

# 2009-03-30 The Path

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path, attitudes, shovels, people, mirror, retreat, self image, reflection, life, novice, image, garden, ideas, deep, world, long, meet, abbot, dig, buddhist path

## SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdaal

Thank you. So Good evening, everyone.

Nice to come back and sit with you.

The so as Jim said, I've been at spirit rock for the last month teaching a month long retreat, and ended yesterday morning.

And it's quite a profound thing to be involved in a month long silent meditation retreat. And a lot happens in it's in an environment where nothing happens. And the it's quite quite rare for people to spend a month in silence in their life. Some people were there for two months, and it's quite rare to be engaged in the process of meditation. Day after day, hour after hour.

And one of the things that happens on a month long retreat is that it happens any, any dedicated meditate, meditation practice, but one of the things happens very clearly in that kind of retreat is people get to meet themselves. And you get to meet yourself really well. And some people are surprised that they who they meet. There are people there. Remember, there was one person who came there with the intention to have deep jhana work, deep concentration work really get concentrated. And she met her mother or her image of her mother relationship where the mothers that they actually they were a lot of mothers there territory.

It was kind of remarkable. I people who brought with them unresolved issues from their, from their life that had to somehow be dealt with and met and worked with. Without somehow meeting that and working through it, they couldn't go deeper into the, into the path into the, into the practice. And some people met their attitudes, they met their attitudes about themselves. And there were all kinds of attitudes that got in the way of being able to meditate, because they have an active attitude, to hold an attitude that we're kind of using to kind of see ourselves to the world. The mind has to be busy, has to be activated. And in order to get calm, the mind has to stop being activated. And if the attitude is really big, then it gets in the way. Some of you were here a long time ago now, maybe six weeks ago. Remember I gave a talk on visiting San Quentin. Remember that. So at the last week of the retreat, it was quite unusual to have someone come just for one week of the retreat. But the man who leads the program at San Quentin, he came to meditate to sit there for the last week of the retreat. And then at the end of the retreat, he came up to me and he said, Gil, remember when you came to my class in San Quentin, the violence prevention class, and the inmates were kind of leading the class and there was one, one member who was come many times. And remember, he wasn't buying it. And he was pushing back and arguing. And then there was this big discussion between him and some of the people

in the class. And I said, Yeah, I remember him. And remember how the other inmates said to him, you keep taking this violence, violence prevention. class for in six months you'll be teaching. Well, so he said, Well, he kept coming back. And after six weeks, he had a catharsis. And he broke down. And he said, you know, from the age of nine to 14, I was abused. And in that in coping with that, I assumed that I took on an attitude persona, of being a tough guy. And he finally met it met that tough guy attitude enough to break through it.

So this guy just told me the story at the retreat. So it's ties to the retreat experience, but that was often the kind of some people's experience in the retreat is they had to meet their attitude that carried with them all the time. And remember, there was one person whose attitude was it's all too difficult no matter what What? Too difficult, or I can't do it. It's quite remarkable. And because of the retreat, what happens on a month long retreats me that much ongoing practice, you get to kind of bump up against your fundamental attitudes over and over and over again. And then there are attitudes that are submerged. You don't even know you have maybe been repressed. And in that context, they kind of come up to the surface and you get to meet them know that. And then there are people who came to retreat to deal with their big life issues and issues didn't come with them.

Where did they go?

And, and there was one person who I wasn't working with that person or the teacher was who said that she was bored, maybe understandable, you know, in a retreat, like, nothing's happening. But the teachers are always, you know, suggested something, look at it more carefully or something or suggest, and somehow that teacher help the person to realize that it wasn't boredom, it was calm.

And the person didn't didn't know calm, had no experience of calm and so it was kind of confusing and so the label was boredom.

I think it's often in daily life is really hard to see, to have the kind of clarity See, the attitudes, the beliefs, the operating principles in which we base our life on. And, and sometimes even saying them out loud what they are, they can maybe seem trivial and not important or two Like cop psychology or something, but when they are, we don't see how they limit us. But when you start stop to sit down and be still, you can see how these things limit us. They are they're limiting. And then there has to be some meeting of that then working through that and moving through it.

So at the retreat, I wrote a story to make up a story for one of my talks there. So I want to read you this story. It's called the tap. It was common for new monks and nuns, to ask for instruction on the path of practice. If one of them was insistent enough about finding the path, the abbot will take them to a back corner of the monastery garden where people sell them when They're the abbot would point out a faint pathway in amongst the bushes and trees. You will find the path at the end of this walkway that had been explained before. Before leaving the novice to walk on alone. Intrigued, the new monastic would set off down the path. After a few minutes, the path would make a sharp turn. rounding the corner, the novice would come up to a very large mirror that blocked further passage. Confused, the novice would stare at his or her own image in the mirror. Maybe I've taken the wrong path, some would say. But no matter how many times they retrace their steps and started over, they would keep running into the mirror. Many of the novices would soon assume that the mirror was placed there to show the real path was in themselves, not in the external world. The data themselves were the path. With this realization, some would get frightened and run away. Others would collapse with hopelessness. After all, if the path is me, how can they be any hope?

