

2011-09-25 Tranquility

Tue, 8/18 6:37PM • 31:09

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

relax, meditation, mind, people, relaxed, feel, energy, meditation practice, retreat, body, instructions, calm, tense, meditate, joy, concentration, agitated, breath, tension, thinking

SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

Today is the end of the two week retreat that I teach every September in hidden villa. And it's a wonderful retreat. This year it's about 26 people who have you know done during the this retreat, it's kind of intensive silent Vipassana retreat. And today's the last day so it closes today. So we start the closing thing at 1130. So are so when I when I arrived so it means that when I finish here talking I'm not going to linger and stay for the potluck I have to leave pretty promptly to go to the retreat. And so the whole experience of the retreat is very much on my mind in my heart. It was a beautiful thing. To be part of and beautiful to watch people go through it. And when people engage in meditation practice, whether it's daily meditation practice or on retreat, there's a variety of different functions, psychological psychophysical functions that come into play. And sometimes people will kind of focus on only one function, or one one quality that gets developed. But they're really meant to come together as a whole. And today, what I like to do is spend a little bit of time talking about tranquility as one of the factors. But I want to mention that tranquility exists together with these other qualities faculties that come into play, when we meditate. And so they're considered to be sometimes it's one list three, energizing faculties that need to be energized appropriately when on practice. It said that The investigation looking more deeply at your experience is one of the energizing factors. Joy is an energizing factor. And, and then energy itself applying oneself engaging, putting energy having energy for the practice. And then the tranquilizing factors are things like tranquility itself, concentration, or Samadhi, and equanimity. And so those have to come into balance. If you're too tranquil, you probably just go to sleep. If you're too much energy, you'll spend your time spinning your spinning and discursive thought, being agitated. And so the idea is to bring those two in balance. And when you do that, it's both of them can actually become quite strong. Our capacity for deep penetrating investigation, deep penetrating, observing of our life, is quite phenomenal that what can happen in meditation on retreats, that capacity of our human minds to really see deeply is a beautiful, beautiful thing that usually not so easy in daily life because our mind is usually agitated or involved in a variety of things and concerns. And so, but to really have that strong is really beautiful. And so is it, it's beautiful to have joy. And it certainly can be a lot of joy and available in daily life. But there's something different about meditative joy. Because in most people's idea of joy, because most people are most people I believe, joy or happiness comes from having conditions of the world just right. And whereas meditative joy, something it doesn't require anything from the world outside of us, stimulated in particular way, happy events, but rather it's something that wells up from inside. And so the level of joy on retreats quite strong so much. So sometimes people will report that it gets intense the joy, energy also, it isn't that we're supposed to have this agitated you know energy on retreat, but there's something very as as an energy or a capacity to apply ourselves develops on retreat, the energy becomes clean, becomes like this, almost like in East Asia they talk about ci or ki. This ci kind of gets awakened and this beautiful upwelling sense of aliveness or vitality can be there. That is not agitated but often sometimes clean or more vital than the kind of energy you'd get from a you know a good doughnut or good doughnut or donut and coffee. The

