and everything and also became acutely aware of my own thinking much more than I had before. I've never been on meditation retreats before done much meditation And I became very aware of my own thoughts was going on here. And I became very aware of silence of certain kind of silence, silence of conversation, not talking silence and not being able to talk to someone because no one was there. And I did talk to my girlfriend's I like those five cows. And, and, and by the end of the week, I felt like I'd never been more intimate with myself and with kind of the world, then death during that week. And so because it was a very valuable reference point

for me, it showed me a possibility of how to live and how to be present that I had not experienced before.

My friends came back and then I lost the intimacy. It's kind of like, disappeared, shattered to some degree and then I updated my, my spirit but kind of my quest my, my task not was not to go find someplace to be a hermit but rather because that didn't seem to be in the cards, but rather, my task was how to have that sense of solitude together with other people how to have that intimacy, that presence, that stability, that peace with other people, because what I noticed is when I got involved other people, that my mind got more complicated. My thinking got more complicated. I was concerned then about you know, how I was relating to them what they were thinking about me were they like me, not like me, was I living up to some expectation was I did have just the right rejoinder to their their statements so that it appeared good or, you know, or what they just said now a little bit insulting. And do I need to take into account and say something back or defend myself or you know, Are they okay? Don't you take care of them in some way. There's a kind of a multitude of ways in which my mind would get busy and caught up in these concerns. And what I noticed was that, that these concerns often enough became incessant come, like, that's where I live. That's what my mind was doing was concerned, all these things. And it could be so bad for some of us that we are so distracted by our distractions. We don't know we're distracted. So, for me, those seven days on that farm was kind of the first day that I kind of first time in my life where I in some ways, I stopped being distracted to stop being caught up in in thoughts and ideas and concerns. So here was an experience of silence and silence connected to solitude. And so in my previous talks, I would say that that capacity for solitude or silence, stillness was a great support for being able to be a listener to listen to someone. And I one of the things I do is I teach a Buddhist chaplaincy training course. training people to become Buddhist chaplains. In in, in places like hospitals and prisons. And generally people who work as chaplains work in situations of distress. People usually don't need to talk to a hospital chaplain unless they're in the hospital, in some kind of distress, sometimes in crisis, and sometimes the crisis is quite acute. Some to a tragedy is performed someone. So one of the things one of the requirements I feel for someone to go through our training is to have set a number of silent meditation retreats. Because two things happen in assignment retreat. One is the person gets to meet themselves in a deep way. When we're distracted and involved in conversations in life and all things we do Do we often distracted from ourselves. But if you spend a week, 10 days in silence on a retreat, even though you're around people, so you're not solitary, in a sense, you're still the normal kind of social self that comes into play, as you're involved in the conversation doesn't, you know, doesn't get fulfilled. And in that silence over time, even if you didn't meditate, there's a greater and greater understanding of intimacy, your familiarity with yourself, what motivates you what your feelings are with a common patterns of your mind our content, you know, a whole bunch of things, he becomes really obvious. And that's really important for someone who's a chaplain, to see because if you come into the room with someone who's been in before, like some sort of going through some tragedy, it's very important. The chaplain doesn't express or spill over their own unexamined feelings, reactions, and mess up the whole situation. We had one In the first year, we did the training, who in fact had gone through a war as a child kind of grew up in a workplace and just kind of traumatized by that. And for some reason would part of the part of his chaplaincy work or chaplaincy work was to go there visit people in nursing homes, who had also gone through the same war. And, and she came back to me one day and said, Oh, you know, I was talking to one of the patients there. And the patient said to me, you're the chaplain, right? I feel like I'm taking care of you. Because it was actually the trauma was so close, it was unresolved and in a dealt with that, actually, you know, she would get upset, talking about it.

