

2011-10-24 Awareness

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SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

So Cheryl asked me to talk about why do we allow people to come in late so long? Somebody asked me tonight not sure exactly where to start with that, but you know, where are a kind of urban more or less urban community meditation center? where people have trouble hearing people okay hearing on the other hand people okay, if you need to get the hearing assistant device was. So, everyone, okay, so the question is about the community. So here in this, you know, the assumption I have is that most people have business He lives around here. It's a challenge to make a livelihood to work. It's lots of demands on people. Some people have a family and other obligations. And this kind of lifestyle that many people live, it's often difficult to be able to come to even to meditate, let alone come to meditation center. And we're meant to be a resource for the community where people can come and practice. And so the idea is to keep the doors open and not have, you know, you don't come by 730 we lock the doors to, you know, the assumption is people are doing their best effort. It's good for people to come on time and helps everybody else to have a place that's quiet. But we don't want to make this too strict requirement of that because we want people feel comfortable coming here late if that's what they have to do. We're hoping that people don't come late, just casually, just because, you know, doesn't matter, you know, whatever. But we want people feel comfortable coming when they can And to leave when they can. So coming and going, how is he supposed to be real easy. And it's kind of it's also part part partly it's a spirit of expressing the tremendous openness I think the Dharma has always been offered. Dharma is offered freely and openly to everyone. The Dharma is offered without any obligation to anyone. And it's kind of the spirit of the heart is to have that kind of openness and receptivity and availability to everyone. And so some people have said that it's quite unusual for them to come to IMC because one of the few places in public people can go where nothing's asked of them. And the sense you know me you can go to the park, I guess but but, you know, you come into a building institution, and lots of people and no one's at the door. asking for money, no is at the door, checking your badge. You know, anything. Just you just come and some People find that very meaningful, and very, to come in a very safe and comfortable they like they love sitting in the back row for years and not talking to anybody. And some people find comfortable coming right up front except some people. And so it's kind of the idea that kind of what you had in mind. I think that's what the person was asking. And what about the practice to maybe a little bit about the practice too, for those who have to listen to some rustling or this or that. The other thing is that I mean, part of part of the practice of mindfulness of Dharma is, you know, the essence of Dharma practice is nice, not to cling, and not to get attached to things. And so one of the things we can easily attach to is my precious practice, my stillness, and, and to be more spiritually mature in our tradition is to be interruptible

Whereas you know, you don't, you don't you don't like oh no, and I'll keep that the bay or that shouldn't be that shouldn't be happening. But rather, that doesn't mean very maturing and very wise about learning to whatever sounds, whatever activities are going on within reason to include them within your

meditation don't make it a problem. And it's part of a training. And it's, it's common enough for people who are new time seem to be a little bit perturbed by all the coming and going and the noise. But most people after they come for a while will find that it no longer bothers them because they find that they can meditate just fine. It's actually quite a powerful lesson to learn to keep the attention aware, open, present, and be kind of inclusive of those things rather than exclusive rather than be troubled by them to be kind of just to hold them within the field of awareness. So it's part of our practice too. And if we had a really strict policy, you know, walk through like again, some some meditation centers, they closed the doors when this meditation supposed to start and as beautiful that gets really pristinely still and quiet and meditation hall and it also promotes it disciplining people because you know, consequential if you come late and so people get more disciplined. There's a lot of good things that way. But one of the things that happens is people get really attached to the silence and the preciousness of it. And they get that to my practice and they get attached to rules and regulations, there's an inside and outside and the way it's supposed to be done. And so we practice with what how it is here. And given that sometimes I'm a little bit surprised by people who come in late and they're, you know, they come in late and they insistent sitting way over there. You know, and, and there's two there, you know, you're probably if it's not easy to slip in here, you're probably sitting you know, if you're coming in late to the sitting sit in the outer Hall and to the end of the sitting. I think that's nice to do, but

I prefer not to say about

So, should we change gears? Or would you like it was just an effort? Or, you know, it's an opportunity to find out about it, how it works here, what's goes on here? I mean, we're kind of mysterious in many ways to people. There's a lot about IMC, which is not obvious when you come in because the underlying philosophy or how we present what we do here is not spoken much about So, you know, some people are mystified what goes on here, how did it happen? And I wonder, too,

so, you've been here for a long time. Do you know how to work here? Some days? Okay, so, okay, so let's do Should we do a Dharma talk?

