

2010-09-13 Humility

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SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

Good evening, everyone. And I thought of continuing somewhat the topic of the last two Monday's last two Monday's I've taken it particular approach to exploring the Buddhist attitude teachings around self and not self. And mostly avoiding the philosophical ideas around self and not self the Buddhist tradition has, because I don't think they're that important generally those philosophical perspectives but rather looking at the more psychological aspects of this issue, meaning that in the way that psychologically or mentally, we are active participants in creating our sense of self Our sense of identity and, and it's very interesting to look at our participation in this phenomenon rather than taking it as a given that I am this, whatever it might be, is to look at the way it's formed both as our sit by ourselves but also by our society or culture. There's a lot of factors that go into play. And a lot of what we think of as the self is a is a condition phenomena constructed phenomena is a fabricated phenomena. We're involved with activities of the mind. And, and I thought today to explore this again in a little different way. And that is to try to have some exploration with you. I'll talk for a while on on the on the virtue of humility. And it's a it seems like a dangerous thing. To talk about who am I to talk about humility? And, and who am I mean, you know, my, but if I say I'm, you know, I'm not really worthy of talking about humility. That doesn't seem like quite right either. Thanks seems like I'm kind of stuck, you know, I'm just gonna start talking without thinking about it. But I think it's a very interesting topic, being humble or sincere humility, some, some places is considered to be a virtue, to have that. And I know for me that I've encountered people who there's a very beautiful quality of humility or humbleness. That has inspired me quite a bit. It's been very meaningful for me, and it helps me kind of become more empty or cleaner, or kind of more lighter. In that I in seeing those examples. I feel like them And less likely because they're so focused on my own self conceit my self preoccupation my self consciousness. There's certainly the word humility sometimes associated or being humble with feeling being inferior. And apparently the Latin root for the word humble comes from the word. First word refer. One of meanings it means to be low lowly, but apparently before that, earlier than that, even in Latin, they meant the ground. And so people who are close to the ground are the people you know the peasants, you know, the low people. But some people you know, turn that around, that's like, word, vomit humus come as same routine Latin. And, and some people turn around and say, which is a beautiful quality to be of the earth. To be kind of close to nature. We even use the word grounded in a positive way. So I'm inspired, I've been inspired by it. I've also been quite dismayed by people who have a very strong self deprecating attitude towards themselves, where they really feel like they're, if you're really upset or angry or, or hostile towards themselves, because they feel like they're unworthy, they feel like they're not as good as other people. And, and it can be very painful as a tremendous source of personal pain to carry that kind of attitude. And it's even worse when people other people kind of insist you're that way too. They participate. They help you out. You know, you're no good. And we sometimes in our societies and societies in general, we do it to whole other segments of society.

And it's been pointed out There's a kind of even more healthy attitude of humility is very closely akin to many religions to being religious. And that people feel humble in relationship to what they consider to be sacred. It's not uncommon for people to get down on the knees in front of the altar or something. But then it can be overdone is this kind of a joke? Maybe you've heard of, I'll put it in Buddhist terms. There was a Buddhist teacher who was sitting meditating in front of the altar and the Buddha and exclaimed, I'm nobody, nobody. And so then someone else there, you know, another monastic, something said, me too. I'm nobody. I'm nobody. Nice and so then the janitor heard them. The janitor came over and said, I'm nobody, I'm nobody. And then the teacher said to the other person, look who thinks he's nobody

