

2011-04-03 The Ordinary Nature of Buddhist Practice

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SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

So one of the principles that I believe helps a lot in learning about Buddhism Buddhist practice, is that when you hear some Buddhist teaching, don't assume that it is something esoteric, even if it's seems, seems complex, but rather begin with the assumption that you already know this. And you're already familiar with this in some way in your life. And the first task for you is to discover where in my life Do I already know this? And then once you understand it for yourself that you already do it, then the teaching is not so strange, then the teaching becomes Well, if it's already already doing this doesn't make sense to do it in more areas. Does it make sense to expand the lessons the teachings of this into more areas of my life, and I like to think of Buddhism and Buddhist practice as being irrelevant. ordinary thing to do, though I think going off on a long Silent Retreat is seems strange to some people. But those who do it, it seems like an incredibly non ordinary word, but sane thing to do. One of the most delightful things I know in my life to do is to be on retreat. And so in thinking about the ordinariness of practice, there's a famous Zen koan Zen story from China. And where a monk asks a Zen Master, what is Buddha? In zen, they had this way of asking these short, pithy questions that, you know, we're supposed to get to the heart of the matter quickly. So to ask, you know, it probably was a little more confrontational kind of question, you know, what is Buddha and, and the Zen master or reply is ordinary mind. I think this is a this is kind of a little bit of a shock for many Buddhists to hear, because what is ordinary mine mean? I mean don't isn't that the whole point of Buddhism is to get out of my ordinary mind my ordinary mind is, you know, is a cauldron of suffering, distress and agitation. Can my ordinary mind be Buddha? I mean, what's, how does that work? And so then Zen students down through the ages have grappled with this answer to this question, you know, how, what is it the ordinary mind, how is ordinary mind Buddha, how's that? at all, but one of the things about ordinary mind orden is some things are very ordinary. So it's very ordinary. If you get a splinter in your toe, to not continue walking with a splinter in your toe, but to reach down and pull the splinter out. That's a simply ordinary thing to do. And you don't need Buddhism to tell you that you should pull the splinter out and so Are there forms of suffering that we have, that are the equivalent of a splinter? that are really simple ordinary receipts ordinary to kind of to address these things. So it could be as ordinary as being impatient at line at a supermarket. And the lines going slower than you wished. And you're spending a lot of time scanning up and down the different options of different lines, you can stand in wondering, you know, maybe that lines better. Maybe you even change your lines. It turns out that this time is even slower. And so what do you do, you know, and you could feel the agitation, you can feel the restlessness or the strain maybe of searching and looking and, you know, and then the judgments about the slow teller and, you know, all this stuff goes on. And at some point, you might become aware that this is just another splinter. And you have two options, maybe a lot of options, but two primary ones if you want to buy your things. One is, you could continue to be impatient. Or you could perhaps, accept the line you're in and try to

