

# 2011-01-10 Retreats As Sanctuary

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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## SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

Good evening, everyone. And so the other little announcement is that for those of you who don't know, we've changed the schedule for the rest of the evening a little bit, in that I will give a shorter talk than usual. And so I'll talk for about, I suppose for about 20 minutes, 25 minutes, and then we'll take a little break for those of you who want to go home. And, and then some of you might want to stay because then from about 8:45 to 9:15. We're going to have a little bit of a community meeting, where I'm going to talk a little bit about IMC is as contracted by a retreat center or buyer, a property that we're going to turn into a retreat center for so we can all stay here we're not going anywhere, but we're having an additional place where we can do residential retreats. And so many people are interested, we were interested in letting people know who are interested in what we're doing. It's a big step for our community. So we'll have a little bit of a community meeting to discuss that and presented for half an hour. So that's what the what we're planning here today. So since we are going to talk about this retreat center, I thought I would talk about retreat centers and Dharma talk as well. In the last few years, in my mind, I've been thinking about retreat centers, as sanctuaries. And a sanctuary is a place that has a number of associations. I suppose its associates and something that's sacred place that's sacred. I also think of it as a place that's safe. Like if you go for sanctuary, sometimes you went to sanctuary in the church and then your enemies couldn't get you as long as you're inside you No even the state couldn't get you once you're safe in this inside the church is a sanctuary it's a place of refuge. And it's also the word refuge and sanctuary are sometimes they're used seemingly synonymous in the world of nature preservation. There's a you know, wilderness sanctuaries, this wilderness refuges, bird sanctuaries, bird refuges, I think they mean my mind almost the same thing. So, a place of safety where one of especially in nature, you want to preserve something which you considered at a treasure, something, you know, natural treasures, something very special, something Perhaps that is endangered. And, and so when things are in danger, you want to protect it and you want to create a place that's safe, that's sacred, that it honors respect something that is considered very important. And so, in our tradition, we call it we have the word retreat center or the phrase Retreat Center. Traditionally, Buddhism they have the term vihara, which meant a dwelling Place a place where it usually refers to where monks and nuns live. And sometimes we use the word monastery, but it's tends to be associated with monks and nuns. And here in the modern West, our tradition has number of retreat centers that are sometimes monks and nuns will come and practice their teach there. But it's mostly meant for people who are not monks and nuns and so called laypeople. And, and so and so we don't use the word monastery, we tend not we tend not to use the word temple. Because a temple I don't know what it exactly implies, but a temple implies more of a place where the congregation comes to visit like for their Sabbath or for their, their Sunday morning or something. So sometimes, you know, I kind of think you know, IMC hears more functioning as a Buddhist temple and the monastery or more as a temple than as a retreat center. But we tend not to use the word because a few of us kind of don't like religion that much at least you know

the history of you know, or whatever, you know going to that part and but so it's kind of strange that I'm in this occupation.

So here I am and so you know words like temple a little bit kind of to religious. So we say this, you know, kind of neutral term retreat center, but lately in my mind the idea of sanctuary I like a lot. And I think that just as you would have an A nature sanctuary that preserves some especial you have mine secretaries or heart sanctuaries that provide a special place where something that is very hard, something that's in danger. It's something that's easily easily covered over or lost in the frenzy of everyday life has a chance to flower and grow and be preserved. And, and I think that the good hearts, people's good hearts, spiritual hearts, awakened hearts, free hearts. Hearts of compassion are a phenomenally beautiful, natural event that deserve national recognition. And just like John Muir got started the National Park Service, I think that Obama should start the national national would be equivalent national mind mind service. And we would create these special places and in our country that would be places for the heart or the mind to go. And I suppose that's what churches and temples and things like that are for anyway, we have lots of them in this country. But retreat centers are quite special, I believe, because they're really meant to be a place that are quite distinct. From how life is normally lived, and so it's a chance to step out of the normal flow of everyday life. Now, some people protest and say what's wrong with daily life. And those Buddhists, you know, they always had this duality between this world and some other world and they read, you know, and but and there is a kind of duality distinction made in Buddhism between what's sometimes called the worldly life. And sometimes it's called more of the spiritual life and liberated life or the higher life. And some people are uncomfortable with that duality, that distinction, because it's very easy then to kind of denigrate ordinary worldly life. However, if we look at the so called ordinary Rule of Life, some of it is not so ideal. Some of it's quite painful and difficult for people. Spirit rock, some years ago I received a letter from someone who had been spared rockers retreat center where I teach up in Rowan County. And we received a letter from a woman who had been on retreat some months earlier. And she expressed her gratitude for coming on retreat. And she said that it was the first time in her life where she felt safe in a place that somehow in her life maybe grew up in her fit in our family in our communities, that she had no safety. And only it was so safe she was kind of impressed that even that no one should feel safe there. But she felt safe enough not to lock your door because your doors a spare rocker not locked. So people sleep in these residential halls. You know, then it's there and they're unlocked really. And people feel safe. People walk in the mountains and hills there and feel safe walking in the hills. Not all people feel safe even walking in nature. Some places are dangerous for people and I thought it was great. remarkable that someone that spirit rock could offer this service to a person who'd grown up and live the life of feeling not safe and offer a place of safety. So that distinction I'm quite happy to make, going from a place of lack of safety to safety, and a tremendous amount of people in our society live on safely. They feel safe to go out into the neighborhoods after dark or in different situations.