for all humility. And it's a degree to which humility humbleness is a virtue. It's a very strange virtue. Because it's not something you can very easily cultivate directly. It's sometimes been said to be very lonely virtue, because a humble virtue, you know, humbleness is humble, because it can't kind of claim itself Look how good I am. Look how humble I am soon as you say, Look humble I am that's kind of like doesn't work. And so you kind of like how do you see if it's a virtue and you can't claim it. You know, you've kind of like stuck Well, what am I supposed to do? One of the things you can do, which I think is more than the approach of certainly mindfulness of Vipassana is we don't try to be humble. We don't try to be have humility. As a thing. It's another construction activity we do. But we try to understand one of the things we have to do is all the ways in which we're conceited. All the ways in which we're arrogant or we're caught up in sense of self. And to really understand that well, and to see through it, to learn not no longer believe it or to or if we believe it, or if some are caught in it, maybe start not taking it so seriously or realize the limitations of that or the falsity of that. And that just kind of kind of seeing through the conceit and arrogance is you know, if you see through especially be let go What are you left with Maybe in other person's eyes, you appear to be humble. But you don't need to think that way. Because you don't care, right? You just work through this painful thing of contraction around self. And so then you don't need to have hold that sense of self anymore. But you don't have to replace it with being now a humble person. You're not gonna be anything. One definition of humility or humbleness that I really liked, is to no longer compare yourself to anybody. So in the United, you know, to be humble, you even don't even compare yourself as you're worse than anybody who does not play the game of being somebody better or worse than anything. There's a Calvin and Hobbes cartoon where Calvin stands on top of a big hill, stairs. They're proud and strong. And he says to everybody through here, I guess I am significant. And then I guess As I remember that cartoon, I guess something like the pan out. And you see that on top of that you standing on this hill, but he's standing on the hill underneath the huge night sky, stars and everything just meant immensity of the sky, and he's looking up. And then he says, in a very small voice, says, the dust mote know who are we to hold ourselves to proud and too powerful and too significant is the kind of conceit but to kind of kind of to dismiss ourselves entirely just dust mote is kind of that's also a kind of conceit. conceit that we're inferior. And this has been one of the great challenges. And I think that Buddhist teachings gives us is around this idea of conceit is that being considering yourself less than others is a form of conceit. And the alternative of not feeling superior is not to feel inferior. That's not a good humility. To have, but rather not to be involved in comparisons. And then there's a very interesting teaching. I don't know if it's completely true, but certainly interesting to to consider whether this is true for you some of us teaching is that if you're shy, the shy or you are the more conceited you're What do you think of that? That's not what we think right? Someone who's shy maybe kind of doesn't feel very surface like shy doesn't have a very strong sense of self. so afraid kind of pulls back needs to be stronger. No, but, but to be to be shy is to operate around. A concern for self image self preference, how you're presented to others how others see you and shyness has a lot to do. With a sense of self, and how much we're caught and concerned with that sense of self, and the straw, and if that sense of self is very strong one form it can take is extreme shyness. It can take other forms as well, it can take extreme arrogance, for example, but, but it's still at the root this kind of concern myself.