become try just to let go of your impatience. And perhaps I hope that's all of you have had the occasion of something simple like that, where you decided this is not worth being impatient about. I think I'll let go and just be here in this line and look at the you know, look at the headlines of the National Enquirer are even better, even better. sit there and follow your breath or do some loving kindness for the people in front of you in the line or for the teller but to you know, to let go little bit because it was relatively easy to let go Or in a traffic if you're driving your car. And perhaps you're, you see up ahead the lightest, you know, green, but you don't know if it's gonna stay green. So you feel a little, a little bit of tension, and you begin pushing a little bit faster on the pedal, and you don't really notice it's a little extra strain. But at some point, you realize this is not worth it. Or perhaps the light turns yellow. And that's when you give up you let go. And you Okay, I guess I'll give up my strain of pushing, I'll just stop at the red light, yellow light, and wait for my turn. And it's a very simple kind of letting go. But letting go isn't just letting go of getting someplace through through the intersection. It's also letting go of the impatience or the desire to, you know, be ahead an extra 30 seconds or something. And so that's an ordinary thing. So that ordinary process could be played Inside the Four Noble Truths, which are the kind of the fundamental core teachings of Buddhism, so there is some kind of suffering some, which is a kind of a kind of a vague word encompasses many different things, including strain and stress, despair and a lot of things. But there's some kind of some kind of suffering. And there's a recognition that there's something we're doing that contributes to contributes to it. We're contributing the impatience in the line lines on impatient, you can have a hard time looking for patients in the line, if that's happening in you your contribution to the world at that moment. Or it's your desire to get through an intersection. And that's your contribution, the intersection doesn't care and so, is to understand your contribution. And so Buddhism calls that the, the your contribution to suffering is craving or grasping or a certain kind of driven kind of desire. A desire that's driven or compulsive, and that it's not so easy to let go of, or in the compulsive quality of it, there's some kind of suffering that's there some kind of strain or resistance or something that happens. And so then recognizing that this is not desirable, it's not worth keeping, recognizing that it's possible to let go of our contribution, then there's letting go or the cessation of the clinging and of that suffering. Those are the first three of the four noble truths. meant to be very simple, ordinary kind of things that happens, hopefully, I suspect it happens many times in the course of a day for many of you, that you have some kind of experience that feels not so desirable. It's not, doesn't feel good for you to have it. And that you realize it's something you can do to let go of something and letting go of that your state changes. And, and so many times through the day, the Four Noble Truths. These are the three noble truths, the first three Playing themselves out is something you're familiar with quite a bit. And I don't think you'd get into adulthood. If you hadn't been practicing this a lot. And then you've come to Buddhism, they say, well, the Four Noble Truths and sounds like this big belief system, you know, must be must be much more complicated than it actually is. After all, Buddhism is a great world religion, it must have a very sophisticated body of thinking. I would argue the opposite. It's not so sophisticated at all. It's taking something that's completely ordinary, maybe packaging it a little bit nicer. You know, packaging is a big part of sales right.

After lunch one day, the Abbess and visiting philosophy professor went for a walk along the river that tests by the monastery being a hot day. They eventually sat down to cooled off under the shade of a large tree? The professor asked, I am interested in learning Buddhist philosophy. Could you tell me some of the fundamental doctrines of your religion? Well said they are this, I don't think I can help you much. You see, we don't rely on any philosophy at the monastery. But continued the professor, everyone, consciously or unconsciously, has a philosophy with which to make their make sense of their life and their purpose. It is different than the monastery replied the Ibis, the monastery, we rely on awareness, not doctrines. But insistent professor, you must have a philosophy which explains the importance of being aware. After pausing to consider how best to respond, the abbot said, as we walked along, we were both aware of how hot sweaty and tired we become from our walk. We did not

need a philosophy to tell us the benefits of sitting down here in the shade. If you put your hand on a hot stove, you don't need a philosophy to pull the hand away. If a baby is crying from hunger, the need to feed the child is obvious to the parents. Buddhist practice does not depend on having a set of doctrines or beliefs. Rather, it depends on being aware of what brings release from suffering. Rather than being taught Buddhist philosophy, the monastery the monks and nuns are trained to develop an acutely refined awareness. With such sensitivity, ultimate liberation is as natural as sitting down in the shade on a hot day. So ordinary the task in Buddhism is to take what's ordinary, and you know what we do all the time and make it extraordinary or make it, make it apply it in more and more areas of our life, so that our life is kind of thoroughly influenced Thoroughly practice with these ordinary things. The ordinary, pulling out the thorn in your the splinter in your toe is obvious and perhaps relatively easy at times, but it might not. But what happens when you're up against sickness, old age and death, you go to the doctor, and you suddenly get a diagnosis that you are not expecting. That is, you know, a dire diagnosis. So now you have a really big splinter. And so, you know, you might not have much ability to pull out the illness, but your distress is not necessarily not the illness. Your distress is your contribution to the illness. And so then are you able to turn and see this ordinary phenomena of clinging of grasping of compulsion of what we're holding on to that is a source of the distress. Are you able to do it there? So it's still the ordinary thing, but now, it's an In a much more challenging situation, it's challenging partly because the, the splinter we have or the attachment we have is much more deeply embedded. It's very hard sometimes to see when it's this big existential issues. And so, you know, it's embedded sometimes in the structure personalities, seemingly a structure of our thinking or deep down in the subconscious elements of our mind some of these attachments. And so it's not so you can't even see it, obviously, where you're attached. And so the task is much more difficult to sit quietly or develop the mindfulness to be able to turn inward and find where is the splinter, where is the holding? Where is it that I can make a difference here, so I don't add distress to the challenge that I have. It's not to say they're supposed to go along and just happily, have a dire illness. You're supposed to do something about it. I hope it's right To help make a difference, but it's a lot easier to do it if you're not distressed, in disappointed, depressed, angry, frightened by it. So to turn around and look at that, and try to work with it is the same ordinary thing. Is there anything which is you know, not ordinary in Buddhism, I would like to say it's all ordinary, it just taking it to situations in our life which are, you know, more or more difficult to apply it to. So, one of the this principle also plays itself out and the practice of loving kindness