You know, I do feel kind of, you know, I don't say is one of the things I don't say much about how it works here is that I do find it kind of odd that I sit up here and carry on these monologues week after week. I mean, you know, the rest of our life I you know, my friends and stuff. I mean, I can't just start, you know, going on for 45 minutes. And then I have this captive audience here. I mean, it's, it's kind of amazing thing. And you guys are all polite. So it's, you know, so I am kind of amazed. So, it happened, that when I came down here to teach all day today, I was thinking what am I going to teach today? And I had nothing to teach. And I've kind of felt emptied out of teaching and like, you know, teaching a lot likely or something and, and I had nothing to teach, and I came down here I drove down it nothing, nothing, nothing there. Nothing. You know, nothing. And so I thought, well, what I'll do is take questions. That's, you know, that'd be nice because that's not. And I thought that was good to take questions. But then I sat. And I knew early in the day, you know, if I just sat for an hour or two, I'm pretty confident that a talk would come. Right in thought that I didn't think a talk would come from just sitting this evening. I was all prepared to do questions. But then I sat, and I started being filled in a beautiful way. I felt very, very calm, I got somewhat concentrated and focused. And in that calm and focus, I started feeling kind of filled, physically my body, nice feeling of warmth, delight, being connected being here and my body. And then that sense of being full, then a topic for talking. So that's what I'll offer today. And it's perfectly because it's a topic Topic I talked about last Wednesday briefly. And so it's something that I am interested in, I think I feel some sunlight for me in certain way. So I like to try to teach whenever I can, something feels alive and present. And so that's what wasn't there earlier today. So it might also be interesting for you to hear the background like that. Maybe that's. And so to introduce the topic, I want

to say that one of the, you know, great questions for many people and many spiritual traditions is Who are you and discover who you are. And, and if you go to the Zen master and say, Well, you know, I'm a plumber. That's who I am. They probably story out of the room and say, Come back tomorrow, because that's not who you really are. Well, I'm a parent, out of the room you go, you know, because that's not a satisfying answer for Zen master who are you're really and then you come back and say something profound like you saying, I'm love it out you go. And so Who are you? This is an important question. Now one of the one of the answers that many people will come to thank you, especially if you were the Zen master who kind of rejects everything else. Eventually, many people come to the answer, I am awareness. That's who I am. In fact, some religions that's kind of a central tenant that who you really are the true self has to do is consciousness or awareness. Buddhism has a different view on this. But Buddhism also puts a lot of emphasis on the value and importance of awareness. And mindfulness is kind of a form of awareness. And as we practice, when awareness practice, we practice mindfulness. And awareness is really a beautiful and profound thing that's often overlooked. It's very easy to get involved in life, and be so concerned with the many important things and trivial things. People can be involved in and get preoccupied and get so focused and fixated in on work and family and awkward about things we have to do that, that in that preoccupation with what we can think about or be concerned about. We don't really notice that we are being aware. And of course, if someone says, Are you aware it's everywhere? Yes. You know, you kind of kind of know. But it's not like alive in a juicy ways. Like, wow, there's awareness here. There's attention. This is an amazing phenomena, to be aware. I mean, how does that work? How does that happen in this human life? You know, I was very meaningful for many years ago when the idea of my awareness was reframed by someone that maybe like Alan Watts, who said