And to be humble, is not to be shy. I don't think a humble, beautifully humble person wouldn't be shy, just that because that's playing that self thing, self game again. So how do we work through that? I think we look through it but being very mindful of it being very present, not believing it not reacting to it, not judging it, but looking very directly at the shyness, learning how to be present for it, so that it doesn't run us but we're in charge of it towards it differently. So we're not being pushed around by our shyness and believing it, but we can look it right in the face and say, I see You This is how it is, or anything arrogance, or any kind of sense of self, to be able to turn around and look at it and recognize it, not be embarrassed by it, not be angry with it, not believe it, but also not dismiss it. Just look at it clearly. Because it's very interesting to look at some sense of self, some self construct that arises that we live by, to turn around and look at it. If you look at it, the one who's looking is not it. So if the one is looking is not it, because you can look at it and what's left, who are you who's Looker? And then in Buddhism, if you look, if you look at the Looker, you turn that around and look at the what's looking. You won't see yourself there. You won't see anything that makes sense to call. This is who I am. They're just looking and we make this a world of difference between Looking and being the Looker. And if so tempted to keep looking. So in Buddhism, we keep looking and looking and looking. And we see what's really there. If you look clearly enough and steady enough and honest enough, it doesn't make any sense to kind of, be believe or be caught or, or be weighed down by the ideas of self that we carry with us to be contracted around it. And so then we don't have to make comparisons we can just be and so we find in many spiritual circles, meditative circles, has tremendous emphasis on the value of just being just being up being anything just being sent to being this way we don't want to add on to ourselves need to be successful, or the idea that we're failure or to be kind or that we have to be a kind person or angry person or, you know, all these ideas we have and where did we drop all the ideas and just be very powerful. The Buddha in the few times where he referred to himself, and kind of in a more absolute way or clear way, he called himself he didn't he didn't even call himself a person. He just would call himself such. I'm such, I'm thus the, this title was the target of Tata means Deus or such. And a God that means the one who has come, the one who has come thus, that's pretty vague. doesn't tell us much at all, you know. Now I don't know that, you know, that doesn't help you understand who the Buddha is. But maybe the external internal experience of someone like the Buddha is not to fix Anything is being a reference for this is who I am. They are awareness can be free our sense of presence. Can doesn't need to have the Buddhist ideas doesn't have to hold the flag could see too. So this is in Buddhism, the image in Buddhism is you hold up a flag and wave a flag here I am, look at me. There's no flag, there's no concept of No idea. And the beautiful thing is, I think to experience in something like meditation is the experience of being present, being alive, being energized or being just where, and that awareness doesn't have to be associated with any ideas, does not associated with the concepts doesn't have to be associated with before and after, doesn't have to be associated with proving oneself or apologizing for oneself. It doesn't have to do anything. So it's just to be and And then there could be protests, you know, there's no monetary value and just being you know, there, there's no usual things that we want in our society that society champions not much is found and just being you know, you got to be someone can have a lot of friends on Facebook or something.

So humility. So what is humility? So I said one way to kind of healthy approach humility is to understand all the things that stand in the way or the conceits that we have and see through them. Another way is to begin understanding more clearly, the limitations of the human being. We're all limited. You know, we can't understand everything. We don't have infinite powers. You know, it's I think it's quite significant that we use the English word mortal. for human beings, mortal means that we're mortal. Mortal means that we're going to die. Apparently the ancients and the Romans and the Greeks used, I guess Romans use that word to differentiate, those of us who die for those of us who did the gods who never die. That's, that's what distinguishes us. But anyway, we're mortal. And, and there's a certain kind of healthy

humility, I think, to realize our mortality to realize, you know, the limitations of our capacity of our knowledge of our everything. And sometimes it's a great disservice to one's when does a great disservice to oneself by being too successful and capable. Because sometimes, if you're too capable, you can get carried along for a long time with the illusion the idea that you're all powerful or capable and better than everyone else, and just can do something. So there's a story of this aristocrat who came to the monastery, young man capable, successful, well educated, everything he turned his attention to He was succeeded into why quite easily. And he decided to become a monk came to the monastery. And first day the abbot said, Why do you want to come here be a monk. And he said, in order to take art and the full glory and power of the Dharma so they said, Well, just be careful what you ask for. So he sat down to meditate in the first day in the monastery and I'm capable, I'm just I'm sure I can figure this out well and apply myself I'm diligent and disciplined. And so he really sat down and sure enough, he was capable and cup guy quite capable, focus his mind quite well. And he got very concentrated very quickly. And then you could feel this Tremendous focus like magnifying glass in the sun and heat the rising and this is it I'm getting there the thing I knew I could do this and then within a few minutes, he just spontaneously combusted in all there was left was ashes is Christian. And then, as the stories go, there was a peasant son of peasant son who decided to join the monastery same time and the abbot asked him, you know what, why are you here? What do you want? Oh, I want to see the Dharma. In the food I eat the work I do. In the face of the people I meet. In the habit system, please enter the monastery and He went to the monastery and look for the Dharma and try to find the Dharma no ordinary ordinariness of everyday life everyday life. And he lived in the monastery for a long time very happy. monastic life worked well for him. So what do you want to attain the full glory and power of the Dharma as quickly as your capable self can? Or is there some kind of way in which being humble makes the practice more more successful even? Not being so proud and conceited? Think it is something I'm gonna do as quickly as I can. There's a beautiful story, I think of moving story of the Dalai Lama. I think it was in a conference in Arizona many years ago. Someone stood up in our big hall people and said, How can get enlightened as quickly as possible. And as the story is told and Darla stood silent for a long time, so that question is kind of hung over this you know, Rome 1000 people or more. And then it as it was told, at some point the Dalai Lama start to cry, started to tear and then he said something about how