And then it's very hard for the, for some people to step out of the habits of their mind, the strong conditioning of the mind. And there are people who are always for example, busy and doing and doing and doing and maybe trying to survive, trying to get along trying to take care of a family. And then the business and activity of surviving and making do is very hard to check in with oneself to know with one feature to process one's feelings, there are people who have had really terrible tragedies happen to them, and great loss and grief. And there's no in ordinary life surviving and working and just getting by without, there's no place to go or no time for them to really process and feel and respect their feelings and so it gets bottled up again but bottled up for years. And so, sanctuary is a place where people can step out of the flow of normal ordinary life and not have to work not have to do not have to and find out what's in the heart. Find out what's going on. And incense let let our life catch up to us. Let us catch up to our life. And it's quite profound. For some people I've known people who have come to retreats

because you know of some dramatic death that they had to cope with. Last retreat I taught. They were two women there, whose husbands had committed suicide. In the last year, and so that this is a sanctuary, where do you go? In a situation like that? Where do you go to be received and nurtured and supported and, and where it's safe to cry and feel and not be kind of feel like you have to kind of pretend or avoid or something. And, and I can tell you, you know, as a teacher, I hear these stories and, and you know, when these events and people come to, you know, I feel so grateful that we have such places where people in great need, can come and be held and received and be witnessed and, and, and feel like they can kind of open up where they feel safe enough where they feel they can lower their guard. The some people have really strong conditioning, for example, addictions. There was one person at the last retreat who was struggling with television addiction. And bright young man, very promising, you know, in college and all kinds of wonderful things opening up for him. But if for some reason he could not stop being on television, he would, he would be working on his work. Next thing you knew he'd spent six hours. It was four o'clock in the morning and he was watching television. And he realized he had a problem. Where do you go when you have an addiction, you go to places where you are the places you go, she goes some places where you're not tempted. And so retreat centers are places where the usual many of the usual sources of addiction are not available. There's no alcohol, there's no television, there's not supposed to be in drugs. And, and so, people it's a fantastic sanctuary, very important for some people to have a place to go, where they're not caught up in it. There are messages that come through our society, but what's really important and And I think most of us know that some of the messages coming through the media and the advertisements and popular culture are not necessarily so wholesome, especially in the dosages which they want us to live by. And so consumerism shop until you drop. And so there's, you know, some people feel like they have to have, and I can see it in my young children. You know, they get, you know, this tremendous pressure from peers and society and from everywhere to acquire and have the latest and greatest. And it's quite something to be a parent and it's always been this way, but I guess quite something to, you know, to feel that, you know, you know, I get pressure not mean for my son and I'm gonna ruin his life. If he doesn't get it, the and so there's all these messages of stuff. Success and what it means to be successful. And some people buy into it. I remember once, many years ago, I met a man in Los Angeles, a therapist, who was a I forget to be calm system like they wasn't this but an economic therapist or something like that. And what his specialty was, was his specialty was being a therapist for really wealthy people who didn't feel like they had enough money.

And were anxious and upset, immediate people have millions of dollars. We felt like they were really worried they didn't have enough money, they couldn't survive. And so he he met them and so you know, was trying to help them through that, those difficulties. And so, anyway, so there's popular culture, the message of success, and some people buy into them and all the different ways and it's really healthy for some people, to see it as an alternative and to step it up. Have the popular mode or think life as usual, and step out of and see that there can be other values or other ways of living, even if it's just temporary, temporarily step aside. So we can get a breather and look fresh and look deeply at what goes on. Some people, their life is so busy, that they can't, it's really hard to be in discernment, to really look deeply and see what do I really want to do with this life? What do I really want to do with some important decision. And so sometimes it's helpful to step out of life and equip place that's quiet and peaceful, where you're really with yourself, so you can really see and what's goes on. And others another reason I like to call it a sanctuary is that the capacities that the potential that he resides in our mind in a heart, some of them are really beautiful. And some of the most I think, I believe that that the most beautiful thing in the universe that I know that I've encountered, is found in your own heart and your own mind. When I was I went to Asia to practice in 1980. What was it 84, 85. And I went to I was there for a few months, and I had a girlfriend and so she came to join me there to practice with practice. Also, before she came, we were I was in Nepal in Kathmandu, waiting for a retreat with U Pandita to

