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SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

So Good evening, everyone. And the topic that has been on my mind and my heart to last few days has been that a friendship. And it was prompted by planning for the memorial service we had here yesterday for rainbow. Rainbow was someone who was part of our community for about 15 years, and very well integrated into our community in many ways and familiar with many people and volunteered here in many ways. And so we lost one of our friends. And so we did a memorial service for her and, and I've been thinking about, you know, the friendship that we had and what it means to be a friend in, in the context of the Dharma. context of Buddhist practice. And, and I think that often enough Buddhist teachers, Buddhist books and certainly I do in my talks probably give too much emphasis on those elements of Buddhism that have to do with personal cultivation of the path, developing inner qualities of practice, one's own meditation practice, but on the ethics, you know, kind of focusing on cents on oneself. And when that emphasis is made too much of then it overlooks the fact that Buddhism puts a tremendous emphasis on the connections we have with each other, and the inter inter interrelated world of people and friendships that exist And that hugely important part of Buddhist practice happens in the context of the Sangha of community. And it's one of the things we say we take refuge in, we go for support in is that being a part of a community of practitioners being part of a wide network of people who practice and realize the fruits of this practice. And, and then as kind of as a subset or as a part of this idea of a sangha community, is the importance of friendships. Then the Buddha said number of times, that the, in order to kind of develop one's practice, it's really important to have good friends to have good Dharma friends, spiritual friends. You know, in terms of the personal cultivation side of Buddhism, one of the things that's emphasized a lot is the Eightfold Path. But then the Buddha said that the precursor for the Eightfold Path The condition that's most supports the arising or the following the Eightfold Path is having good friends. There was a monk who had trouble with his personal meditation practice. And the Buddha then gave him a teaching about the five factors that would support being able to meditate. And the first of those five factors is having good friends, good spiritual friends. And, and I can go through other places where the Buddha put a lot of emphasis on the value of friendship. My own initial interest in living close to a Buddhist community, which was in San Francisco Zen Center, was that arose because I've been practicing on my own fairly commit pretty committed way for about two years. And, and, but every once in a while, I went to visit the San Francisco Then center. And then I'll go back to Davis was going to school and continuing my practice there. And one of the things I noticed was when I was in San Francisco Zen Center, there were a lot of people there who have been practicing for many years. And there was a lot of maturity because I felt spiritually mature people there. And when I was there, were among those people. I would play my normal games, social games, you know, for, you know, I wanted people to see me a certain way or I wanted to get praised or approved of or wanting to be seen as someone who's smart or this or that, whatever. And, or protect myself, I would try to avoid people seeing certain parts of me and there was

all these games, back 70s we call them games. And I guess that's all archaic language now. I don't know what it's called these days. But, you know, I was playing these you know, just

And what I noticed was that when I play these things out at Samsung zensar among those people, they didn't respond in the way that I wanted them to respond. And it was a dramatic mirror, because I would do these social gymnastic kind of things. And I would get no response and when not getting a response, I saw when I was trying to do much more clearly. So I felt the community was a mirror for me to understand myself better. And certainly I was, you know, slightly embarrassed by what I saw in the mirror. But more important for me was, I thought it was really valuable. I cherished the fact that I got to see myself so well, even though it's bad news. And, and so I chose to go and live near the Zen Center in San Francisco. I got an apartment nearby to be closer, those people who would provide me with that tremendous service. And so that was, you know, I felt in order for me to deep and continue in my practice, I really wanted to have that mirroring. When I came to San Francisco Zen Center one of the things that occurred was that not only was I mirrored the parts of me that were not so helpful to me, but I saw in some of the other practitioners, qualities that inspired me. And to give you one example, kind of in the first lessons in generosity that I got, because I never really thought much about the importance of being generous until I encountered Buddhism. And I was working at one of the Zen center businesses, which back then was a bakery. And, and the bakery manager for some reason that was in his office, and I was sitting next to him and he opened a letter that come in the mail And he handed it to me and said, you know, what should we do with this letter? Sorry, I read it. And it was a request from some kind of local neighborhood association for a donation. And I'm reading I don't know, I mean, I assume you throw throw it away. So, you know, I had a lot of a lot of things had to be mirrored. And, and so he said, Oh, you know, I think you know, the bakery will donate \$50. And my reaction was, Why, but, but in that little exchange, I received a big lesson generosity, the fact that you'd be generous to things that I thought you had no connection with and, and extend yourself and, and because I saw myself and that was a mirror to myself and my reactions, my thought, I spent a lot of time looking at myself and looking at what By relationship to generosity wasn't why I had that reaction that I did. And so, but you know, there's a lot of people who can teach us generosity. I mean, wasn't you don't have to go to Zen center for that, I hope. But, but it was I, there was a lot of a lot of ways those kinds of things. were shown to me by the many people that I encountered there, I encountered people who for whom their virtue their ethics inspired me greatly. There were peoples whose dedication to practice and an intention to practice is so strong, you could feel it. And the intent, the this the strength of that intention, inspired me, inspired my intention to practice. There were people who were phenomenally kind. I was very lucky. When I was at San Francisco Zen Center. There was a man and Isa endorsee, who was there. There's a book written by him now called the streets in a wonderful book. And he was like a saint. He was also a or had been a rather extravagant, transvestite performer in the 50s and 60s and by the time that the hippies descended on Haight Ashbury, he became the den mother for a variety of communes and took lots of drugs and was kind of flamboyant and extravagant and, and then he encountered Zen. And he started becoming became a dedicated practitioner of Zen and became a Zen priest. And most a lot of the people even though it's a lot of kind people at Zen Center, a lot of people inspired me. There was something of stair and strict than about the culture, the people at Zen Center at the time, but easson Dorsey. He was just full of love.