I don't know exactly what he said anymore. But he said something about how unfortunate that attitude was. You know, how could it be as to to attain life and as quickly as you can to kind of arrogance or that kind of conceit it's about me. So the others monastic story of the first he came to the monastery and said, I'm kicking ball. If I work hard, how long will it take to get enlightened habits said 10 years Then the person said well, if I really applied myself hard How long will it take? How in that case 20 years

and for the person that asked what if I did what if I don't try so hard? But instead, I'm really honest about my self. conceit, ideas identifications. What then then probably the abbot would say, oh then probably a few months. Something

It's so easy. You know, if we look at the philosophical view of self, that's people want to defend it during the study of self. But if we kind of could look and see how, whatever sense of self we have ideas of self, how quickly it's a magnet for attachments as magnets are very powerful feelings and emotions of fear, and desire and hatred, all arise out of the sense of self. And if the path to freedom from fear the path of freedom from greed, path of freedom from hate, is to let go of those things is to soften the grip of those things. It helps a lot if we understand how this idea of self is part and parcel of the grip being the holding. And I think part of the value of humility is to help with releasing that grip of self on us. So we get so caught up in ourselves and I think we take ourselves so important. We are important For sure. Everyone's important, really important, and we shouldn't take ourselves so important. I think there's a

difference between. So you know the word humility, this is connected to being humiliated. humiliated is a terrible thing that happened to you. But that's something that's being done. You do, something's being done to you. Or you can humiliate yourself I guess, do something to yourself, being humble. I mean here humility.

Not something anybody does to us. I don't think you can make yourself humble. But you can make yourself honest. A great definition for humility that I read humility occurs when the love of truth is greater than the love of self. Humility is when the love of truth is greater than the love of self.

So we have about 15 minutes. And what I'd wanted to do what it was, the intention here this evening was to say some words about humility, humbleness, to try to stimulate some exploration from all of us hear through your thoughts about the topic and certainly you're welcome to ask me questions, but I'm myself I'm much more interesting to hear my perspective thoughts, concerns, reflections experiences you've had with this scientists The idea of humility humbleness, so you can add, we can help you can help today to build an A Dharma talk. Anybody want to say something? And if no one does it, they simply call it some people. We don't want you know, please don't go false. You may hear me speak up.

The back. Wait for the mic, please.

Hello. I think I can understand what arrogance is. And I think Humility as being sort of the opposite of the lack of arrogance. And somehow I can hang on to that much better. arrogance comes from comparing yourself to other people and finding yourself superior.

Whatever reason, due to a lack of arrogance, it's

lack of arrogance. And then you know,

I wonder if the lack of arrogance, though is the opposite of arrogance. Because, you know, the opposite of arrogance may be is self the basement or something, you know, the other other extreme and maybe,

but if you think of humility as being the opposite of

it seemed to me we got on a slippery slope when we were trying to say, what is humility? Is it the basement of oneself thinking at once Self is inferior of everybody else. to everybody else, or and then all these funny questions about people making invidious comparisons with each other about their

degree of their humility

was, I don't know it just it just

it it kind of dissolves the idea of humility. arrogance seems

concrete.

Great. I think it's your your I think what you're saying is great. And that's why I said earlier that, you know, they're one of the one of the plate ways of becoming humble and a healthy way is not to become humble, but rather to look at to be honest about and to work through the conceit, the arrogance that is there, and then let what happen when that drops away. Let it be what it is and someone else might

associate that with, you know, that person is humble. But it wouldn't occur to you to think of yourself humble.