human awareness, human consciousness is the way the universe looks at itself. So usually we might think awareness is mean, I'm the one who's aware of my awareness and I'm aware of the world. But if you kind of see that human life evolves out of the planet, though the stuff of the universe, and, and we're part and parcel of the universe is who we are, and aspect of the nature of the universe, but we're part definitely part of it, then in this amazing evolution and growth, from Stardust, to planets to life to human beings to animals that are conscious and sentient. That one way of seeing it is that it's not about you as an individual. But it's about you know, here it is that the universe is conscious of itself through you in a certain kind of way. So that was very meaningful to me many years ago when I read that. So what is awareness. And it turns out that awareness is not an easy thing to define. awareness has no shape. It has no weight. It has no color. It has none of that kind of conventional ways in which we would describe a thing. And since there's not a thing in the ordinary senses of the senses of the term thing, like a physical material thing, how do you describe something which is, in some ways? invisible? I mean, you can be aware of it being aware. But can you see awareness? Can you hear it? Can you smell it? Can you taste it? Can you touch it? You know if you can really say no would you can't say yes. Because it's awareness is kind of the, the medium through which you know all those things. But what is it And Is it is it a singular thing? So we know some of us know, you know, if you read modern kind of scientific or neurobiological efforts, it's hard to define consciousness. They're having a hard time by this. I mean that some books are very clear, this is what it is. But then another book says, This is what it is, you know, they can't quite agree. It's like it's a little bit of a mystery, and they're trying to figure out neurology and the brain waves and how they function and how human consciousness arises. But one of the things that's coming up, seems to be appearing as people whose neurobiology studies is that what we we think of as consciousness is a is a is a variety of mental processes operate, operating together in harmony. Whereas if you really are acutely aware of awareness, of being paying attention to function of attention of being conscious, it can feel Like a unitary thing, I can feel like it's a singular thing to be conscious my consciousness. And it can be so powerful that in certain settings, the idea of consciousness that's bigger and larger than anything else more that it's, you know, seems like it's the

one of the most, you know, really, really clear that this is a thing, a unitary thing. But then if there's a variety of things that go wrong in the brain, and those mental processes don't function just right, all kinds of wacky things happens with consciousness for people. And we start seeing that it's not a unitary thing, but it's made up of many different aspects that come together in some kind of harmony. So if it's not a unitary thing, what is it from the Buddhist point of view? We don't necessarily ask you know, the neurobiology of awareness of consciousness. But we are interested in in the, what's called the phenomenology of it, how its experience And some people have no interest because they're more interested in the things of the world. But it's fascinating to step back. Because it's probably one of the most intimate things you'll ever know. Your awareness, what's closer to you than awareness. And so, how is that experienced? And people who meditate, discover, some point meditation is not automatically but some point as you get concentrated and settled, discover something very interesting about awareness. And that is that awareness is a fluid phenomenon, how it's experienced. So for example, as people get calm and relaxed awareness, the sense of awareness or consciousness or sometimes people use the word mind almost synonymously becomes expansive. People talking about

big mind sometimes or an expansive mind or a wide mind and it feels as if they were Awareness is, extends beyond the boundaries of your body because you feel so spacious and open. And now is awareness really extending beyond the body? I don't know if it really does. I don't know if it's important to know what it does. But it can feel that way. Because wareness not being a thing doesn't have a shape has no as essential boundaries of its own. And so, the sense of boundaries a sense of you know, is quite variable and that can be part of the construct of the mind, with a mind does and how it participates in the shaping of a consciousness. And when the mind is relaxed, and concentrated, then it the tendency is that it doesn't dine involved in defining things so much anymore, labeling things, labeling, self labeling, others being ideas, and as the ideas of the mind relax, then there's a sense of a boundary to the body. dissolves ittle bit, and awareness seems to extend wider. And then there's a wonderful feeling some people can have. That awareness is actually as if as extends as widely away from you, as the thing is that you're aware of. So if there's a sound, the car travel going by outside, then the, you know, in a certain kind of way you could feel like, well, awareness is wide enough to take that in. And you can kind of this experiential sense is that awareness is really so big. It's as big as this building as as big as the city. It takes in whatever it's aware of whatever comes into awareness. But it's not really what's going on. I mean, I think that nowadays people think, no, that it's the sound from the car outside, that's traveling through the airwaves, and hitting my eardrums and then being processed by the brain. The experience of the car is happening in the mental process. It isn't that the awareness goes out there, but still the experience of the cars happening within awareness. So one of the kind of mind changing kind of questions that some people like to ask is, Are you inside this room? Or is the room inside of you? You know, of course you're inside the room. But how do you know you're inside this room? The knowing of the room and you inside the room is all happening within the within the processing that's happening in the mind. Outside of where the processing in the mind, you know, you don't there is no room in a certain kind of way. There is a room of course, but and it's a little bit arbitrary, how slightly arbitrary how we reconstruct the external world. And that can shift and change depending on a variety of things. So, as people meditate people have experienced with the mind getting quite some That's quite big and expansive, relax open, it's a beautiful feeling because of how peaceful it can be. And then with that perspective of experiencing that, then it's possible to also to be aware of the opposite of that. You can be sitting, meditating, feeling relaxed, minding your own business. But unfortunately, your mind has a mind of its own. So you're sitting there, and, and, you know, you know, zero to 60 in the mind can be like in an instant, between not thinking and spiraling out of control and thought. And so you can have to say that they're here, the car outside. And this deep rumble of that kind of car, reminds you of someone who had a, some kind of low rumbling car 30 years ago, that crashed into you. And suddenly you're thinking about that accident and you're thinking about the