so and then the other hand, we have this beautiful capacity for it. acronym. equanimity is considered one of the crown jewels of Buddhist practice. And it's not meant to be aloofness or indifference. But rather its beautiful ability to be intimately present for experience without reacting to it. It's kind of like you know, without getting ruffled whatsoever, and, and so it's a beautiful quality to just kind of feel and be intimate and experience things and not feel your mind going for or against your experience. Concentration also, it's beautiful, to be collected to be centered, to have the mind and the heart be really steady in a strong way. And often our life is you know, scattered, we're doing so many different things. It's hard for us to really come together and ever and have everything steadied or unified in the way we can in meditation. So then the last factor is this tranquility factor when all these other factors are there so maybe you can imagine that there's a strong penetrating ability to see there's a really good clean ci or energy alive and present or a strong sense of vitality, there is joy. And with that, at the same time, there's a deep sense of tranquility, of calmness, not a calmness, that just kind of, you know, everything else kind of fades away and just kind of like just, you know, a couch potato blob. But something that feels really vital and alive. You know, you can have, you can have a tremendous amount of calmness while engaged in activity. I don't know if you ever seen an athlete, like a runner, for example, you know, maybe putting a lot of effort into the run, but you get a sense you look and see the elegance in the end of the moves. There's something very calm, also about how the person's engaged in applying all this energy so calmness or tranquility, is an important part of this practice. And the Buddha emphasized it both in these kinds of lists of the describe the ecology of the mind and what comes into play, we meditate. But he also described it or instructed it very clearly, in some of the instructions he gave in meditation practice. And that part of meditation practice, he encouraged us to actually focus on relaxing the places in our body that in our mind, that are tense or agitated. And a lot of people associate meditation with becoming calm, and some people are, even their doctors prescribe it, that you know, you better you're gonna have a heart attack soon. If you don't turn your you know, your blood pressure's a bit high. So I think it's good if you calm down, and here we're going to try the meditation. So it's known to have that effect. Sometimes people will make too much effort they get calm and get attached or get to hold on to the idea that calm is the be all and end all. Meditation is not meant to be the end all of meditation, but it's a very important factor, which enough meditators forget, especially on retreat, where you do find people who strive too much they, they bear down, they're trying so hard, they're so sincere and so dedicated. And they're trying so hard to get concentrated or be mindful or something. And I find this particularly true in for people who focus mostly on on concentration. in meditation, they this idea that concentration is kind of a tightening up of the focus. And so they kind of, they kind of tighten up sometimes you actually see it in their, in their, in their eyebrows, they get all bunched up, they're kind of trying so hard to look and be kind of zero in on something like a laser. And rather than getting, it's possibly concentrated that way. But the concentration usually is not very useful, tends to be more brittle. The concentration that we're looking for in Buddhist practice, ideally is Concentration that's a very soft, broad, where the mind the awareness gets a feeling of becoming expansive, rather than becoming kind of tight and brittle and hard. And so the art of meditation is to learn how to develop with concentration in mindfulness, while also learning to appropriately relax, or how to bring into balance the energizing factors and the relaxing factors. So today the focus is on I want to say is tranquility. So one of the places where the Buddha describes meditation practices in a particular list called that 16 steps of breathing mindfully. And he begins this process of using the breath as a focus for meditation practice,

by encouraging us first or instructing us first, just to tune into your breathing. Get to know your breathing, get familiar with it. Notice qualities of it. Is it? He says, Is it long your breaths are they short your breaths I can add to that is your breath fast, slow, shallow, deep. What part of your body moves? What are the sensations is the breath smooth or choppy? what goes on in your breath. And the