And you'd come into the building you ran into him, you ran to set this huge smile like you were his best friend and it was just, you enveloped in this wonderful field of love. And, and the love was not anywhere else and Zen center was with the sun. And, and then because I'm kind of, you know, I don't know what I am kind of, you know, it's but you know, kind of educated intellectual type maybe something like that. One of my faults I was very inspired by a son, because he was basically illiterate. And he had read he had managed to read Zen mind, beginner's mind all the way through. But that had taken him several

years apparently. And so he you know, he didn't really read about Zen didn't know much about it. But he was just as radiant person. And that had all this love and depth and wisdom. And so whenever I could I kind of spent time with him to kind of get feel that to get that hit. The sun hit. I was inspired, inspired by that love. I was also

I realized that many years later, I was also mirrored back. Because and that being mirrored back and as well in a different way than I told earlier. The good qualities in me with me were mirrored back as well. So I didn't, when especially when I went to see my teachers at Zen center, I would go present something talk about something. And in so many times where I wasn't met with where I had these conversations, they would somehow say something was very Affirmative. have me and consciously Initially, I don't think that registered very deeply consciously. Because I had to kind of kind of dismissive attitude towards being like being affirm somebody like doesn't count. But unconsciously or subconsciously it had a huge impact on me. And I only realized that in retrospect, after many years, I realized how supportive that wasn't encouraging it was to be affirmed by my teachers that tell you, you're doing great, you're doing well keep going. And I suspect that without that, all that kind of support that I had from my fellow practitioners from my teachers, I wouldn't have continued in my practice. An example of me giving up my practice, because of kind of because of my friends, kind of having friends who weren't supportive or didn't understand what I was doing. When I was, I guess I was 21. And I just begun being seriously interested in Buddhist meditation practice. And I was living on a small farm with two friends a couple. And I would get up in the morning, I got to the pharmacy, I was gonna live there for some time. And so I got there and some points I just started meditating every morning. And meditation was great. I was very happy with meditate my meditation. Because of how I finished my 40 minutes of meditation, I felt deeply content. I felt very calm, I felt kind of complete, like there was nothing more to do. And just just create content and settled and nothing to prove. Nothing to be for anybody. Nothing to you know, just just being was enough. And then I go to breakfast. And with my friends, and I would just sit there getting my breakfast, quite content not needing to be anybody, not the big deal even. And, and over the next mornings, I could feel this tension arise with my friends, because they expected the old guilt to be there. And somehow, you know, I wasn't participating in the ways that they were expecting to have conversations and whatever. And I would, you know, so after a while, I realized after a week or so, I thought, at least I thought at the time, you know, I have to either stop meditating, or I have to lose my friends. And so I gave up my meditation because I didn't have the bit I didn't have the ability to bridge that world of what's happening with me in meditation, and my social world goes my friends. And it wasn't like they were bad people or, you know, they were in any kind of way. But somehow I couldn't kind of I couldn't bridge that divide. It took me many years. And part of the reasons I, one of the things that inspired me in practice was how to discover how to have that deep peace or contentment or stillness that I discovered meditation, how to have it socially interpersonally. And so for a long time, that was kind of one of the growing quests in my spiritual practice was that question How did not so much how to go deeper meditation, but how to take the sense of well being that was happening meditation, and be able to live successfully in the world with other people. And so I wasn't able to do it with those friends, and they remained my friends. I didn't lose my friends but They, you know, I being so green with meditation, I gave up meditation. And then when I was around San Cisco Zen center then I found people that it was okay to be all kinds of odd ways. And not only was it okay, but because