injustice of it and the problems of and how your life would have been different. And you're kind of get you suddenly you're involved in that all that story and drama of that accident and what happened. And then you notice you pay attention to the experientially, what just happened to you, and what happened to your sense of awareness. And some people can, because the mind was so relaxed and open, it becomes you can really feel how it all gets tight and constricted and contracted, and the field of awareness is no longer wide and open. It's not gotten very, very narrow. The field of awareness is limited to those concerns. If you relax and often takes relaxing, taking a deep breath, and you're not so

riding so close in on the thoughts and concerns or your emotions and feelings, then you can get kind of feeling some space it gets created in the in awareness again, some space in the mind and it begins opening up again. And to watch that movement is a fascinating movement and the goal and to notice when you feel You know, sometimes when people report when the mind gets really preoccupied around some concerns, they even said there's kind of a darkening that happens in the mind. Whereas when the mind is relaxed and open and spacious, it feels very light, luminous, almost a certain kind of quality. And so, awareness can be feel very small and tight. And so much so that it gets lost. We're not even aware that we're aware because we're so concerned with what we have to take care of. or awareness can be very broad and expansive, so big and strong and wide, that it seems to be more valuable, more meaningful, then the things that can go happen within the field of awareness. And it's quite something to have all this it's like you know, if you go nowhere, but if you go like to someplace in nature, it's a the beach and it's a beautiful day with the ocean is really expensive and quiet and peaceful and Long Beach. Expensive beach. And, and in that great space, expensive space. Someone perhaps you can see something on the beach of me walking down the beach, and you're much more relaxed and open and can hold that in a very spacious way. And it feels so good to hold it in that spacious way, feel so good not to, you know, be caught up in the details of life. Whereas if you're stressed out in daily life, the details of life can be so preoccupying. And so there's something about the spaciousness and the peace and the openness of an open mind that feels so valuable, that it's sometimes easy to just let a thought or pass through the mind and not get involved in it. Not to dismiss it, but it's like something else. There's another there's another very valuable thing going on. Just Being aware of the peacefulness of awareness, to just let it go by you don't pick it up. And this is a for for meditators, it's a beautiful thing to learn that you don't have to pick up all your thoughts. You don't have to react to them, you don't have to get caught by them, you don't get pushed around by them. And so a lot a lot easier to do that when the mind has this open, spacious quality. So the mind can be the mind or awareness can be small and tight, it can be quite expensive. Awareness also can be changed in other ways. You can direct your awareness. You can you know, decide to pay attention to your left hand. Some of you I'm sure have not been thinking about your toes for the last few minutes. And I could suggest you think it you know, feel your toes and you can you know, suddenly your your attention is directed to your toes and you start becoming aware of your toes. And so awareness is something can be directed And, but it's also something that can be receptive. It can be like an open, very open, like a something very open. And rather than directing yourself to listen to the sounds outside, in that openness, the sounds come to awareness. And you're just as aware of the sound as if you paid attention to it directly, directed, directed way. But the mind is not, it's not working to pay attention. Attention just happens. So awareness, something we can actively try to do. And it's also something we can passively allow to happen. One of the another great exercise to try to do is to receive the instruction so I'll give it to you now. So listen to this and doo doo doo. expect you to do a good job. Stop being aware. Stop it, you guys. Just cut it out. And if I give you that instruction you promote you'll find it's really hard to stop being aware of it's like, then you're so aware. And during the meditation you were struggling to be aware, when you're told to stop being aware, just like you know, then it's pretty easy. Awareness is what the mind does the mind is in a sense in awareness

