

# 2012-03-05 Practice And Busy Life

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## SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

Now that it's time for that was the Dharma talk. Now we'll have the second Dharma talk. So the second Dharma talk I actually want to be maybe a prelude to this. I just say that how much I appreciate coming here Monday evenings to sit, I think it's a beautiful thing to come and sit and sit the group of people and, and spend this time I think it's something very, very, very, you know, you could of course have meditated alone at home or someplace. But I think I feel certain they feel a certain benefit and inspiration and, and certain kind of meaningfulness coming to sit with people like you and so anyway, just just the end of the sitting I feel grateful and want to express that to all of you for that. So, yesterday I met with someone who's been practitioner here for some time. And to my delight, he did something unusual, which I wish people would do more often. He criticized me. And there was a lot of criticisms of the right word, but there was a critique. And that's how I heard it. And that critique was the critique was something like this. I don't know if I can represent it well.

A lot of people, not everyone, but a lot of people in our kind of modern society scene here are living very busy lives. They have jobs, it's sometimes required. are a lot of time they might have family and kids require a lot to have elderly parents perhaps a relative take care of their community responsibilities they have to do they have to clean bathrooms at IMC and there's some people have a lot a lot going on. And it doesn't seem that you will ever talk about how to practice with being busy with doing a lot. It seems that the bias among with not just you, but also the Dharma teachers, or the assumption is that you're supposed to be kind of livid, calm, relaxed life with lots of space and just kind of float between things and person didn't say like this, but I heard it this way you kind of, you know, float on the cloud and just be relaxed and not have anything really not have really anything to do and no attachments and no concerns but somehow managed to take care of everything at the same time. Somehow things get done magically in, the more enlightened you are, the more the more you get done, the more you're accomplished by doing it while you do nothing.

Or something like that. And, and so but, and so this person said, but a lot of people don't have those kinds of lives and they're actually quite busy. And I've listened to many Dharma talks, many teachers and there's no just everything you talk about what to do when you have a prepared life that's packed and full and how do you manage that in practice with it? So I thought I would offer some reflections on that topic today. And see how we managed with that.

So first I think I'll say that to make a plug for doing less. I when when I think people have been doing a lot since the time of the Buddha, it isn't like this is a new thing, even though we keep saying, you know, the modern times people are so busy and I was just reflecting today that, you know that, you know, people work so much. In the 1970s when I was working for the Zen center, San Francisco, I had to

work five and a half days a week. And then I had to go back to the Zen center Sundays and wax the floor. You know, so that there was a lot of work. Five and a half days a week, practicing the floor and Sunday's a day off. There was a lot going on, and there was a Zen center. The weather Has Been a long tradition in Buddhism. And I think in most spiritual circles, that in order to let the heart settle the mind settle, in order to find some kind of degree of peace or settle must not be. So it really helps not to be agitated, to have some degree of insight. And to see clearly into yourself and into life, it helps if you're not agitated, your mind's not spinning. And so realistically, what helps your mind not to spin to be agitated to run around? And one of the things let's say it's the only thing or the necessary thing, but one of the things is to give yourself lots of time. Time is a really precious commodity for people involved in spiritual practice. And I think perhaps that's one of the reasons why they have Sabbath in some some circles. And you take a real time and real break. I called I rather than calling it seven I'd call it to set time for sacred leisure. Because there's something to be said about being variable. efficient, not getting a lot done, so that something can settle. And I don't live that way all the time. Sometimes I'm very I do a lot of different things. But there have been periods in my life where I've had lots of this Sabbath or sacred leisure, lots of time to do very little going on retreats is one of those things. And it's been really, really important for me. And what happens in those kinds of settings, the subtle Miss of the settling of the heart, the settling of the mind, informs how I live my life with my life is busy. It's there, it's kind of in there. In the mix. It kind of shows me how to be internally as I tried to do a lot. And what I found is when you take time to be on retreat, time to meditate, some sacred leisure or sacred quiet time or something like that, that it allows something that's shy inside of us something that doesn't come very easily to come forth and be known. And some of the I think some of the Beautiful qualities of heart all too easily covered over when we're busy agitated, and if some of our you know, and some people who don't feel that they're beautiful inside, it's probably because they're spinning around, they're agitated, and you can't see very deeply that way. But if you get quiet, I think most people see it, we'll see their beauty. Everybody's beautiful inside. So the idea of kind of settling. Now, if you're spinning and agitated, and you feel anxious or upset or suffering a lot, and you just make yourself you try to fix that by doing more. You're not going to have the time to settle and discover what's inside. And in that regard, sometimes adding meditation to a busy life is underarm ik. Adding meditation to a busy life or adding some kind of practice coming to IMC and listening to teachings or sitting here and a busy life is just too much The mirror, sometimes when people are Monday night, you're probably better off going home or going to sleep early. Sometimes rather than coming here because people are so packed and sometimes not getting enough sleep and just trying to add all this stuff to their lives. So that was a whole plug. So there is a very important place we're doing less being less busy. And I think one of the important tasks of any human life is to spend some time not meditating not but rather spend some time reflecting contemplating deeply what your life is about, what are your priorities, what are you trying to accomplish in your life? what's meaningful for your life? And do you have the right priorities going?