So there has to be like a familiarity. But also there's a second thing that happens on retreats that supports these chaplains is they learn They find hopefully you're to hopefully touch. There's no

guarantee, but to hopefully in the context of Silent Retreat, touch, deeper and deeper stillness and silence inside themselves. And it's not easy to go deep into their own inner silence, stillness, peace, because almost like there's layers like an onion, of reactivity, feelings, history, that you have to kind of work through activity of the mind to work through and settle, in order to touch into these deeper wellsprings of stillness or silence. But as people develop a capacity for being still and silent, and comfortable there as well, that's one of the greatest one of the great gifts you can give someone else in, in tragedy, that someone is going through some major, you know, disruption, struggles, conflict, fear, whatever. And to be able to hold that whole space, have them hold space. Have silence be a witness for them. Kind of be a fee a person for whom. Not that it's okay that they're going through tragedy. But it's so it can be with someone who it's okay to be. They're okay with being with you. And they can be still and quiet. They don't have to fix it. They don't have to make it go away. They don't, they're not going to cower from it. They're not going to be distressed themselves. But they can kind of touch into a deep wellspring of stillness or silence inside. And as they stay, they're still in silence. It can be sometimes very, very helpful for the patient, to feel that to hold that. So silence is a capacity that comes from a profound connection with ourselves and in a Buddhist situation, you know, connection with our spirituality. And so I want to read a tale

And about a monk named venerable Mooney. Now, this little bit of a pun in the name because, you know, the Buddhist Buddha was sometimes called commonly called Shakyamuni. Shakyamuni, and Shakyas was his clan name, a clan that he could construct your claim. And Muni, usually translated as the sage sees a sage of the suck. Chuck, your client makes some sense, right? He's a sage. But Mooney comes from a Sanskrit or Indian word. I think it's Mona Molyneux, something like that. Which means silence. And there was some very strong association in ancient India, with sages and silence. Maybe sages were those who kept silence. Something. So he's the silent. The sage of the shock. Yes, but he's a silent Chuck. Yeah. You know. And I've read I don't know if it's true, but I read commentary. About this Sanskrit word, and it's yesterday was that in Sanskrit has other meanings besides just silence, broader meaning. It's kind of a, a, a peaceful, calm or peaceful silence or delightful silence sort of warm associations with it better built into it. Maybe that's anyway. So venerable Mooney always appeared peaceful. This was not so unusual among the monks of the monastery. Benjamin Mooney was unique, however, and that he remained peaceful and calm. Even after entering the busy and noisy bustle of the town market. He was the monastery shopper who on most days, spent hours bargaining for the best prices for the produce he bought for the monks. When asked how he managed to remain peace, He said, I entered the monastery looking for peace and quiet. I spent years in the harried world of commerce and people. I longed for the silence the monastery was rumored to have. I was delighted with my first weeks in the monastery. However, as I settled into the silence of the place, I was shocked to learn that the real noise was within me. It was the busyness of my own mind that oppressed me, not the activities of the world. Now it doesn't matter where I go, I carry the great silence within me. So part of meditation practice is to meet to busyness in our own minds, to meet the agitation, the activity, and to begin understanding that there are other ways of living, other ways of living with our mind. Remind doesn't always have to be busy. Or mind always just doesn't have to live in its thinking, live in what it's saying to itself, the inner talk. And I think for people who many people who don't meditate, that's a very new idea. Many people it's there's an unexamined aspect to their life that they never really thought about their thinking, never thought about where their attention tends to reside. My attention, I pay attention to what's going on around me and I pay attention to TV and pay attention, a lot of different things. But what's not noticed is that very active paying attention is for many people is through the filter of their thinking. They're thinking about things all the time and understanding things through the filter of their thoughts. And it's very hard to see sometimes how much that's the case unless you get still and quiet like a meditation. So sometimes in meditation, or certain places in life where things get quiet enough Still enough, it's possible to discover little gaps between your thoughts. You're not always

thinking. And one of the very interesting questions is, who are you? When you don't have a thought to tell you. So, you know, someone says Who are you? You would think of something. Man a woman is some that, you know, I'm you and we say it through the vehicle of our words. But if we don't use words, don't use thoughts to tell us tell ourselves who we are. Then who are we? If we don't have words to tell ourselves, we don't just simply poof disappear, right? We know we're not dependent on the words to be alive and exist. So in the space between the thoughts as one of those places to discover some different way of being with ourselves in different sense of who we are