and the competitive practice of compassion and sympathetic joy. The principle there is that you begin doing that practice with the person that it's easiest for you to love. Easiest way to have compassion for and then so that's ordinary, hopefully to tell to who it's most often Nearly straightforward to have it for. And then you begin to stretch yourself and expand that love or that compassion out into areas where it's a little bit harder to do and harder and harder to have compassion. And you end with the people who are your enemies, the people who are, you know, most difficult, seemingly impossible to have any love or compassion for. But you don't start there. You don't. You don't start with your enemies you start where it's easiest, most obvious where it's ordinary. So, in the ancient world, loving it, they assumed that it was easiest to have loving kindness towards oneself. So the idea was to start there. But you know, the ancients hadn't been to modern America. So it seems like here we have a different need some people. So some people find that it's a loving kindness practice that doesn't help to start with themselves. It's helps to start with someone else who for whom it's really easy. Could be a family member, a loved one it could be I know any one person who chose their dog And that was the easiest entry point to doing loving kindness. I've known people who've chosen the Dalai Lama, because there's just seemingly this infinitely benevolent person, it's easy to feel just loving kindness for, but it's the start where it's easiest, which is another way I think of saying Stark, where it's ordinary to feel love or feel compassion. And then once you understand how it's done there, then can you take it to the next level to someone who's not quite as easy, but still somewhat easy. And then work it and try to develop and

make it smoother, easier and more open, make it flow more, more, more completely to that person. And once you've done there, then you take it to someone who's you know, a little bit harder to do it for it harder and harder. And slowly we do it we take what's ordinary, love for ourselves, love for our family. We don't deny it. We're not taught you don't come to Buddhism and say, renounce your family love for your family. What you're told is to Yeah, to accept it, to understand it. Appreciate it and now unit virtualize it. And this. So universalizing doesn't mean you dismiss what's local. It means that's the foundation from which you can do this great work. And of universalizing, your love your care for others for others.

It's very interesting also, one of the ordinary things for many people is to be attached to themselves, or to one for themselves to be happy to you. Not everyone has that. But the idea of wanting the best for yourself. Some people sometimes it's called, you know, an extreme forms, it's called selfishness, or self centeredness. And, but maybe, you know, it's ordinary to do that. And so if you start to accept that as an ordinary thing to be self centered, don't dismiss it. But start with there and then begin There's a beautiful way of expanding out your self centeredness by understanding what is really most beneficial for you. And if you're mindful, sooner or later, you'll discover very clearly how painful it is to be selfish. And if you really want to be self centered, you really want the best for yourself. You're gonna have to let go of your selfishness because it's really to your detriment to be selfish. So isn't that a nice kind of term? So first, you accept it. And as because you accept it, you can study it and see it better. And then you're still interested in what's best for yourself. But what's best for yourself is not to be selfish. I thought that so if you encounter someone who's selfish, tell them to do a better job. And now it's because they're not doing a very good job if they're, you know, caught up in it.