And it's easy to get become greedy and want to do everything or too much. It's easy to pursue, have pursuits that might seem in some sense, important and valuable, but they don't really conducive to discussion. Bring the beauty in your heart that are some of the more wonderful qualities of who we are. So part of this having a busy life, I would hope that people are really deeply reflective, considered considered deliberate about that life they're living. And I think there's plenty of people in our society who don't really aren't really deliberate don't really think deeply about their life. There was a friend of mine who came to went to her teacher, Buddhist teacher, and said, I'm really busy and have a lot going on is running around doing this and that and exactly how she said it to him. But you know, it's a little bit of a problem how much I am kind of tired from all the stuff I do, but and, and her teachers response stopped her in her tracks. She said to me completely uninspired. For her, because he or she was a very capable person she was had really good work and very successful and doing a lot of different things everywhere. And he looked at her and he said, the reason you're doing so much is because you're lazy.

That's Dr. Because that's the amount that didn't seem logical, right. And so she thought she should because her teacher said that to her, she thought about it for a while. And after a while, she realized it was true. He was lazy in the sense that she didn't want to do the difficult work of looking at herself deeply. It was easier to stay busy and not face herself, that face what was going on. I'd look at your priorities and what's going on. So there's a constant sometimes moving and moving and moving, is not really sometimes healthy for people to do. So, to reflect and consider one's life, look around. intentions, priorities, what's meaningful? Is it one of the important tasks in life? And, and sometimes people I think are better off spending time, carefully thinking and reflecting about what they want their life to be about, then they, it's more important to that than it is to meditate. And I sometimes had very good, very, very intentionally said, don't meditate, but go off and spend that time thinking about what your life's about what's important for you, because some people don't do it. Some people don't do it a whole lifetime. What's most most valuable for you to do? And then based on that, then maybe you can rearrange things. The other thing is that so what about when you're busy? There are times when there's a lot going on, and you have to do a lot of different things. And that's what the name of the game is. So what do you do then? What do you do when You don't even have time to meditate. One option is to feel guilty. You know, we're not a bad Buddhist, bad practitioner, I hope no one knows. You know, as you know, because you know, you're supposed to meditate every day, Gil says, but there are times when meditation, you know, I think it's given what's going on in life. I think it's a very busy life. certain periods of time where I think what I've done that situations, I've stopped meditating, it just was. So I'll give you some examples. I found through a little bit of struggle, that for me, given who I am, or my home situation was like, the first year of both my son's lives. I stopped meditating at home. It just didn't work to try to fit to fit it in. I mean, I don't know it doesn't it's not large enough to look back. I must have amnesia because it doesn't matter. logical, right? You should have time to meditate and you know, home and, you know this, you know, this, they sleep sometimes don't they? But sort of the parents, the dry too. So anyway, so that was, you know, it was it was just it was it was too much suffering to try to keep meditating and forcing it in and you know, just better just get up. And that's not the name of the game. And so if that's sometimes you have some situations in life where you just have to give up something, even something that's very valuable for you in order to have a same life.

So today, someone told me what the acronym for chaos is. Chaos is Children helping adults avoid Saturday