process. And if you're relaxed, awareness can just happen. It doesn't have to be directed, it can just be receptive in all directions. 360 degrees. Awareness also can be very focused, and you can take like, like taking a close up lens, you can get like a microscope and you can get really close and precise with awareness attention and look very precisely and everything else falls away. You don't notice because you're so absorbed in something very small. Or you can take a wide angle lens and make their awareness weaker wide angle lenses step back and take a bird's eye view and or look at things from a distance. Don't people have done this with emotions, some emotions can be quite difficult to be with. And sometimes we ride our emotions very carefully and very concerned about them. And some people find it very helpful to step back and take a bird's eye view or get a very wide space. Imagine that the awareness is as big as all of Redwood City. And then oh, then I can hold the emotion. But if I'm writing it close, there's no space and you know, it's claustrophobic or we get pushed around, or sometimes within a difficult emotion. Sometimes it's really useful to actually go into it and put yourself put awareness right in the middle of it. And really feel it from the inside very closely and intimately. And then something very different happens some something releases and opens or evolves. So this awareness thing, it can shift and change and morph, you can do many things with it. And because and maybe because it's not a thing, it doesn't it's it's no sir it's a certainly a process, but it's not a thing. thing like we usually think of. So some people take awareness to be ultimate. And that's, you know that this is who I am. And it's very interesting to look at what happens to the other ideas of who we are, who we think we are. When awareness is very open and relaxed and spacious, are you the parent, are you the plumber? Are you the victim? Are you the angry person? Are you the old person? Are you whatever What are you? And you can see that those the thought is there and has some accuracy, some of them perhaps, but those ideas, those thoughts, those concepts, feel like water painting on a running stream on a river. It just feels like it you know, it doesn't You know, where is it gonna land as a land somewhere to be have any meaning? And if, you know, so say you know, you know, so like identity, which is maybe obvious, relatively obvious for me is that I'm a man right male. So I could ride that identity really close and tight and be really concerned that you see me as a good man or whatever you know, and really kind of get into the man thing. Some of you known men who do that. And, but I can sit and be very relaxed and open with my awareness and not readily kind of getting latching on to ideas and concepts. And I could see the thought kills a male close a man just go through and you know, I know it has some truth to it. I know which bathroom to go to. When they when they have, you know, male and female bathrooms. I know you know, I know enough that enough, but, but it just doesn't. You know, there's something much more deeper and more valuable going on the awareness, the peacefulness of awareness, this openness awareness, is like this beautiful screens like the beautiful running, you know, calm river that's flowing. And the thought of a male just doesn't have much juice to hold on to and to get involved in and get preoccupied with. And so a lot of the ideas, this is who I am, starts seeming like that just Oh, it's interesting idea, thank you. But it's not really who I am. Because you realize you're more than that. There's more than just your ideas. And ideas are just ideas, they're valuable, they have their place, but this awareness thing is quite something. So then some people will say awareness is who I really am. That's my true nature. And because one of the one of the, one of the and it helps to have that idea, one of the things that supports that kind of idea is that everything else can seem to have some kind of

impermanence always moving and changing. You know, some were just ideas of float by, or everything else seems sooner or later passes and disappears. But awareness seems to be a constant. It doesn't change at all. It's kind of permanent. Like a backdrop. It's a background. Background field is the background screen. It's on screens always there, even though what's being projected on the screen is always changing. So it can feel that way. But the fact that it feels that way, does that mean that's really is that way is the way you experience things, an accurate view of what's really happening. If we the way we experience awarenesses is unitary, and it turns out to be made up of many different processes. Is it unitaries in many processes? What is it the fact that we can experience awareness being so wide Do