So in this way I Buddhism is not an exotic religion. It's the religion of the ordinary, applied to the depths and they and in, you know all the different corners and depths of our life applied out into our social world and the world around us. And it's what makes you know Buddhism and religion is that this ordinary simple thing that all people have some familiarity with, is cultivating developed to extraordinary degree. So it becomes the foundation. of, of, of or the orientation around which our life is centered. So there's many orientations we can have for our lives. You could be oriented around greed, you could be oriented around hate or you could oriented about financial success. So you can be oriented in many, many different things. But one of the, you know, as Buddhism becomes a more religion. The idea is I think that one of the primary orientations at the heart of a person's life is to thoroughly apply or thoroughly live by this ordinary observation or ordinary practice, that if you have a splinter, it's good to pull it out. And if the splinter is something big, like deep attachment to your self identity, clinging to self identity, then it might take a while to pull that splinter out. But to do it thoroughly, and when you do it thoroughly, when you pull out all the Spencer's thoroughly, then these two ordinary things become work together. rise together the ordinary thing of pulling out the splinter, and the ordinary thing of loving others, caring for others. Initially, we only care for a few people, ourselves and someone else. But as we expanded outwards, we care for more. As we pull out the splinters, the heart, that our sensitivity, our capacity for empathy becomes clear, and clear and more and more powerful. And so becomes natural, more natural and ordinary, to love more people. And so when you go into the supermarket to stand in line there, it's like going into a temple. Because not because the supermarket is a temple. But because as you go in there, you now have the capacity to feel and sense the people in line ahead of you, the clerk who's helping you and to feel warm hearted feelings, feel love, feel compassion, for your caring to feel that they're and that market is a place where You can empty yourself of greed, hate and delusion. You don't have to only do it. When you come to a temple or a Buddhist meditation center where we were only when you meditate and feel good there. I would feel very sad. If people only discovered how to be free, be empty of greed, hate and delusion when they're meditating. But to be able to do it in the supermarket, makes a supermarket your temple. And I probably shouldn't say this as we're getting

ready to fundraise for a retreat center, but the idea in Buddhism is to make every place you go your retreat center, but we have to have some place where we begin from which we universalize from which he learns how to extend out so there was a Some of my thoughts for today. So now it's your turn. Yes, author. Mike over.

I'm so I had this week, what was a very interesting and very, very emotionally painful experience driving. I was I was leaving early for a doctor's appointment. And then at the last minute I got distracted by several things.

I started to rush. And then I got in my car and I was driving exactly as you were describing earlier. And I was thinking to myself, as I was doing That? Well, I was aware of how I was driving. And I said, Well, you don't need to drive this way you're not, you know, you'll be there on time slowed down. And there was this momentum that kept me going. And I was going back and forth trying to slow down and finding myself unable to do it for more than a second or two.

So I'm not sure what was happening, and I'm not exactly sure what to do about circumstances that one finds themselves and then I find myself in question. So the question is, you had some understanding of it was not helpful to be rushing, you didn't want to rush but you kept so you could slow down, you could relax but then you started up again, right away some unconscious subconscious force was something you couldn't quite recognize would get you driven again, and then you'd like go it's back and forth. How you're saying yes. So. So one of the reasons to meditate due to mindfulness practice is to begin to see deeply and to tease apart all the different motivating things. motivating factors in our lives are the beliefs, the assumptions, the emotions, the drives that are operating, often below the surface, we can't see, unless we calm down and slow down because they happen so fast. And so in your situation, I mean, I hope it's okay to mention this, but we've had some conversations and I know for you going to the doctor is a very consequential issue is you know, that getting your health taken care of is really big issue for you. And so I can imagine that it's not, it's not like you know, maybe you know, if you were going to a dentist, just to have your dent your teeth cleaned. It would be easier to kind of slow down and not be so concerned, but there's so much meaning in it and emotions and feelings. related to going to the doctor for you, I could imagine. So it's much more complicated. So it takes more work, it takes more mindfulness, it takes more reflection. And so that takes time. So, it might mean that you next time, you should give yourself an extra hour to drive there. And then you have you can stop there every 10 minutes and park and then kind of check in what's really going on here. And only if you give yourself a lot of time, can you begin teasing apart What's going on? Because it's not easy to understand sometimes when things are really when there's, you know, things are very meaningful for us. It says it says how does that work as an answer?

I hadn't thought about the medical question and I was I it works very well. It sort of explains. We were talking last week about the, the here this and what and I kept getting to the word and becoming confused and distracted and I But I didn't think of that connection. And that makes a lot of sense.