start to know what you know, which is a few days to wander around Kathmandu. And, and I saw this and he was like, these Buddhist icon and Tonka painting Buddhist kind of stores in Kathmandu with you know, with Windows you walk by and you do window shopping, you see those Buddhist statues and Tonka's and paintings and books and all this stuff. And so I was walking around Kathmandu and I was one store I saw that had a Buddha statue, maybe about 10 inches tall. That really spoke to me just like, you know, boom, that's, you know, it's like, Wow, that's a powerful statue that really resonates with me. And I don't know how much it was maybe like \$100 which was a lot of money for a person had only 300. And that's all I had, you know, my whole life. I mean, right at that point that was that I've gone to Asia to practice for the duration. I mean, it was I had no plans of going back, I was just there to practice wherever long practice took and I find \$300 and, and so I had plane tickets to get back to Bangkok and different things, but I had and so that, you know, wow, it's \$100 that two third of my wealth and what am I gonna do about the statue? So I would walk back and forth, you don't walk around, go back and look at the window and what should I do and so then I got this message that my girlfriend unexpectedly wasn't planned, was on a plane to meet me. in Qatar Do come practice. And I knew that she had less money than me. So I said, What do I do? And I decided that as beautiful and touching as the statue was, what was more touching more beautiful resides in the heart, in the mind. So I thought I'll save that money and use it to save more money on her. I'll use it to help her so she could stay longer in practice. I thought that was a nice story. Now I look back at it. So you know, tremendous beauty. I believe still to this day, the most beautiful thing that to be seen to be gauged and to experience is found in mazon heart and it was a moment in her life and the experiences of great love and compassion, of purity, the experience of freedom and liberation awakening, the peace, experience of great insight in wisdom and understanding, some of the most beautiful qualities that we cherish and people flow out of the heart, the mind flow out of out of these beautiful qualities that can be developed and grown inside.

And these these qualities are not easy to develop to their full potential in a busy harried frenzied life doing a lot of different things like we feel feel afraid, like we were on boarded and pulled into all kinds of popular culture and ideas and, you know, we're distracted from ourselves. We're so distracted, we don't even know where they're stuck. It's hard. And so it's really amazingly important I feel, to have a place where that our sanctuaries we go and we can really step out of life this is usually lived, and then see that life in fresh eyes and to see ourselves in new ways to allow something new to happen and grow and develop within us. And then if we do that then we can come back to the world we're left behind. And then we can drop the duality. First there's a mountain, then there's no mountain. And there's the mountain, the Zen saying that, first you live the life of everyday life, then you leave it and drop all the concepts and all the ideas of ordinary life, special life, all the ideas of a sanctuary sanctuary, a place where you forget about sanctuaries. You drop even that distinction, and an experience something very profound, a life of awakening that's not marred by concepts, ideas. But then you can come back to your ordinary worldly life and live it in a different way. Hopefully, you live it without attachments and clinging and fear, greed and hate. You can come back and see it through different eyes and see it with a certain kind of purity, certain kind of from different perspective, where we can engage in that so called war Life, but without greed, without hate, without fear. And if you can do that if you live without greed, hate and fear, then there's no need for sanctuaries, then there's no need for that duality or distinction between, you know, you know, what is it like to be a kind of a secular place so called sanctuary where ordinary life worldly life and a sanctuary. But that distinction is very useful. When we're suffering when we're caught up and lost and struggling, then it's useful to have a place to come and go. My hope is that when people who do practice whether it's on retreat or not discover these beautiful qualities in their heart, discover freedom, awakening, and then they can come back and offer that to the world, or as in the Zen tradition says, Come back to the marketplace with gift bestowing hands You know not to stay at the retreat, but with hands that can offer support the world that we have. So I think it's a you know, I'm, I'm a great champion for the National retreat center service that we should write our congresspeople to start, and there should be a retreat center and every county sponsored by our tax money. That's

radical, right? Boy, oh boy. But I think that it would be extremely cost effective. I think our need for a lot of public services would drop dramatically. If, if more people in our society could touch into the beauty and, and have their own hearts and these these great values that come along. So I'm very excited. The looks like IMC might have the chance to create a retreat center. And, and it gives us a chance to do a lot of a lot of this and create a place for our society. And I think it's been, I'm hoping it'll be one of the great kind of gifts that are our generation, give to the next generation and to the next generation after that, to establish a place where generation of generation people can come and touch into these beautiful qualities and, and practice in a deep way, and then come back and bring that back to our society. So those are my thoughts. I hope those are okay. And those of you who'd like to go home which is quite reasonable thing to want to do. When we take it to a three minute break goes from your most standard stretch, if you wish, and then if you want to stay for the rest, please stay and we'll I'll talk in detail what we're about to do.