Somewhat Stan, simmering in anger. Occasionally, one of the novices would find a heavy rock to hurl at reflection, but the rock would shatter, not the mirror. Often enough, there were those who had stance stuck in front of their own reflection filled up with conceit of themselves as somehow being the great Buddhist path. Occasionally, a novice would try to walk around the mirror by plunging into the surrounding bushes. But the bushes were in pen trouble and they would soon return Turn to the path bloodied from the many thorns they encountered. Once in a while a monk or nun would find next to the reflection, the reflection of their mother or father was often an eerie sight since the parent was not standing next to them on the path. And once in a while the reflection would quickly become obscured by a crowd of other people. No matter how much novice would try to make sense of the people reflected in the mirror, they would remain confused. If the monk or nun became calm enough, sooner or later, they would simply stand studying the reflection in the mirror. For a number of them, this was the first time they had really looked deeply into themselves. After a while, the more unfortunate monks and nuns would conclude that the mirror and the reflection Were the end of the path. They would end up standing there for a long time. But those who remembered the Abbott's claim to the path was to be found at the end of the walkway would look more closely at the reflection. If they look carefully enough, they would have the wonderful realization that the reflection is a leap, the reflection is of me, but I am not the reflection. The reflection is of me, but I am not the reflection. And if then they gently pushed at the mirror, it would give away like a great door, it would gently swing open, and through the new opening, the path continued into an expansive, brighter sunlit section of the garden they could never have imagined existed. They're further on. At the edge of the path, stood the abbot holding two shovels

What do you think of that story? Sorry. It's a riddle. The Zen master Dogen. One of the most famous Zen masters in Japanese history, said to study Buddhism is to study the self. to study the self is to forget the self. And to forget the self is to be awakened by all things. So as we walk the path, there is no path outside of each of us. If you're going to look for the path of practice, you won't find it at IMC, you won't find it at spirit rock, you won't find it in Thailand. You won't find it in a place in India where the Buddha was enlightened. The only place you could you could you can find the path is in yourself and how you walk the path. That's where it's found. It's found in you. And so there has to be some real meaning of yourself. And there's plenty of people who engage in the Buddhist path to try to avoid themselves. But sooner or later, there has to be a very honest assessment, inventory, honest meeting, of who we are, what we're up about what we're up up about what we're up for what we're up to, not just in the kind of conventional activities of our life, but deep down in our hearts deep down in our psyche, our emotions, our feet feelings or attitudes or beliefs, and most importantly, are the ideas we have about who we are our sense of self. We have to meet these things. And as we meet them, some people will have all these attitudes about what they meet, and the attitudes we have about how we meet ourselves, how we see ourselves are an important part of the path. And so we have to kind of understand, are we for or against our own self reflection, the image we hold for hold of ourselves in? The ideas we have the ways we represent ourselves to ourselves, represent ourselves to ourselves. How do we relate to that? And there's a whole range of ways. Some people are basically optimistic about their self image, and some people are pessimistic. Some people think, who they are is a gift to the world and some people Think the opposite the whole range, you know, ways that manifests itself. And so you have to kind of understand that in some what's what that is. And as we begin looking at understanding that, we also can begin understanding where that we begin settling some of those resolving some of those so that we don't they don't keep us agitated or running, running away for some people. Some people are really good at running away from themselves. Some people are really good at looking always being busy in the world, busy with activities, busy with judging other people, busy with things so that they don't have to stop and really take an honest look here. Some people are really good at giving up and just kind of collapsing and not taking any steps in the past because their self image is one of I mean capable, I can't do it. So all these there's a whole spectrum of attitudes we have about

ourselves that have to be met and looked at. And then if we've settled them enough, so we can look calmly, so we can be still nothing conflict with what we see. And that's really a key thing is not to be in conflict or when we see the need to see and look and be present really carefully. Then this magic moment can happen or a special moment can happen. When we realize that whatever it is the image we have of ourselves, whatever that image is, whatever the way we represent ourselves, in our own mind, the way we hold ourselves. The beliefs we have, but who we are, we start seeing them for what they are their reflections. And the reflection in the mirror has some truth to it. But the reflection so the reflections of you, but you are not the reflection. The reflection can't hold the fullness of who you are who we are. all the aspects of who we are. And so to realize that there's some truth perhaps or some, there's something two dimensional, in the in the realm of these concepts, ideas, attitudes, feelings we have about who we are. And whatever our understanding is of who we are, then understanding is always going to be limited. And so what is that? What Who are we outside of the limited view that we have? If all views are limiting, and limited?