instructions are simply to know it as it is. And that's a very important instruction because it doesn't say, Judge, it doesn't say judge yourself because of it. It just says it's beautiful quality, just know it. So the beginning is just to kind of enter into this kind of simple knowing of your experience of your breathing. And while you're breathing at some point, the instructions is to become stay with your breath at the center. But also broaden your your your range of your attention to be know what's going on in your body. Are you tense, are you relaxed? Are you hunched over what's happening in your body as you stay with a breath. Don't get lost so much in the breath that you don't know. Because the body is a great teacher that can teach us what we're doing as we're meditating. If we're not making enough effort, you might be slumped over. And it's not useful to be slumped over. When you meditate, you need to sit up and have some energy there. But you might also notice that your body is getting tense as you meditate because you're trying too much. Or you might notice that there's tension in your body from how you live your daily life. And so it's good to start noticing what's going on your body, become familiar with it. So you keep breathing, but you kind of breathe with your body, noticing what's in your body. And then comes the crucial step says once you kind of had done a simple nonreactive observation, checking in with yourself noticing how it is. Then the instructions are to relax your body Or more specifically, and this is important, it wasn't it doesn't say relax the body, the technical word is relaxed the bodily formations. formations is the word is Sankara. And this is a very interesting word. The Sankara refers to the volitional activity of the mind. So that's part of those activities in the mind which the mind is active, it's thinking things wanting things, not wanting things resisting things. Its minds involved, you know, most of the time with wanting, not wanting, doing something, having a lot of energy for some concern. The, the volitional activity of the mind can have an effect on the body. So you know, if I'm always worrying, that's a mental activity. And that worry can translate to my shoulders being tense. If I'm always angry, maybe my there's a fire in the pit of my belly. And so there's this kind of tension that's there. And we sit down to meditate, you feel that tension there. So there's a lot of different so that so what goes on in the mind can have an effect on the body, the bodily formations, is that those bodily experiences, you can have those sensations you can have your body that are there because of what you've done with your mind. So, you know, if a fly lands on your cheek, you know, that's just the fly, you know, itching you crawling around. But, but if you have a headache, it's possible that your headache is there, because you've been really tense at work focusing on the computer trying so hard, you know, to do something. And so, you know, the fly's more neutral, in terms of what you do. The headache is something that your mind has contributed to. a lot. It turns out in mixing Buddhist psychology, the teaching is that A lot of what we experience as our body, not the way you think about it, but from the inside out as you would with the sensations you feel in your body are there because one way or the other because of these volitional formations that we have. So as we tune into our body, good, were aware of it, breathe with it, then the instructions is to relax the bodily formations, tranquilize them, calm them, calm them down. So if you feel tension in your shoulders, then perhaps you can relax your shoulders a little bit. Sometimes the tension in the shoulders is not easy to relax, it's kind of locked in, then I find it useful to rather than relaxing them soften around the tension. Just soft, like I can have this

sense of softening or opening or, for some people, maybe it's a sense of acceptance. Maybe we can't relax it, but we can accept it and that accepting awareness does something as opposed to being critical. They're against it or, or upset because it's there just kind of create some space around it. Same thing with a belly, the face, it's really useful to pay attention to what you do with your eyes. There's a lot of people who not everyone, but there's fair number of people who, whose intensity around how they're going to what they want in the world is channeled through their eyes. They're looking I'm like, ancient psychology, they believe that the sun has done something about the eyes would reach out and grab the object that it looked at. And now we know that you know, the lightest passively bounces and when we keep our eyes open, and we register that and interpret it in some ways, what we see and so we don't take responsibility anymore. like they used to. But then in fact, I think often you know, some people you

know, you can see they're, they're trying so hard, they're looking and trying to pick things up and great instruction in meditation is to relax the back of your eyes, for some people will have your eyes relaxed back on their sockets, so we're not trying. So to relax the body, while at the same time, keeping the body upright. This combination of having energy and uprightness and relaxation. I read a study many years ago of what human postures allowed people to relax them physically relaxed and most deeply. And apparently, the number one was lying on your back flat. But that's conducive to falling asleep. then number two, it was sitting cross legged. Then sitting cross legged like on the floor, I mean, if you can do it, you can't do it. It's not real. But if you can do it, it's a posture that is very stable as this tripod effect of the knees and the butts and the bodies upright and it can align the spine if you do it right alignment just right, that very little of a musculature is needed for holding ourselves up. And it allows for some deep relaxation, deeper than if you sit in a couch leaning against the backrest of the couch. You think that sitting on the couch is the deepest relaxation occur, but there's something about the aligned posture sitting upright, that allows something deep inside to let go. And so to focus a little bit, not a lot, but you know, on staying relaxed in your body is very, very useful for meditation practice. So then, as these instructions on the Buddha continue, he talks about experiencing joy and there's an interest connection between joy and relaxing the body. If you if your body is tense you know the muscles are tight. You have a very particular way in which the body is experienced. Usually when the body's tense, it feels pretty solid. And the boundaries of the body tend to be much more distinct. When the body when the tension relaxes, the boundaries of the of that area become softer, more diffuse. When we relax, it feels less, less solid, feels lighter, more open. It would maybe be like if you really made a really tight fist in your hand. You would feel that the boundaries of that tightness, the solidity of it, you'd feel maybe the inside of your palm, the fingers, kind of you know in your focus would be kind of Hard, that's where you feel when you make a good fist feel a lot of hardness. But if you're relaxed that