So and then the other time I've given up meditation was when I was writing my dissertation. And when I had to really kind of had three months block of time where I poured myself into trying to do the bulk of or finished my dissertation was working on and, and so I just kind of dropped everything in my life, I couldn't have kids then to drop everything in life, and stay at home. And I didn't leave home, except once during those three months, and my wife took care of everything that that'd be taken care of. She went shopping and stuff and, and I just worked and worked and worked. And I didn't meditate during that time. I just get up and work. You know, I should work all the time. And that for me, the kind of person I am and the kind of activity it was, it just seemed like the only way was gonna get done was I was going to, I tried to pour myself into this one activity for this period of time, just give myself over to it. There's something about giving yourself over completely to an activity, which is a kind of practice. And itself. It's kind of a simplifies things. It's a lot of letting go that goes on. And, and I found that very, very helpful, at least the first 10 weeks. And so I just gave her gave up on meditation. And now the cost of that I knew there was a cost to that. And the cost was that my mind got more agitated. I didn't feel as settled. And but I decided that that was I'd put myself on this course, to do a doctorate. It's a big deal. And I don't know what was the best choice design, best choice I could have made. But I made it a choice and I was going to finish it. And the cost of that decision to finish this endeavor was I had to be willing to sacrifice some of the quality of my mind in order to see through. So to hold on to a high quality

of mind which you know, I am capable of handling was not the name of the game given at least how I could find my way. So there the example was how to do a busy life a full life a very, you know, a lot of demands was to sacrifice certain quality of mind in order to do this one thing really well or well enough, but hopefully really well you did well, but something else I learned about I learned a lot about also about practicing in busy very active situations. When I worked as a fast order cook at greens restaurant, so I was practicing in Zen center. And Zen center still has this restaurant in in fourth Mason. So in the early 1980s, I was worked as a cook there. And you know, there would be lineup bus cooks, I don't know how many of us, seven of us, eight of us something and we would feed something like two to 300 people for lunch over two hour period and it was really fast. If I had just kind of, you know, I was, you know, making the pizzas and just kind of like feeling the dough. Enjoying the dough and my hands, the fields, smelling it, playing it down. Taking a deep breath, closing my eyes, feeling my intention, pausing picking up the roller and roll. You know if it wouldn't have worked at the restaurant that that wasn't, that's a fine thing to do in certain settings. It's a beautiful thing to do. And that's one of the ways we set up retreats so that there you can sometimes do things slower and be mindful. It's a beautiful thing to do. But that's not the appropriate practice in a restaurant like that, and so there, there has to be very fast. And so what I did there Was my practice was, I gave myself again over completely to whatever was needed. And the practice, my practice was to give up my resistance to notice how I held myself back and how I resisted or how I complained or how I didn't want or this, that, and that my practice was to let go of that so I can be fully into whatever is doing. And there was this kind of amazingly dance, you know, in the kitchen, you know, spinning around and getting pots and pans and lifting and moving and putting things together and, and if I could get out of the way,

as much as I could of that activity and just be completely there for that activity. I would leave at the end of the shift, more relaxed and more calm than before I started. So the fact that it was a very busy and active activity, that did not mean that it agitated the mind. It's not the business or the activity that agitates the mind, but how you do that activity and so giving myself over completely to that one activity and letting go of my resistance to it for me was very important. Part of that was also was I changed in my for me the word I used for mindfulness I sometimes I find it useful in my practice like to use synonyms for mindfulness because mindfulness who knows what that is. But, but the so one synonym I like his participation. So some situations what's called for is not mindfulness, but participation. Let me participate fully here for this there has to be some mindfulness attention to participate. Let me another synonym I like is intimacy. So sometimes I like to know how can be more intimate with the situation. So sometimes changing how I understand the practice has been part of it. Adjusting myself to the demands of busy, busy situations being a busy life. Sometimes it's also realizing being very conscious about the sacrifice in the quality of my mind when it's made me You know, when I haven't felt so centered doing it. And sometimes I've found ways to enter it fully. It's very settling. One of the things I found that's been very helpful is the principle of doing one thing all the way through doing one thing not doing a lot. So in the restaurant, you know, there was a lot going on. And so that was the one thing was just cooking. You know, it wasn't just the pizza. This dough, you know, it was like, you know, was tracking we had to track a lot. But in but like I can see at home sometimes. There's a lot going on at home, right? There's a lot to do cleaning and laundry and kids and breakfasts and you know, all things have to be done. And, and when the kids were younger, my two boys were younger now it's that period is over. But by the time that I got them to school I was exhausted. I was ready for a nap. So, but one of the things I found was to, to do just one thing to know what I had to do to know what task this task was, and not get sidetracked because I have an ability to get sidetracked where I'm going into the laundry room to get the laundry. That's what I'm set to do. And then I noticed something on the way that needs to be cleaned or needs to be picked up or needs to be done. It seems reasonable to take care of it. But I find that actually the whole thing works better if I have a very clear idea of what I'm doing right now. And then see it all the way through Go to the laundry room, take care of the laundry, don't get distracted. And then when that's