As one who has been called arrogant, most of my life

I've had a variety of different experiences with

you know, I've had situations in my life where I was sort of, like a big shot, and I treated people poorly. And then I was confronted and humiliated and positioned. And those are very powerful experiences because I said, Wow, I was really, you know, way out of line, but I was so lost in my own delusion, my own experience or my own self, you know, the sense of self The self preoccupation that it was destructive to the people around me. And you know, the community at the time I got positioned and humiliated. And I was thinking about this practice. And it's a practice that you really, it's humbling you, no matter who you think you are, at some point, you hit that place where you just go, Wow, I can't do this. I'm just gonna. And for me, personally, that's been one of the really powerful things about this practice for me because I just sort of run in that way I run, I can do anything, you know, and, but I can't, I can't not, you know, escape this experience that Cisco like it's going to consume overwhelm me on some level and I fail You know, a lot all the time in this practice and I go, Oh, okay. That's it. You know, and it's just, it's one of the great things about this practice for me, because I'm not harming people nearly as much as I used to my my activity because I'm able to take this practice and come up against that, in some ways. on your own. Yeah, in a sense, I mean, that's kind of one of the things that I've learned to navigate and when gauge and say, Oh, you know, I think I can sit through this. I don't think I can. I think I'm gonna, you know,

let it humbled me. Yes.

It's great. And here's a so here's a kind of building on Richard set, Richard said is interesting statement. That first I'll say and then maybe I'll explain it more that this you know, Buddhist meditation practice is is designed so you can have a lot of experience with failing. What do you think of that? Why would you want to do that, but we're going to do something to get you to fail. I explain it is that is that if we see the sense of self, to be a construct, that's actively, we're actively reinforcing, living making occur. The mind is agitated mind is busy doing. And as long as the mind is doing and active, it can't really be at peace. So as the mind gets more peaceful and calm, at some point, what limits further calm is our sense of self. I'm the one who can do this or whatever it is. And so then, our attempts to keep trying to meditate are then limited and blocked. By the how strong our attachments are yourself. And so when you're up against that wall, I can't do it, I can't do it. Something has to give the walls not going to give. There is no wall so it's not going to give. But, but so at some point, you have to fail. And in the failure, you realize I can't do this. And I've had many situations in meditation where I finally realized I can't do this. That's when the meditation began. So I had to fail. But I didn't want to fail me, I went kicking and screaming and you know, you know, wasn't gonna give up that easily. And now, those of you who are blessed with no detachment to self whatsoever, and you don't bring any of that to bear when you meditate, of course meditation, just a breeze you can sit down and kind of cruise right into Nirvana. But for everyone else, it's okay to fail. And in fact, I like to say that meditation practice begins when you failed. And many of us are perfectionist and to feel like you know, and because when you fail, there's a number of things that can happen. One is you can be really honest and see what's going on. And, and that's the interesting time to start looking. So don't be afraid of failing meditation. It's one of the good places to fail. I saw a hand in the back there.

So the reason I started coming here was feeling kind of suffering lately. Can't get

closer. Is that a green light? Can you hear me back? Yeah.

So the reason I started coming here was I'm you know, suffering a lot lately. And I'm trying to find some way to ease my suffering. So this lesson is a little bit weird or difficult for me to understand since I really motivated to come here so I can ease my suffering. Yet, you say that, you know, you know, if you're really motivated and you're really focused and you try really hard that's going to take longer.

I'm kind of stuck.