Some people talk about feeling in silence, feeling fullness. And in the busy noise of the mind, feeling diminished actually feeling kind of flat or two dimensional. So in this space, and sometimes that space can seem quite broad and expansive. And it can be really a delight. Or for people who depend on their thinking, too, for their sense of self, it can be frightening sometimes to encounter stillness and silence. And then, and sometimes we can, the mind can still think, and we don't have none necessarily. We're aware of the gaps between our thoughts. We still think merrily along, but thinking is only one small corner of what's happening in the present moment. We aren't just thinking you know, There's a fullness of awareness, there's a fullness of presence. There's a fullness of other ways of relating to the world. That is that's in addition to our thinking, and thinking can be, still have its place. But it's not so important. There's something more important, greater sense of well being that can be there. So to have to understand an alternative to thinking or to speaking, as a way of perceiving and sensing and being in the world, I think it's a great, great, great thing to discover. As we as soon as we get comfortable with that, then sometimes that becomes a capacity that we bring into play in our negotiations with the world. So for example, in conversation What are you are you comfortable with silence in your conversations, Some people are not. And so they rush to fill the silence with whatever you say something, you know, because then you feel connected, you're acknowledging the person the person feels heard or all kinds of reasons why we want to kind of say, sometimes we want to interrupt sometimes I've noticed in myself is embarrassing, it is admitted that sometimes I've stopped listening to the person. Because I'm involved in what I'm going to say. And the tragedy of that is, maybe the person is going to say what I just got what I'm going to say, even though I don't know what they just said, because you know, and so hopefully, it doesn't happen to many of you or any of you. Yeah, I'd like to, I'd like I'd like to believe I'm the only one spare you spare you from that. And so and so with make some space and in silence in the conversation, there's two very important things that can happen. One is in a silence, you might discover some deeper understanding, or feelings that are relevant than you could have if you rushed into speech. And the other person has a chance to connect to something deeper, find out what's going on. So silence can be very rich. pauses can be very beneficial. And I can't tell you how many times as a teacher, I've listened to people for interviews, and was convinced that I knew what I had to tell this person. I knew what was right. You know, I should tell you something. But I've learned often enough, or often enough, but often to pause and wait and maybe ask some more questions or kind of wait and see and see what comes out of the person I'm meeting with. And then I'm, I'm delightfully surprised that some greater wisdom comes out of them than that wisdom that I, I had. And so if I had rushed in with my explanation, my teaching whatever, then that deeper wisdom couldn't have bubbled up out of that person. So I hope that all of you had some experience of pauses and silence to allow some deeper reflection to happen. Or deeper connection to some deeper values that maybe aren't on the forefront of your mind. But, you know, if you acquire you can connect to this is also true, I feel in relationship to oneself,

is that to spend some time doing nothing, some time in silence, where the mind is not Actively having to do something or think actively needing to think about something. And just be silent, sit and have a cup of tea and be very quiet and different kind of silence than meditation because meditation, there's often a kind of letting go of thoughts, but have a cyber deeper silence that allows some calculation of new

ideas, new thoughts, new reflections to come up, I think is very, very valuable part of life. And I do it often for myself. And sometimes it's tougher as a chance for creative thinking, thinking new things, sometimes it's space where some of the things which are a little bit unresolved in my life has a chance to bubble up and I go, you know, I need to address that I need to take care of that. Or sometimes I get new understandings of something in that space at giving myself space and time to to, to let some bubble up. There's been times when I've thought something Like, you know, I think I need more wise understanding. So I think I'll rush to one of my books. And then I haven't brushed my books and just give him come for a walk or make space. And then somehow the, the with over time, the understanding bubbles up appears. And again, it's like you know if you know something may be better than some wisdom that comes from a book, because it's comes from my own process. It was my own engagement in it. And I think becoming our own teachers becoming our own reservoir of wisdom is really the purpose of this practice overall. It's not about acquiring wisdom, and then kind of applying it everywhere, but about learning how to just kind of let it awaken it from inside of us, so that in all the different circumstances of our life, we have the capacity to reflect, contemplate, feel. Tap into something, some deeper sources of wisdom and understanding. Deliver life from

the process of finding satisfying silence and stillness is not always an easy process. Because of these layers of unresolved stuff that we have to sometimes confront. Now I've known people who have closed their eyes in silence for the first time in their life. And like an imitation place like this, and what they discovered was instantly was so difficult. So much energy and so much emotions and feelings that they got up and left, because I just couldn't handle it because I never had any of you always described They're always engaged and kind of doing something to stop it some people it takes a while to discover some place that makes it hard to continue a process of inner peace. But it's really a worthwhile process. It's really a great thing. And I hope that all of us can deepen our capacity for stillness and silence, so that we can all be chaplains for this world of ours. That's so much tragedy.