done, go on to the next thing. So just trying not to get scattered in what I do has been one way I've managed with a lot of things happening at once. Another thing that I've done just okay to keep going and not not, you know, you guys not getting impatient, you have things to do, and this isn't this is not you know, this is not really speaking to your concerns, and you have a lot to do. So, another interesting thing I've learned and work, it's you have to change your strategy. I thought I was going to different situations call for different things that like one approach works, everything works in all situations. So one thing I've learned is that sometimes when I feel I feel I have an internal feeling of pressure that I'm not managing to keep up with everything, there's so much going on I have to do and it's a little bit different than having A lot to do and doing it. But this internal kind of anxiousness or pressure, not getting enough feel like Sisyphus pushing up the rock forever. So I feel like I'm specifically not like I can't get it all done. And there's a lot of there's not enough time anyway to do it all. When I have that feeling, there's some times when the best thing I can do is to stop it all and meditate. And it seems like there's inside of me, some part of me says, You're crazy. You know, you don't have enough time to do what you're doing what you have to do, how could you stop and meditate?

And I'll sometimes meditate for 10 to 15 minutes. And after that period of meditation, I have a lot more time. And how did that happen? Magic. And there's something there's something about the mystery of conscience and that consciousness but conceptualization, how the mind conceives of life itself. And time, time is a concept of the mind. participates in creating, it's not just a matter of what how the second hand ticks and, and so there's something about how we relate to the notion of time that has something to do with the mental activity. And if the mental activity is spinning out in a certain way, time appears differently than if your mental activity is operating a different way. And so I've seen many, many times where I've had so much more time after I meditated, I think probably what happens is they don't feel so claustrophobic, so caught by all the demands and concerns. And so I've let go enough that I can then I can kind of engage more efficiently in what I'm doing. So that's been important. These little short periods of time have been important for me. The other thing is reframing. What how one understands what practice is with mindfulness practices or how it's done because I think some people don't have very Very, no very, I have a very limited understanding of what mindfulness practices or Buddhist practices or spiritual practices are, how it's applied in different situations. So in some situations where you're really busy, maybe you can't meditate. It's not it's not happening. So don't try to suffer if you tried to force it in. But it doesn't mean you could mean to stop practicing. don't define practice by only meditation. Maybe the most powerful thing was useful practice in a very busy situation, busy life is to focus on your speech. And pay attention to what you say. Be mindful, as mindful as you can. Hopefully, that's not going to slow you down. And you can just do two things just as fast and just as much, but you put all your mindful attention to notice what motivates you to speak and what you say And try to speak, you'll learn a lot about yourself and you'll save yourself a lot of problems. If when you're really busy and harried if you're paying attention to your speech, because that's most likely time when people make mistakes socially. And so the practice becomes a practice of mindfulness and speech in those situations. And it might not make you calm and settled. But I don't want to you shouldn't measure your meditation practice or your spirits Buddhist practice by how calm you are. It might be more interesting to measure it by your ethics. The fact that you haven't caused any harm today, and how are you most likely to cause harm? I suspect I don't want to generalize and put you all in a box I apologize if I you know, if you feel like I'm judging and judging you or kind of limiting you, but my guess that most of you most if you're if you're going to harm most of you, people here, do it through yours. Words. That's my guess. But maybe you do it other ways. But so today is to switch the kind of practice you do. So you find a practice that you can do that make sense, when your life is really busy and lots going on, so you can work on something else, like your work, for example, on your speech and your ethics. One of the things that I try to do when I'm very busy is I try to that's a good idea all the time. So it means not fair to use as an example. But I think about this when I'm really busy, is I try to be in my body, try to be



connected to my body. Because I find that when I'm busy, I tend to go into my mind. And so I try to come back and do all the things I have to do while being in my body at the same time. So it's time to cultivate mindfulness to the body. Or perhaps when these things are really busy. It's a time to practice generosity, or kindness, friendliness, and don't underestimate the value of practicing friendliness. Try to be friendly to someone to people you encounter while you do things. You know, as you're rushing down the hallway at least saying, you know, nice to see you or did I shirt? All right? No, she's an unkind so we have five minutes before supposed to end. And so I don't know how I've done in terms of responding to the criticism that we never talked about this kind of thing.

But maybe the last five minutes if you have some comments that you'd like to make, maybe you have some wonderful approach of how to practice or how to be wise in a life that's really busy. That I haven't mentioned would be nice to hear. Yes, please.