you'd feel the parties all the blood would flow into your fingers, perhaps, but you'd feel kind of this more open, feeling lighter feeling very quickly. And if you held yourself along time tense, and you relax the fist, it feels kind of nice, light, refreshing energy, I think something like that happens in your hand as it opens up. The same thing happens in their body, that as we begin relaxing the body, the sense of the Body Body being solid, and which firm boundaries begins to relax as well. And the body begins to feel more open. There's a kind of a release of a certain kind of energy in the body that can't be released. When everything is held tight. Maybe like the maybe it's kind of like your energy is all bound up and being tense and when you're relaxed, the energy gets freed. flows more freely in the body, maybe it's a little bit like that. So as the body relaxes, the body starts feeling better. And that feeling of betterness in the body sometimes is associated with joy or lightning or delight, or sense of well being that can happen. And the instructions at this point is experience it, which I interpret to be appreciate it. It's a good thing. Meditation is not supposed to be a grim task. You know, a serious duty You know, I think meditation is really important thing. It's like one of the more important things I do in my life I feel but it's very important not take it too seriously. Because then you're in trouble. So you want to so anyway, to feel the joy feel that like you know, if you're feeling the effect of being present in your body being here and now and relaxed And then it's the instructions are is to now keep breathing. Stay with your breath. But now open your attention now your body's a little more settled, open your attention up a little bit wider to become aware of the mental formations. This mental Sankara is so now the volitional activity of your mind, the mental processes of your mind what's going on in your mind. And this I think it's more it's it's more than just realizing what you're thinking about. It's more like realizing what the how the mind as a as it as what to say, how the mind operates when it's thinking. So, what are the activities of the mind like when the mind is thinking or concerned about things. So the mind you can feel sometimes the mind is tense or the mind is relaxed. You You can feel that there's a lot of energy swirling around jumping around, you feel the mind jumping, you can feel that there's tremendous intensity sometimes, in certain concerns, it's one thing to have a concern. It's another thing, the intensity with which we're interested in

the concern. And here at this stage, it's very helpful to begin appreciating that we're trying to settle the mind or quiet down the discursive thinking layer of the mind. It's like there's different layers of thinking that the mind can do. And one of the courses layer thinking is sometimes called discursive thinking, which we are having a discourse. I guess that's why they use the term but is it like like conversational thinking that goes on in the mind. You're repeating a conversation you had with someone or you imagine you're telling something someone or you're telling something to yourself? Are you making commentary about things or judging things are planning the future remembering the past or fantasizing about something? It's quite involved. It's complex, it usually has nothing, nothing to do with what's happening here. And that level of thinking can have a lot of I can be done commonly, but also can be done with a lot of intensity. And so as we start feeling, the activity of the mind, is the mind tense. Is it brittle? Is it tight? Is it open? Is it relaxed? What's going on in the mind? If we notice that these mental formations the mental activity of the mind is agitated, restless, tight, tense, and the instructions are calming down, relax, let it become more tranquil. Now, sometimes that can be done just telling yourself to do sometimes, you know, calm down, Gil, you know, you're not to think about that. And sometimes it can be done by feeling into where the tension and tightness is