Thank you. In the front, it's coming to your mind you

have a question about when you talk about loving someone or yourself. What if when there's something that you don't like, in yourself or in somebody else? How do you deal with that? How do you stop the judgment and just accept that I find myself realizing I'm judging. I thought I was a better person than this that I can control that I can recognize it that I am judging and stop it. And I can do that when I'm with somebody else. I can be neutral or try to be neutral. And then when I'm by myself, then all them it's

like it's a storm of emotions that come back and say, No, I don't like this or I don't love this about myself or this person. And so I feel I feel tormented by that

interesting. So you're saying that in the in the actual interaction with someone you can kind of control yourself or let go enough for or damping it down. But then when you're finally alone, it's like then the genies out of the bottle. Well, then probably you're letting go when you're doing the social thing. It's not really letting go it's probably some kind of, you know, closing down or resisting or tightening up and you're just bottling up that energy and could probably come back as backlash later, if it's not. So, you know, what do we do when there's something about ourselves we don't like or about someone else? There's so many different depending on what you're what we're talking about. There's so many different answers to that. But the default answer The fundamental one for someone practicing mindfulness is we investigate it. We try to understand better what's going on there. And, and so for you, you know, try to understand the depth of judgments, you know what's going on underneath your judgments. And one of the great questions to ask when people are judgmental, making critical judgments of others or for oneself, is that can sometimes kind of open the door a little bit to see more what's going on, is to ask yourself, What benefit Are you getting from being judgmental? So you're shaking your head? No, there's no judge, no benefit at all. What probably your mind is not doing and unless some part of you thinks there's some benefit. And so you might look more deeply and instead what could be the benefits. It might not work as a benefit, you know, you're not getting any benefits, but it's part of your thinking it is, otherwise it wouldn't do it. And one of the most common benefits are people who were being critical and judgmental of others, not saying it's for you. Is it by judging someone else? We're making statements about me. I'm right, then, if I can show that someone else is wrong, then of course, I'm the one who's right, since I'm the one having a judgment, sometimes judging other people as a way of protecting ourselves. Because some people, some people feel insecure. And so they've in being insecure, they want to make themselves safe. And if I can show that everyone else is wrong, then I must be the one who's right. So that's a benefits that you know that, you know, well, is it selfishness? No, I wouldn't call that necessarily selfishness. You could see it that way. But there might be some deeper underlying issue going on that needs to be addressed. So I'm not saying this is your situation but so if there's an insecurity behind the judgments, or desire to be safe, you know if I can be safe if I know I could push everybody else away and show that everyone else is wrong, or those people are wrong. Then I'm safe, then becoming safe isn't wanting to be safe isn't the ordinary healthy thing to do? And so then, but then you have to ask the question, I want to be safe. I want to be secure, what's the best way to do it? And it turns out, it's not such a useful way that it's not so benefits, not a beneficial way to be judging critically other people. To become safe oneself. There's other ways that are better. But once you identify the underlying need, then you can maybe satisfy the need in a more in a better and more useful way. So asking the question, what a bet What do I benefit? How do I how am I tried? What am I? What kind of benefit Am I trying to get from this? Or what is the deeper underlying need? That's below the judgments that can open up and help you understand what needs to be addressed? Because if you just let go of the judgments, let go the judgments. It doesn't address the underlying need. And then it comes back later and so my stronger way so when

you love someone, your child, whomever is it that You love everything about them? Even if they're things you don't like that they're doing. I don't

know, I'm asking, How are you supposed to be? Are you supposed to love everything about everything they do?

Are you so?

What? Am I supposed to know that you're supposed

to teach the teacher?

You know, they didn't have that in the manual.

The teacher manual, I would look back and look it up and see. Maybe it was maybe it's in the footnotes about, yes, people are supposed to.

I'm supposed to love everything about that person

Who says that?

I'm really comfy with who has

the authority who has the authority to make that kind of claim.