the sense you know that the old way of being in the world didn't really work anymore for me, the way I presented myself and wanted to things I want to do and accomplish and prove and to others and whatever didn't work anymore. So in the question was, you know, what did work? How should I be? And so what you know, so Zen center was a great place because I felt like I could experiment there and try out different gills or try out different ways of And see, you know, see what that felt like and what I

learned from that. And so I did that, you know, sometimes I tried to be very, you know, quiet and silent and not say much unless people talk to me. Sometimes I didn't talk about myself at all, unless people asked me about me. And that was a hard one. Because many of us, you know, are so accustomed to talking about myself in mind, at least I was. So then I practice with not talking about myself unless they asked me. And if they asked me, then I would only try to say like, two sentences at the most. And then I'd wait. And if they ask further than that would say more, but if they didn't ask then I'd ask them about them as something about themselves. Sometimes I tried to be experimented being an open book, which meant that little difference where whatever anybody asked me about myself, I was going to tell them so if they, you know, just anything I wasn't, I didn't have any secrets, nothing was hidden. So I just be an open book for people. And that was very valuable for me to find that kind of freedom of not having to kind of be protective or feel like there was private stuff or whatever. I don't know what it was like for them.

And, and all along, I felt like I could do this because I was with these good spiritual friends. I was with people, a community of people I was with a community that I didn't feel was going to turn their backs to me. I didn't feel like they were going to, even if even if there was and there was a times when there was tension and problems between us variety of different things, then, you know, we were always gonna be. We always kind of were the practitioners together, it was really something to be practicing in the monastery like Tassajara. Where all kinds of interpersonal in monasteries are often the outside people think monasteries are these ideal peaceful communities where everybody's serene and nice. And from the inside, it's kind of like spiritual hospitals. You know, it's the people who most needed to go there. And so if they need it, then they, some of them really need it, you know. And so, and it's a good, there's good data, it's really good to have hospitals, right? They're really important. So people have all kinds of difficulties in their lives and, and monasteries are very important places where people have difficulties personal, interpersonal, whatever, can really try to grapple with that and come to terms with it and see it through the other side. Remember, once when I was the kitchen manager in the monastery, this guy took me syedna said someone in the crew on the kitchen crew who said Gil, if you weren't so sincere, I punch you out. To give you an indication of, you know, the monastery wasn't always you know. So I, but then we don't have these, you know, difficulties and then we'd all go in the meditation hall and meditate together. And there was something very special about meditating. We have to so you're looking just so a car door or window being broken. Just a car door, right? Talking about xencenter we had a, we would sometimes have car door car doors windows broken pretty quickly, regularly because we were kind of in this neighborhood where things like that happen. And then we would all jump up or people be mugged outside the door outside that way Or you'll be sitting meditating and hear someone yell for help and we would always look great we'd all jump up and dash out the door running down the street and everyone's a little bit late getting out the door myself. But you know, bedtime i was i was a priest and monk and I shaved head and black robes. And they opened running down Haight Street, the whole all these students in the robes. This woman had her purse stolen into statue standing in the corner, and most people are running down the street after the person that was kind of last one down somehow for some reason. So I realized that there were 50 people down there chasing this guy. So I said, Okay, so I stopped. I stopped right next is bushes. And I kind of turned to look in the bushes and this guy jumps out. And he kind of puts his hands up against the wall. You're up in the air against the wall. And he must have been thinking kung fu

you know? Was 130 pounds, you know, really thin guy, you know, I couldn't afford a fly I think. And then here I had corner the senior guy, which is just my shaved head and my robes so um so now GM went to look, it's good to go check, we have doubts. So it was so the idea of sitting together to be in a community of people where you could not be in conflict, and then come and sit, meditate. And the meditation was a wonderful way of meeting your own yourself and how you were your contribution to

the to the conflict and the feelings that generated and learn to let go of a lot. So and be fresh so that when you come back the next day, there's a kind of freshness or openness or something in that relationship. So that's one of the things I feel it's very, hopefully, very part a valuable part of any Buddhist community, whether it's residential monastic or not, is that the doors are always open, and community never turns its back to anyone. So it's a place where it's safe to experiment with different ways of being. It's a place where it's okay in a sense to be in conflict. It's okay in the sense that you can always come back, you can always hang in there, these are your backs not there is always a place where things can be worked out or before, or some new understand new way of being around conflict can happen.