where the energy or the pressure is, that can be a sense of pressure sometimes behind the mental activity. And to feel feel the pressure field attention in the mind or wherever your mind happens to manifest physically, and then relax, soften it. I find it helpful to do that on the outbreath kind of a letting go with exhaling. And so as you exhale, see if you can let the mind settle. Some people, it's helpful to have it have an image and the image is that I like is that they surface of a lake. And that surface of the lake, you know, maybe it's all choppy with the wind and all that. And as the wind settles down, the lake becomes flatter and flatter, and calmer and calmer. The surface becomes you know, a mirror like and I like this image from my mind at least because as I relax my mind, my mind It's like my mind becomes broader and flatter, it spreads out. A tight mind and anxious mind tends to be claustrophobic and narrow. A mindful mind, concentrated mind tends to become soft and expansive and open. And so the instructions here are to begin softening, relaxing the instructions or not to let go. Because letting go is taller order means kind of put something down. But here it's moving in the direction of calming oneself down. It's kind of like that happens in a graded way. We slowly over time, can relax. And I think people who meditate regularly will find that the process of meditating over 45 minutes, that there's often a slow gradual movement towards becoming more relaxed, and there might not be any clear moment of suddenly being more relaxed but Slowly, slowly, we get more settled, more calm and all that. So, giving some attention to relaxing the body, calming the body, giving some attention to calming the mind is a part of meditation practice, not for its own sake. But because when the mind is calm when the body is calm, it's a lot easier to see, into our experience, see what's going on in a more balanced way in a nonreactive way, it's usually easier to be able to more economists are relaxed about the process of meditation as it continues to deepen. And at some point, the instructions in this list of instructions is in fact to let go to let go of our clinging and it's a lot easier to let go over clinging when things have gotten soft. more relaxed, were kind of more tranquil. There's a sense of well being a sense of joy. To sit in a sense of well being and meditation, tranquil, delightful sense of well being, we feel it can be very healing for people to feel it here, to feel it here. Happy, contented, satisfied, feeling relaxed, really feel your presence here. It's a lot easier than to let go some of the concerns and attachments we have, that have nothing to do with here now. They have a lot to do with imagination, a lot to do with other times in other places and concerns that have a lot to do with conditioning. A lot to do with fears that we might have that we need to hold on. It gets a lot easier to let go those mental attachments, when letting go clearly feels like you're letting go into something that feels good. Letting Go is not only about about letting go Something, when we let go of something, some attachment, we're also letting go into something. And so if we can let go into something that feels good, your mind is gonna be more interested in letting go. If you think that letting go, let's go into deprivation into something feels worse,

why would it want to let go. But so part of the function of calming, relaxing the body or developing some kind of inner sense of well being as you meditate is to create an environment, an inner environment where when you let go of an attachment, you kind of drop more fully or can experience more fully, that inner environment of well being.

And so, as you feel that, it's becomes hopefully a positive reinforcement kind of thing, where then maybe you're willing to let go of something else. And something else, until eventually, you come to the most cherished attachments you have the things that you're absolutely committed to. No way. Are those Buddhists gonna take that away from me. And no one's take trying to take anything away from you. But it comes to a point where you see it most deepest thing if you're attached to. And you see, look at it, you kind of you kind of cocked your head and you look at it from the vantage point of all the sense of well being and ease and stillness that you have, and you caught your head and you look at it and say, wait a minute. You know, it's kind of obvious, it's not to my benefit to hold on to this anymore. In fact, holding on to this is kind of like an errant irritant. On top of feeling so good. You know, if I could just let go of this attachment, it's obvious I'll let go into even a better Feeling. This is like the last thing that's keeping me from feeling really, really good. So, it's not an obligation to let go. But if you if, but as you do this process of settling of stealing that meditation involves, it becomes clearer and clearer that it's to your benefit not to hold on anymore. So this is one of the reasons why it's useful to relax the calm to cultivate calm as part of meditation practice. So that was maybe a you know, little slice of what I talked about on the retreat, because on this retreat, we went through this. During the 14 days of the retreat, we went through the 16 stages of mindfulness of breathing that the Buddha gave in a particular discourse. And it was fun, especially those days where the focus was just relax. whole days focused on it.