Well, then who are we outside the views? And how would you you know, if you don't have a view to, to name it or call it? How do we relate to that part of ourselves, which perhaps,

is outside of

knowing, understanding, planning, evaluating, measure, measuring, defending apologizing, fixing, building up. You know, there's all this stuff that we do. So to begin, it allows us could begin to question our self image, the sense of self, the idea of self that we carry with us as we go through the world. We begin perhaps understanding a little more about the forces in our life that helped create that sense of self we have it's not arbitrary. It's not just the nature of the universe that you were at, you should have this particular sense of self that you have. But there are deep cultural, familial familiales. So social experiences, messages, conditioning that we get, that goes into formulating something as intimate as our sense of who we are. The sense of who we are is not God given. It's not a fixed thing, but rather something gets put together through lots and lots of experience. answers and feedback and messages we get growing up. And beyond that. So to begin seeing that and begin seeing it in a sense as being two dimensional, not three dimensional mirrors two dimensional mirror has no depth. So how much depth do we lose when we mistake when we mistake ourselves for image of ourselves for our idea of who we are. And perhaps there's some truth in the idea, we don't want to dismiss the idea that the ideas we have entirely the mirror is accurate enough, but the mirror is only two dimensional only part of the picture. And so then to be able to look calmly or without agitation, without being for or against the self image, the ideas we have, whether it's a bad self image or a good self image, just to look at it, be present, feel it, see it and not be fooled by it or not be pulled into its orbit not to be pulled into its kind of magical world not be tricked by it to believe that's who I really am. You know if you if you have a magician does a magic trick. It can be fascinating. No matter how long, how many times we see it, that's a really good magic trick. Wow, look at that. Look at that. But if the magician if the musician shows you how the magic is done, you get bored pretty quickly. What about the magic of the mind? When you get to see how the magic the mind is done. The sense of self arises and is created and holds us in its enchantment. You see how that magic is done? Then we get bored or we lose interest or good big interest. interest in something else we'll have to stay there we can't turn away, be present. And so then in the story at some point gently, and they were gentle is very important from the story. Gently they gently push against the mirror. And the mirror just gives away I would have liked actually in the story if the mirror just kind of dissolved into thin air. But, but that wouldn't have been very realistic.

So the mirror just kind

of swings away just kind of gives away parts. And you know this two dimensional image that we have ideas we have just kind of give away and into something which a world which is three dimensional. And in this kind of pastoral way of the story in the story. It opens up and through the new opening the path continued into an expansive bright sunlit section of the garden. They could never have imagined existed. never could have imagined existed. So, with the path continues, it isn't like that is the end of the path. You know the garden beautiful son the gardens, the path continues. And in the first version of the story, I put the abbot on the path, waiting the other side. But then I thought, Oh no, if I put the abbot on the path, the abbot will be confused for the path for the end of the path. So I moved them.

Then further on,

at the edge of the path. At the edge of the path, stood the abbot holding two shovels. Now, why do you He's holding two shovels so now that's your turn. That's the middle part

two shovels

shovels

that's to put the self image in to dig a grave and various

Okay, so the naked nigga grave the self image may get behind. A great Yes.

Continue

ah so to continue making the path at

some point the path

runs out of paths and you have to use your shovel to make more. Great

Okay, that's nice. Thank you. Okay, yes route. They are

beautiful. So they're gonna bury the body. That is self image the image and then you can bury it and cover it and water it and some beautiful things and grow up out of it.

Great. Thank you. Thank you very much. It's

I never imagined that these more morbid ideas but

but I I'm very much appreciating it

that's so good in the middle

that's what I'm asking you.

I don't even bring it up to that point.

Yes.

Both of you have

both of you have to keep digging into

both did you have to keep digging Good.

Even if you get to the end,

things don't just stop right there life goes on.

So even if you get to the end so called the end, life still goes on, there's still more work to be done.

And that works kind of dirty. Right?

shovels kind of.

Yes. The self and the non self and the two shovels. Okay.

Okay. Yes, please.

If they went to the search,

fertility of the search, yes. And the shovels What are they used for?

Okay, thank you. Yes.

So, so she doesn't know the two shovels but he thinks they're there to cover your tracks. When you go in the wilderness you bring you bring shovels with you nowadays so that you, you bury your own poop.

Very bury your own

mistakes. Okay?

The shovels

the point where you've gone past image of yourself, you're taking the path.

So the path the two shovels are one for each of them, the abbot and the novice. And once you reach that point where the image falls away, then you keep

your wherever it is, your

path is wherever you Going and just shovels what what's the hell before? Make way make work path make the further path. Okay, great is just the appropriate tool.