we take in the street outside and the car is going out like this, if it's that wide, said really what's going on? Or is it that the sound waves are coming to us, and we process it in the brain? So the fact that we can experience awareness as being constant and permanent kind of always there ever, ever there is that really the case is it really that way? You know, if you take a like a flame, like a stick is an ancient Buddhist kind of metaphors, Emily, we take a flame on a stick. And nowadays you glow sticks maybe. And you, you spin it around really fast and a big circle in the dark. Then it looks like it's a it's a ring of fire. It's one continuous full ring, because that's what the eyes that eyes, the eyes kind of blend it all together, right? When we process it that constructs a ring because it goes so fast. But we know that the flame can only be in one place at a time. So it's not really a continuous ring, but it looks continuous. So could it be that Continuous permanent feeling of awareness is like that. Could it be? Is that what's going on? Do we know? And, or another perspective is that generally when people have this very big, open, spacious, relaxed awareness that really gives a strong sense of all the other really is awareness. Awareness isn't the most central thing. It's a permanent thing. awareness, in some ways, takes the shape of what it's, what it what it focuses on. Sometimes if it's really focused on something, and, and if it's, if it's if awareness is focused on an empty space, because it's so spacious, then maybe, you know, you know, since we can't no empty space without being aware of it. Then you know, there's a is a kind of intimate connection between awareness and the empty space. And so it can be empty space has this quality of feeling like it's permanent, right? I mean, where does it go? Does it come from anywhere? Does it go anywhere? What is this permanent space? empty space? It's always there, isn't it? Kind of. And so if awareness takes in that really takes that in awareness can also feel like it's permanent and doesn't go anywhere. And it doesn't come from anywhere doesn't go anywhere. But it's not really the case. Do we know? And how do we answer this question? Can we answer this question? There are the way that I know that this question can be answered in a way that was meaningful for me. Because I at some point in my meditation practice, I felt that everything was impermanent. It was really clear everything except for awareness. And I went to My teacher and I said, I don't think I can be a Buddhist. I think I need to become a Hindu. Because in certain Hindu traditions, the idea that consciousness, pure consciousness is the ultimate. And the self, the who the true self is is consciousness awareness that everything is permanent, this thing doesn't change. And my teacher said to me, Gil, just keep looking. Which is like, you know, the, the fundamental teachers instruction. You come to me with a profound question, and I just look at you and I'm good. Just keep looking. It's very easy to be a teacher. And, and so and so I did. And I kept practicing and practicing. And then, at some point, awareness dropped away. It's like, it's like the floor. Just dropped away. And it was one of most beautiful things that I've experienced.

But how do you experience something where there's no awareness? So this is kind of, you know, like, it's kind of, like it's kind of Escher like or something. And, but, but to see or to know to experience, awareness drop away, and then return shows you that awareness is not a constant. quest for Buddhism, it isn't so important whether you believe that awareness is constant, or you believe that it's in constant. That's important, if you believe awareness is unconditioned, or the ultimate or whether it's not ultimate, at least from my point of view, what I understand so far is what's most important is that this all this team, what it teaches you is not To claim and one of the things you not to cling to is awareness itself. And it's the freedom of not clinging, that this practice is pointing to. And we use our awareness in the service of that. We use awareness to see clearly what's happening here to see clearly what's happening in our present experience to see how we function and operate, how we think how we feel. We relate to the world. We use our awareness, understand and be present for the world in a deeper, fuller way. So compassion can arise and empathy can arise. We use our awareness to understand attachment and clinging and how that operates, so that we can be wise about it. We use awareness to overcome our delusions or confusions and we use awareness to help us see how we can move towards more and more freedom. The freedom from clinging move towards freedom Peace. And there's

no peace found and clinging to anything, including awareness. But to have the experience of not clinging to anything whatsoever, is a powerful lesson in our hearts capacity for being at peace. We have this really beautiful hearts that have phenomenal potential and capacity, or deep abiding peace. And that's kind of what this practice is pointing to. And in that piece in that, you know, freedom, then there can arise our response or responding or acting in the world. And one of the very, I think, meaningful things to discover is how to be deeply relaxed not to be at peace, and then to allow a response to the world arise within us. That's not a reaction to the world, but rather a deep upwelling of our compassion or love or wisdom that arises. And so, to a small degree, that's what I did this evening, I came here with nothing on my mind. And I wasn't concerned particularly about that. And then I sat, and then something in my eye Cup was peaceful and relaxed was very nice sit here with you and, and that's something arose. And I told you this. And you can decide whether this was worthwhile arising phenomena. And if it was not worthwhile to have this come out of my mouth today, and you felt like you're a captive audience. And I apologize. And whatever I said that was foolish today. You can leave Hear when you leave, don't take it with you. So, thank you