Well, how do I decide

Question. I mean, are you are you giving authority to me

to tell you

that you shouldn't and should or shouldn't love everybody? That's a big that's a big responsibility for me. I don't think there's no there's no, there's no manual. There's no there's no absolute law that says, Thou shalt love everyone unconditionally for every possible time, everything all the time, everything they do, they pick their nose. You know, and they leave it. Son, right, he picks his nose and we're trying to trick we try to train him. But it's been kind of a slow training. I still love him. But, you know, it's, you know, there's things that he does that I don't love. So one of the things that some people find very helpful is to distinguish between loving someone or keeping In your heart to open for someone versus being critical of particular actions they do is that judging? Well, the word judgment is a is a vague word. And generally in our circles and in modern California English judging has has has negative connotations you're not supposed to be judging. So let's just accept the negative idea of judging in you know, in California and, but it's very important to be discerning so it's it's very, I think it's appropriately to speed assert discerning and evaluative about where my son, wait, my son does with his not. You know, I don't you know, that is something that needs to be addressed. I'm not supposed to sit there, you know, just look at that and say, Wow,

it's amazing. It's a force. It's a force of nature, you know,

the flowers bloom and spring and this and it's not it's not comes out

and hope he does so then then, you know, so you know, so, you know, I don't know if you know, I try not to be critical or the angry way or to tell them you're a terrible person or a bad person because of that. Just like when we were younger, I tried to avoid its language if you're a good boy. That's, you know, was the opposite end. Where I try to say was, I said, I say what's great about thews e Azzam, when he did something was kind of fun, wonderful, I say, I did go wow, you had a lot of fun doing that. So focusing on the action and the effect and you know, rather than the my value to my, my, you know,

category of his good person that that was dangerous to say that a lot. But But how do we love keep loving the person and support the person? And how do we still make evaluations and act and evaluations is a very important thing. And there's a lot of things to be learned. The so what are the things if you What are they you know, it's a lot to be said about this. But if you want, I can point you to someplace that might be interesting to to learn more about this might help you. There's a there's a thing called nonviolent communication. It's a training and there's books about nonviolent communication, and it's a wonderful they have wonderful ideas there about how to speak up and when to speak up and how to engage in conversation. And how to be evaluative and, and how to do it in a way that allows, I think, the kind of beautiful love and fullness of love to be there while still taking care of business. And one of the, one of the principles they have there is, is you have to understand what your needs are. And so and then if you come to someone and say, you know, you're, you know, they're they're say that they're always late for an you know, for a dates. And it's, you know, you really starts getting judgmental of them. It's like the baguettes are no good, lousy, unreliable, whatever, fill in the blank. And rather than saying that you say, Look, my friend, look, friend. This has a big impact on me that almost every time that you come to see me You're late, and in order for me to feel comfortable or you feel I have a certain need And let me tell you what my need is, my need is for you to come on time, or my need is for you to call me ahead of time, let me know if you're gonna be late. And then if you recognize the underlying need, then perhaps there's no need for the judgments, sometimes or other things. The reason why people are critically judgmental or angrily judgmental, is when they feel helpless. And so to learn how to help oneself can often take the sting or the power away from being judgmental. So maybe one more and then we should stop right there.

Are there any treats or teachers you particularly would recommend for teaching? How to note you know, your splinters? Your it's a similar question, but I keep wondering, you know, where's the bootcamp for self observation? And I'm thinking there must be One of these nine day retreats at spirit rock that's really good for that. You know, awareness training, even sometimes

it might mean that the Surgeon General mindfulness insight meditation, nine day retreat is a very powerful retreat. And it's, it's unparalleled. I think, Oregon is unparalleled, but it's very few kind of very few things in the world that are as powerful to get to understand oneself and to work through these things and find peace in the other side, as it retreats like that. Teachers, I know that therapists have pointed out when people come back from a nine day retreat, 10 day retreat that was worth like a year or two of therapy. It's so powerful, you know, and so much self understanding that goes on. So just the generic one, the ordinary one is very powerful. Now if you know you have a particular issue that needs to be addressed, occasionally they have to match retreats, like I know sometimes it's bedrock. I've seen retreats on the theme of the inner critic. So for people who have a lot of this inner criticism, going to the thematic retreat might actually be helpful to deal with to get ideas for that particular one. But I think the generic one, and if you're not familiar with the mindfulness teachings, then you're given instructions on the retreat. But you could also prepare yourself by learning more like here at IMC doing the intro class here or coming to a day long here and things like that and the more better foundation you have, the more value you probably get out of a longer retreat. Okay. Well, thank you very much, and I hope that you can become more ordinary