So yeah, it's a thank you for asking the question because I think it warrants some clarification. I think that the abbot invited that person to come in to be a monk, which is not an easy it requires giving yourself completely over to that practice, since it was sincerity and dedication, and it's not for the lazy so you have to kind of engage yourself But how you engage yourself in the attitude you have is really important. So if you do if you, if you if you give you give yourself over completely, really apply yourself completely, and you're arrogant. Or if you can see it or it's all about me, I'm going to be the best meditator on my block. There's a lot of things that can be ambition, or greed, or the opposite there can be, I'm going to really do this, but I can't really do it's impossible for me to do it. I'm not good enough. There's all these ways we limit ourselves. And one of the important things to do is to look at the various ways in which we limit our efforts and shortchange and short circuit our efforts. There's nothing wrong with making a lot of effort. It's how we make it the attitude with which we do it. So some, some people who suffer a lot. I don't think that makes sense is to engage in the practice nothing else anymore makes any sense. And it's a beautiful thing to plunge into the practice, give it Give yourself over to it completely. And you know, if you If you're a weekend, Buddhist, you know, like, what's called a nightstand Buddhist. It's a lot of nightstand Buddhists, you know. And, you know, this makes a lot of sense. They read a lot of books. And that this is great. I'm gonna do this. This is fantastic. Let's go to the bookstore tomorrow, get another book. You know, it's it's valuable to read books, but you know, yeah, at some point you have to actually do it. So I don't want to discourage you from giving it giving it your all. But as you give it your all you will encounter, invariably, you'll encounter limitations of some of the attitudes that come along with giving it your all. And you'll find that you'll see the limitation the problems that come and then you don't give up when you see those limitations. You try to adjust the attitudes try to find how is it more useful way to hold this and how to hold it more likely how to hold yourself more likely. Not be noticed, for example, not have too many expectations or demands. It has to be your magical thinking or, or believing that's, you know, there's a lot of things that can happen that we explore and develop as we do this. So is this addressing your concern? You feel Are you are you still feel like you came to the wrong place tonight?

I don't feel I came to the wrong place. It's just not very easy to understand. Okay. So I

hope I hope I clarified a little bit and, and it's sometimes sometimes it's okay not to understand well, something because one of the things I was trying to do tonight was not so much maybe it wasn't obvious, but not so much tell you something but rather provoke you into thinking about something more deeply. I was hoping you would think more deeply on this topic. So maybe that's done that for you.

So Sofia, okay, I

just want to say something really quickly, because we're almost out of time. But the thing that came to me Oh, I keep you with this thing away is one of my Ministers' he gave a title of a sermon. And that kind

of stuck with me. So just the title of the sermon is enough to make, you know, this whole thing and his title was he who feels punctured, must have been a bubble.

Think about it.

That's great. Don't puff yourself up. So one more Okay, we still have two minutes so

okay, I'm listening to you not being shy sign. Not to be shy. I experienced mltss Something that does not have an opposite. Because the more moment

you're aware of that you

that you have humility, you know, do you lost it? So there is no stepping outside of it. So I don't really think it has an opposite. So

nice. Yeah, so humility is like one of those things. It's like, you know, you know, you it's kind of like trying to touch your right elbow with your right hand. can't quite reach it in terms of being you know, not you know, identifying I'm humbler. I don't think it's something we should be concerned too much about. being humble. But I think it's a it's a, I think it changes the inner landscape changes our hearts when we appreciate the beauty of it or the value of it. Because, you know, as I started the talk, you know, I've been very inspired by Another people who maybe they didn't think themselves sample at all, but I was inspired what I saw. And so they appreciate the beauty of it maybe changes something inside of us. And maybe maybe the point isn't trying to be humble. The point is to be honest.

So, I hope this gave you something to think about. And, and, and talk about, I hope that during the week, you go back to your communities and bring up bring this topic up with other people and see what what it provokes and what kind of reflections that brings that brings to you. So, thank you. So, next week, I won't be here. Next week, Westminster is going to come and give the talk. He's a spirit rock teacher. Wonderful, man. And then I'll be back, probably looking back in two weeks. And if and if it's okay with you, I think what I'll do is just keep talking about this issue of self and a different angle. I think it's interesting one. And so in the meantime, I hope you have great practice. Thank you.