I found that makes a big difference how I frame a situation. So if something happens at work, and it's out of these guys in this department, they're just idiots and you know, it's a lot more wearing. So at the end of the day, I'm tired, I'm cranky. Whereas if I frame it with more of a, maybe trying to understand where they're coming from what they're trying to accomplish, I may still disagree with what they're doing. But at the end of the day, I'm more relaxed I have more energy more at peace.

So reframing It is useful. So what are the reframes that it sounds like you know, since we're kind of a man is often a reference point for some people is in Buddhism is a monastery. If only if only I could change my life I chrome that can get to the monastery. There. Things are calm, people float on clouds, lots of time. Everyone's harmonious, everyone gets a long and I've been in enough monasteries, I've been enough centers to know that How many people from outside think it's ideal and once they come on the inside, they see it's you know, it's the people who need to be in monasteries who were there.

So. So one of the one of the reframes that one of the reframes that I've used for people that suggested to people is when you have a lot of demands at work, think of your work as your monastery. And your difficult boss as your Abbot. See, I see if that changes a little bit, sir, someone else? Yes, here is the other Mikey commitment back to green light on that side. On the side

world It was wonderful, you get an A, by the way.

For me, it would seem to be the thing I in fact, I was just talking to my wife before we came in, how chaotic My life was.

coming in today,

we know we're doing some engineering on a device and we've forgotten a number of things. And this is not unusual. I mean, you know, when you're dealing with physical reality, it's, you know, it's not very mouth malleable. It, it's sometimes you know, you you just forgot something or you failed to do something in terms of analyzing a problem and, and so you have to recognize that it's part of life. And if you I sometimes reflect that it's my fault, or it's the fault of somebody else in the group, or, you know, how can we be sure Stupid, and a lot of self criticism and all that. So part of the reframe is to

understand that things will often go wrong. Yes. And so the idea in Buddhism they have, some Buddhists often have the idea of impermanence. And so when things are impermanent, things don't work out. It's rather than being disappointed or shocked, like Oh, of course, of course, it's not didn't

work. Of course, it didn't work. And so rather than being pulled down by that, it's, it's okay, let's get to work. Let's take it to the next step.

Yes, um, and going back and just recognizing that that is just part of the process and that there. The great thing about being an engineer or something like that is you learn that through this process, and then you go back to your group and you you, you find a way around the problem or a way to fix it.

So I suppose some of that is just appreciating the fact Process appreciate is a long process it's things often don't go right. So I think not getting caught by expectations of how things are supposed to be and then being able to be able to kind of work with all the when your busy life sometimes it's hard to work with the disasters that pop up suddenly that make it even harder. But you're saying that you have it helps you to be to see it as a process. Good. Maybe one more tall, straight back.

Working maybe the battery's low isn't it, maybe give him the other mic.

It's green. There we go.

So I

meditated for, I guess, some number of years with, with SN Goenka, who sort of, in that tradition, they insisted, right? If you're serious, you meditate an hour in the morning and they're an evening. And it took me a while to establish that practice. And they this advice they gave us, you know, just take year and no matter what happens, I'm gonna sit like this. And I found that after a year, no matter what I did, and nothing bad happened, and I did my PhD and, and I found this in my life that in making these choices, like, if I'm going to go into work and spend the day programming, I won't go unless I swim, because I know that I will be stressed. And I would rather just not be productive at all, then go and have that day. And I think there's this kind of warrior like quality of making the choice. This is what I want from my life. This is what is important. And there is a lot of fear in us that something bad is going to happen. If we take the time out for that piece, I think that the turning towards again and again being like, no, I choose this, which is this, my guess

right? So I started the talk off by sport to look at your priorities and your values and what's important for you, because it's so easy to get sidetracked and to other things. So entry is an interesting thing to consider reflect on. For some people, is, you know, you some people say I have a hard time having time to meditate, finding time to meditate, you know, it's hard to fit into busy life. But if you really step back and look at what you do during the course of the day, how much time do you watch television? How much time do you surf the web, the web then read the news or something and how much time do you do think That, that in a week or in a month, you'll have freedom forgotten who did you don't remember anything about it? And is this really necessary part of your day? And you know, my hope is that people spend less time watching TV then meditating. Wouldn't it be nice if the proportions got changed in our society? So I don't know if you all do so now those of you who aren't busy sorry for today but it seems to be you know, pretty common many people and sooner or later you will be so I hope it's been okay and I wish you all well and drive home calmly