So we have about, you know, 10 minutes easily before we're scheduled, and we could sit in silence. Or we could like the I type. I'm actually curious to hear from you guys, from you about your experiences with silence. And what can you add or builder to what I've said so far, but silence from your experience. You're talking about silence and in internet isn't understanding you're referring to silence in the narrow sense of not communicating or talking

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activities and preoccupations that keep a person busy the same way treat silence let's say a person. I can imagine person playing video games or watching television or something like that you treat this the same as silence You see, that is something different. You mean if someone is silent and you're not not having conversation, but they're filled filling their days with just video games and all that? Yes. Yeah. Yeah. You know, and yeah, I wouldn't think of that as being high quality silence.

Obviously not I was I mean, did you did you think of the same thing is the two communicating I mean,

referring for the people keep themselves

busy with right with talking such as at the sun, you treat that Same Yes. So some people keep themselves very busy and distracted by those kinds of activities, games, video games, television, sometimes novels, sometimes recreational activities, sometimes sports, sometimes helping other people, you know, as a way of kind of not facing and staying busy and

I wanted to sort of follow up on what the gentleman just said. I've observed in my 15

year old son, that when he

is playing video games, he is, in some sense, totally immersed in them. And I'm wondering if the reason he enjoys it, is because in some sense, when he gets immersed in that level, it's analogous to What you were referring when you have these moments where, between thoughts where, you know, your sense of self essentially isn't there because you're not thinking, although in some sense, it's a Converse, it's been the focus of the mind has been transferred in this external activity. But in some sense, the reason it's so powerful, in some sense has an analogy to when you are not thinking about yourself, and then you get this level of calmness. It can be that way. So all the things I listed before can also be avenues for people to to deeper stillness to step outside of the normal thinking mind. And it's very, you know, even you know, so the people need I think people really need somebody to step out of living in their thinking mind. So anything that gets you concentrates can do that. So if you can really concentrate in your video, you To game I can imagine you kind of kind of clears out the can clear out the mind, it can clear out the mind sometime. And so I remember when I was in college, I would take exams into the quarter, and I stay I've got to love taking exams, not that I was particularly good at it, you know, in terms of, you know, getting the right answers. But, but I would spend, you know, a few days before the exam kind of just cramming for the exam. So it's a lot of focus. And it was a little bit charged event to take an exam. And so all my attention will go into doing exam, everything else will drop away. And, and when I left the exam room, I would go out and I feel all the silence, just beautiful silent peacefulness. I just felt so good. And so I can imagine maybe hopefully it's that way for your son this year.

I just want to share my own experience with silence

and silence I feel much more tender. I feel there's a heart opening experience. Sort of I can narrow it down and much more so interest in what

I'm doing

and also an element of inspiration.

Beautiful. Beautiful. Thank you.

I'm David and I appreciate your excellent words about the novice that begins a Silent Retreat is trouble going through the layers and I, however, picked up an implication or overtone of aloneness. And I know I can't do that stuff alone. So could you say something about the interview during retreats in which an interview with the teacher during which the silence can be broken?

Not sure how to respond. But the I think it's very valuable to be on retreat in a community. So, silence in a community, there's a kind of very great support that happens there in the silence and there can also be many people find a particular wonderful intimacy with other people. In a 10 day retreat, you don't talk to the people near you. You get to know them in a way that you wouldn't get to know them if you talked. And so there's very can be very supportive to feel that and It's, it's true that silent retreats to retreats we teach, there is some conversation. The most common one is the interview that happens with a teacher, it's built into the schedule. And the other is it's not conversations but there's usually a Dharma talk once a day to listen to. And, and then as little bit of work connected to talking connected to work, Can people have nearly half an hour, 45 minutes of chore that they do. And so sometimes those talking around that.