So in my experience of friendship in these, my many years of practice now, it's been really invaluable for me to have had friendships with fellow practitioners peers in the Dharma. People who

I could chat about the practice, I could talk about my ideas and get feedback. And sometimes we had arguments or disagree discussions way into the night, and what was going on in practice and understanding that we would sometimes people would give me feedback about myself. Not just that they wanted to punch me out, but they give me feedback and variety of different ways. Gail, you know, something you need to know about yourself. And, you know, feel very grateful for the people who had this. had that took the courage or the willingness or the wisdom to tell me things about myself. Some of them were my teachers. Some of them were my fellow practitioners who would say things to me. Number one, there was a time when I was overly zealot zealous. Tell us about meditation practice. And one of my friends said, you know, when I talk to you, when we're talking, somehow, I feel like I'm talking to an addict when I got my attention, so they're gonna look at that. But you know how overly enthusiastic maybe I was, and how I was kind of caught up in my enthusiasm. And there were times when I had challenges in my meditation practice, things I didn't understand were going on. And it was not my teachers that helped me. But rather sometimes it was my some of my friends, fellow practitioners, we would have these long discussions about what's going on in practice and with myself, and, and there were times when I had this Aha. Oh, now I understand in those conversations with my friends now Of course, there were times when I had conversations with my fellow friends and, you know, I felt they completely missed me. That was okay to

a very important moment for me at Tassajara Zen monastery was

I was just walking through the monastery one day and I saw in the distance, I saw another resident there, walked through to his job in the kitchen. And as he was walking in his walk, there was something about the way he walked. where, you know, I don't know if it's true. Maybe I was projecting but didn't matter because I learned anyway, something. I was really inspired because there was something about the way he was walking to the kitchen, where he He was just what he was just walking. He wasn't walking to go anywhere. He wasn't walking to prove anything or get anything is just feeling this man is complete, it's complete. And at home, each step is taking. And there was something it kind of spoke to something, maybe something I was ready to feel the recognize in myself, that possibility of doing something so simple as walking to someplace just walking, without the mind racing ahead to the planning and what's going to happen and all the kind of things, but just to be there and the simplicity of that moment. So I saw it in him. And when I saw it in him, then it became more alive in me. And others. This is not from a friend but from a teacher story. When I eventually went to Thailand in practice in the monasteries there, I had a practice in the first monastery. I was in I was stayed there for 10 weeks practicing it was a practice intensely I was supposed to practice by myself and this little hot that was given the edge of the monastery. And I was supposed to meditate all my waking hours basically. And every day I did an interview with the abbot, talking about the practice and I go back to my little hut in

one day, for reasons I don't remember anymore now. I went for a stroll around the monastery, which was not meditating. And in the distance, maybe 3040 feet away, walking kind of perpendicular to me, was the abbot. And as he walked by, he turned and looked at me. Now, back then, You know, I say sometimes, you know, Gil, Gil is short for guilt. And, you know, I had really low self esteem and felt like I was, you know, or whatever I was doing. I was always guilty for something or other and, you know, I just feel guilty as to walking through the monastery, you know, like, I was doing something wrong, or I was doing you know, and here I was, you know, breaking the schedule. I wasn't doing what I supposed to do. They probably kicked me out of the monastery right, taking a stroll. And so, you know, it's been extreme but, but here I was taking a stroll and he looked at me and I felt like he really saw me I didn't feel like he but at the same time I felt he really saw me like he also saw right through me, not through me like you saw inside of me but just like I was just a tree. I'm just part landscapes feel really seen but also felt there was no rip In the Abbott's mind, he had no judgments, no criticism, no idea that I was wrong. You know, what's this guy doing walking around should be meditating. He just saw me. Maybe in the same simplicity as my friend was walking across to work. He's just sitting is just walking in. It's just very simple. He saw me. And in that seeing, it was very important for me, because it kind of helped dissolve dramatically. That self consciousness that I had struggled with so much of my life. I felt like oh, I don't have to see myself as someone who is guilty and bad and inadequate in all these ways. I just I just been seen by the abbot. Maybe because he was an authority figure, maybe it's more powerful for me. I'd be seen in different way. And, and that kind of helped me quite a bit. So what I'm trying to do here is to give you a lot of stories about My practice of how important it was to be practicing with other people.