Struggle represents work. So there's no enlightened retirement sorry. Enlightenment is a direction not a place and so the shovels are the tools for moving on. Yes. Arrive so at the beginning you think the

abbot has arrived, but when you get when you when you see that you see that he's still working and moving along to Okay, yes.

So

we have to prepare for that. So

we have to, we have to prepare for death. So in a way we're digging your own grave. Suzuki Roshi, Suzuki Roshi said that life is like being being put into a boat, which is going off into sea to sink.

So you have to dig your own grave. Yes. Well if you're still alive, I suppose take the show when you go build another garden. Oh, so if you're still alive you go have to go out and build another garden out in the world. Okay, thank you. Yes.

To have a garden a shovel is a gift because it's hard to do work in the garden without a shovel. So the Abbott's giving him a gift. Great, thank you. Yes

No no, the EC in Zen. They teach that everything is significant. Everything matters. There's no red herrings

sorry thank you all for

nothing this debit shovel can take you off the path if you focus on the shovel instead of the path by the show so like you know they don't don't mistake the finger for the moon they Sainz and so don't mistake the shovel for the for the path. Yes. Did you spell it

out the shovels to dig yourself in Or to dig yourself out?

Yes, please. Once you have arrived at the garden, it's time to tender. Ah, once you arrive to the garden, it's time to tender. Okay, thank you. Just behind you. Yeah. I was

way out there to go back.

Ah, okay. So once he's once once he's gotten once the novices have gotten there, his job is to go back and help other people find that path and make a path for other people to do the same thing. Beautiful yes with

the shovel

myself.

Aaron

rules

and by getting involved

Yes, so she has been the turning the soil over



and and putting all the support you know from living a life of a false image and then creating  
flowers  
as you  
saw over  
the compost that comes from

Yeah. So it's a nice idea that all our false images and delusions can be composed For something beautiful to arise, so rather than dismissing it, nothing gets dismissed. But everything gets addressed and worked with and, and allowed to be transformed into something else. So it takes a lot of honesty to do that. Because you have to really see what's there and look at it then. And be very still, when we look. So one of one of the things that I think is very important to learn, especially if you do a month long retreat is how to be very attentive, learn to pay careful attention to what's happening. And then learn how to no matter what it is, to learn how to be still, in mental darkness, be still with what you what's what's happening, to rest in the middle of whatever is your experience, to be very. So you have to have both, and I kind of liken it to the vitality and stillness of a candle flame.

That is

an flickering in the wind. You know that if you look at cataflam is completely still, there's no wind, but it's really dynamic in there. So that alertness, the clarity of the mind that really sees is the dynamic part. And then the still flame is that ability to be at rest or be really still really quiet, just to be there. And sometimes it's a hard test to learn. It's, it's, if it's if there's a lot of fear, deep inside, or a lot of anger, or a lot of sadness, to really be there. And then be really still to rest in the middle of it before against it just there. And then see what that transforms into its own time, or to have a lot of joy. And to sit there very, very still with the joy rest in the middle of the joy that not caught in it or being pushed around by it or delighting in it, but just really they're still great present for it. Still this capacity to be to be really present and to be still really present and to find the place of rest, in whatever experiences and that's a big task. It's depending on how challenging the inner life, the inner inner images or issues that are that come up for some people on the retreat, the really big mirror that they encountered, they really, you know, they may be encounter a lot of small mirrors all along the retreat. But the really big mirror where they really met themselves was at the end of the retreat when they started talking. And they're actually it's somewhat common in long retreats like that, for people to be surprised how quickly their personal It comes back. And it's a it's actually a very important thing to see. Because normally people go through life thinking that personality is who they are and just the way things are and they don't question it. But and on retreat, the personality slowly bit by bit falls away are the usual ways habitual ways of operating and talking and being concerned and all falls away? quite quite. So sometimes it's so slow, that people aren't even aware that it's dropping away. And But then, when these people start talking, it can rush back. And it affects not only how their mind thinks and feels, but it even affects their sense of how the experience of their own body pretensions and stuff in their own body. And, and then to see that contrast is an opportunity for a lot of wisdom. And one of the wisdom is to see that are so much of what we call our personnel. He's not all of it, but much of it is, is the software and not hardware. And if we start seeing it a software, then we can put a question mark after it. Oh, maybe it doesn't have to be this way. Maybe there's another way of relating to it. Maybe there's other software maybe there's an upgrade.



So

So I hope that you

get to your shovel. hope someone gives you a shovel someday. And until then, until you get the shovel I hope you find that mirror and I hope you know Moeller Learning how to be present for what you see and to become, to be still to rest with what you see until you see that whatever self image you have is a view. But you are not you are not it. Thank you so much