So and part of the main, the primary function of the interview with the teacher is to support the retreat, to help them with be supportive. And there's many many ways in which interview can be supportive. Sometimes people having some challenge and difficulty. Sometimes difficulty is with meditation itself, and so they're needing some kind of clarification of instructions. Sometimes the difficulty is psychological, their own inner emotional process that needs to be addressed. In some way, sometimes it has to do with interpersonal things that there's that sometimes interpersonal difficulties outside of the retreat are so big that in order to for the tree to unfold that has to be addressed. Sometimes there's no difficulty, particularly on the retreat. But the retreat into a Carmen's mentioned give it a check in with what's going on. And then the teacher perhaps can point a person in a useful direction, how the practice can keep developing and going further. So it's not always about a problem. So you talked to interview and sometimes the interviews. Occasionally, someone will come in to interview and they're so immersed in, in a kind of a meditative stillness, silence that is not really didn't really want to talk and be appropriate to talk and sometimes out To say no. And they feel like they have to. So I've said, No, no, you don't have to talk. And sometimes it's very wonderful to sit together for a few minutes in silence. And just because it's so palpable, sometimes this stillness, the silence, and someone can, when they're really kind of concentrated or still, and it's nice to share it with someone to feel like somehow someone understands it. You can share in it, someone who could share some kind of communication that can happen in that silence and stillness, rather than filling it with words. So I don't know if you want to use that adequate or do you want to ask again, or different question?

Bill. My name is Bill.

I sometimes feel that I get too quiet.

I've always been able to come Concentrate very readily. I find myself frequently sitting in the state

where I can feel the thoughts coming up before they form into anything that's recognizable as a thought. And I feel like I cut them off. There's this sea of looks like bubbles, like bubbles, but they form into ideas. They're just, oh, the bubbles are

great. But in meditation, that's a beautiful thing. I mean, it's a meditation practice. Generally, I would take that as a good sign. And you can concentrate and very still present. Mindfulness is strong. And it's also kind of a footnote on this. It's really fascinating. To watch like a bubble, watch the big thought begin to arise in the mind. Even Clear, it's really clear thoughts about to happen. But if you're really mindful and present for it, that thought kind of evaporates. And you'll never know what you're going to think. And so and so what's fascinating about that is that is is a source of your thoughts? Not in that conscious realm. And what is that diff? What is what realm of the mind our thoughts coming out of and being produced? If it's not conscious? So I don't have an answer, I just find it fascinating.

Question is more.

I sometimes feel like I'm shutting all of this out that there's, there might be something in there of importance.

Yeah, so it could be it's common enough that people have some kind of suppression or resistance or holding Back of things. And so a few things you can do. One is, whatever feeling you have, that's the case, you want to investigate that feeling more fully, kind of open, spend time with it, look at it. Is there actually a physical sense of resistance or holding or tightness somewhere in your system? Is there some emotion connected to it that there's some fear or aversion or you know what's going on.

Sometimes by investigating more thoroughly the very feeling of the lid on it can reveal what's going on. That's one way. The other way is to, is to find some way to let these bubbles come to maturity. And maybe if you have a habit of meditation of getting there and not, things don't bubble up. Maybe some other process besides meditation is useful. Maybe there's some kind of like a meditative walk, you go for a walk in the hills here. And maybe in that walk, you can kind of let these things deeper these these make some space for these thoughts could come to fruition and show themselves Sometimes stream of consciousness writing can allow something to come forth that maybe otherwise wouldn't come forth. Just keep writing and writing and writing, what comes out and see what happens. Sometimes stream of consciousness talking, like with a friend or a therapist can sometimes allow things to happen. So those are the sure there's more things to be said. But it's an important issue. Especially if you feel like something's being held down. Can you maybe one more here

to mention that there is a very wonderful practice that does exactly what you were talking about. And it's called focusing. And you can find a book called focusing by Eugene gendlin. There's a website and so on. And it's exactly that and the idea is that this, that what you were talking about that might not be conscious, it's really, that our body holds complete knowledge of our entire situation, and focusing as a way of paying attention to that and letting them Those things bubble up and let them bring a life for direction. Beautiful. Yep. So it really fits. It fits wonderfully with Buddhist meditation. There are a lot of people to pray. Yes.

Thank you. So thank you all. And thank you for sitting here with us in silence this morning and in listening to my talk, I appreciate it. And I hope that maybe this week as you go along, you could explore this topic of silence. Both experientially look for opportunities of silence. Look for the values, the value, valuable silences of the day. Make more, make more room for silence. See what happens if you do that. And also, talk to some of your friends about their good and bad experiences with silence

So thank you all.