And, and so many of the important movements and moments in my practice life, happened in relationship to other people, other practitioners, other people, my good friends that I had, there are certainly very important things that happened to me have happened for me through meditation practice and through my own personal reflection. But I couldn't have practiced and I couldn't have grown as much as I have grown, without the support and the help of my friends, my fellow practitioners, my community, and my teachers. When I encountered tera, vaada Buddhism, and then I discovered that the word one of the words for a teacher is that is, I give you the Pali word first. It's kalyana meter. It's the Buddhist word. Meet them means friend and Pollyanna. is sometimes translated as good, good friend, sometimes as spiritual, good spiritual friend. And sometimes as the word Pollyanna means beautiful. So it could also be beautiful friend. So a teacher is a good spiritual friend. And this is a very important idea for me. Because in the range the spectrum from being between being a friend and a guru in the terrible tradition that we're in teachers more in the friend end of the spectrum than they are on the guru end. And then maybe it's not quite fair comparison. But I like to think that in, in this terrible tradition, where teachers are good spiritual friends, the idea is that we're all adults. And we're relating to each other as adults. Whereas sometimes in the guru student relationship, there's such a clear hierarchy, where it's almost like a parent child relationship. which sometimes can be quite profound. I don't want to say it's bad way of spiritually, setting up setting up a religion. But I know that I prefer the adult to adult approach. And so the idea of friends, that you teach teachers, your good friend is very meaningful for me. And one of the reasons is meaningful for me is that as a teacher, or as a practitioner, I'm still practicing, at least trying to the best I can. And I don't feel like I've completed or finished my practice the lots to do. And so for me when I hear it, I'm the teacher. I'm one of the primary teachers here at IMC. But I also feel very strongly that I'm practicing with you all here. And this is a very important field for me to do my practice in. And in my encounters with many of you are mirrors for me are places where I can see myself better places where I can cultivate myself and variety of different is very important arena for my practice. And, and also I see many things I saw when I was a new student and I see in many of you I'm inspired by many of you to feel your dedication and inspiration and practice is meaningful for me supports me. So the idea of of being, being a teacher as a good friend

makes fret makes a lot of sense to me because we're all friends. You know, you're my friend, you're my good friends. I'm hopefully a good friend to you. And so we're all in it together, practicing together. And the idea that we're, we're practicing together that we're a community of people connected to each other is a very important part of how this whole path unfolds. So what I like to do is so here at IMC we've set it up here, hopefully, so that I MC can work for People with many different interests, needs and personalities. Hopefully, it's casual enough, easy enough to come and go, that, that people who like to be anonymous, who maybe don't want to talk to anyone, they get enough of that somewhere else maybe. And they find it really meaningful and valuable to sit in the back. Those of you in the back there don't want to be singled out. And, and, and have a place to come where you can be with other people and don't have to interact and talk that there's a place where it's safe to do that and comfortable to do that. And other people who like to be much more in conversation and talking with people and involved in community in a more intimate way. Also can happen here. And the whole range can happen here. And at different times in people's practice. They're different, we go through different phases, and their phases that are more

inward perhaps in a little very little context. Other people and other times where it's very outward where the primary area of practice and growth is in community. So really obvious that way, and people are involved and doing things together with others. So I hope that here at IMC were set up to be this whole wide range for many different people in different ways. And one of the reasons we're this way is because we're an urban meditation center, and an urban setting. There's so many different needs and situations that people find themselves in that I think it's very important to be able to provide a home or a refuge or a practice place for all the different kinds of people that you know, find ourselves in this urban setting. Having said that, I would like to also encourage all of you who have a Buddhist practice or meditation practice, mindfulness practice, that you consider

Developing or strengthening or establishing at least a few, at least one couple are really good, on good basis and friendships with people who share the practice you're doing, who share the values, and the practices that somehow are connected to doing this practice here. So you have someone else you can go talk to or share with or something. I read recently that in the United States, the number of friends that people have, as in the last 25 years has been decreasing. The average number of friends that people have, that's the kind of direction it's going, except on Facebook. And the, and I think it's a sad thing. Maybe it's a symptom of something that's a little bit off in our society and having friends and establishing friends, for some people, it's very hard and it's not an easy thing to do. But it, it takes some effort. It takes some willingness to show up and make the effort to connect. And so I would like to encourage you, those of you who are interested in this meditation path, to really think carefully and about how having friendships know how being more connected to others who are practicing, might be supportive and helpful for you, and that you've kind of do something to help establish those. It doesn't have to be here at IMC, it can be elsewhere with other people. It doesn't have to even be with fellow Buddhists. You know, there are lots of lots of spiritually mature people in the world who are not Buddhist. And so it's good to kind of find someone you feel some kinship with, that you can feel you can share this part of yourself and then get support when supports needed. Have the rug pulled from under you when that's needed and be challenged. Be mirrored be affirmed and be inspired and be delighted. So they will all be friends to each other. Thank you