

2012-07-29 The Ease of A Curious Mind

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SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

Good morning, and I also have a few announcements. One is that Diane Tatro, who has been hosting the potlucks here at IMC for over 10 years, I believe back before we even moved here, ready to stop doing it. And so we're looking for someone else. So it's a great contribution to our community, to be the host for the Sunday, once a month, end of the end of the month potlucks, and I don't think it's too demanding, but it means they'll be supervising the events so that things get set up and, and properly and then things get that cleaned up at the end properly and kind of supervising at all. So it's kind of like being, you know, the grand gracious hosts for the rest of us in our practice community for that particular event. That unsaid that someone would like to do. It is not required to make the monthly announcements that she does not do if you're shy and you want to stand in front say there's no potluck or potluck next week, you don't have to someone else can do that. But if anybody is interested in doing that for a community, it's very much appreciated. And you can talk to me or talk to Hillary who's not here today, their volunteer coordinator for us. Another announcement is that Steve gastner here is sitting on a chair that is different from all the other chairs.

He knew he knew to find it today. And we're, we were testing it because we were you know, we're creating this retreat center. And we need to have chairs in the meditation hall. And so we want to choose chairs that would work well and a fair amount of research has gone into chairs and We've also have many years experience with the chairs here. And, and realize that probably these chairs don't work so well. So, we're going to try another chair as well. So if you want to try out the chair, you can ask Steve just step off and after the Dharma talk and try it. But also there's an idea now that maybe we should also replace these chairs with those as well. And hope some people you know, for long sets is still a bit hard these chairs and people use cushions and, and I tried this chair out recently on Friday or something the other day and, and satin and enjoyed it and all that and, and then I moved over and sat in one of our old chairs. And the contrast was shocking to me. I said we were giving these hadn't hadn't realized Come on, until I saw that contrast with what you guys are sitting On.

Yeah. And so, you know, you may wish to keep those chairs. So we've motivated you to learn how to sit on the floor. It's very comfortable, you know, anyway, if you want to, if you would like to try out that chair later and tell us what you think and what do you think that'll work for here as well. There'll be a nice nice information to have from you. And, and then there's a Bruce Friedman is where he he's not at all so he's out there. He's kind of in the burgundy shirt and beard and smiles a lot. And, and he's, he's happy or at least willing to take all the information about you when it should come and share your opinions. And what else? Okay, then the last thing is that I won't be here for the next series of Sundays in August. And there'll be a series of other speakers who will come and speak right now. You'll be Well, well, well taught, I'm sure. Okay.

So as a way into today's talk, I'd like to do the opening verses of the Dhammapada. I'm fond of pointing out that there is no opening words to the Buddhist Bible, the Buddhist scriptures, but if anything was the opening words, like the book of the opening of Genesis is the beginning of the Bible. It would be these verses here. And the contrast between how the book of Genesis begins with focusing on God stands out with how this beginning of the Buddhist scriptures began not by focusing on God, but rather focusing on your own mind, a different source with different beginning and Buddhism in a sense, it all begins with your mind as a post to I suppose in Genesis It All Begins with God. So, you know different theology different approach maybe. So, this is the first two verses go like this. All experience is preceded by mind, led by mind made by mind, speak or act with a corrupted mind and suffering follows, as the wagon wheel follows the hoof of the ox. All experience is preceded by mind, led by mind made by mind, speak or act with a peaceful mind and happiness follows like a never departing shadow. So, here the emphasis on the role of the mind and experience here means that what you experience the experiences Not something external from you. But it has to do with the interplay between the world that you're in, and your relationship to how you perceive it and interact with it contributes to what you call the experience, your experience you have. And, and all your experience here in Buddhism is somehow made by the mind the mind has a really important role in this. And then this very significant statement where if you speak and act as if your mind behaves a certain way, if it's here, it's a word is corrupted. This will bring suffering suffering follows. And the image here is of ox that's pulling a cart. The ox is imagine a very cart that's full of rocks really heavy, it's a lot of work for the ox, to pull the cart. And so is the image of kind of being burdened or being you know, kind of suffering and you're it's pulling along the car the cart will follow directly the weight, weight will follow you. The karma will follow you And then the second one is if you speak or act with a mind that's peaceful, a different kind of mind that has a different effect on you there's a different result. And, and here it says happiness follows. And the image here is not one of being heavy and weighed down. But the image of a never departing shadow, it still follows you around, but there's no burden to have a shadow. Most people are not burdened by shadows, you know, you know, it just follows in light, weightless way, it's easy, and so that happiness follows that way. So, the weight of your suffering and the lightness of happiness depending on how you your mind functions. So this is an important verse in Buddhism. And it lends itself to a variety of different interpretations. And how you interpret something like this is an important to consider because the act of interpretation could be done with a corrupted mind and are a peaceful mind. So, the very instructions here in a sense is even if you're going to interpret this or use this, these sets of verses, look and see how your mind is relating to it, how it's holding it. So I don't know if you prefer the word corrupted but to go along with it if you're willing to go along with it right right right now. If you latch on to this teaching in a hard and fast and dogmatic way, and maybe you're frightened away or and say, Oh, I better not corrupted, no one should be corrupted. And now I can't do those bad things. Now I have to get it now. I have to be a good person and be a peaceful person. And now I have to be my guard and I have to tighten up and just Okay, now I got to be good Buddhist. From the point of view of these verses, that would be a corrupted mind. to relate that way because it's a mind that tightens up that reacts, that gets stiff that near As the possibilities for us another interpretation other approach would be, rather than react or you know, force me to react against it. What are these Buddhists know?

You know and corrupted, you know, they're so they're so puritanical these words and, you know, and this emphasis on the mind and everything made by the mind and talk would that be, you know, in, in protest, that's another way. But if you again, if you look at the mind that's making that kind of evaluation, it's possible if you look at it, that you'll see that reacting negatively is also involves a contraction and a stiffness and hardness, which it doesn't feel so good to have. A third approach would be one of curiosity. One of saying, Well, how does this work? What is this about? This is an interesting statement. Gail made this very dramatic opening statement about how this contrast with the book of Genesis and

You know, that's a that was a big thing to say. And you probably doesn't know anything about the book of Genesis but but it, it's still important for him did make that statement so what is it about this? What is it about this verse? What is it about this teaching? It focuses on the mind. So how is this true in some ways for me? How could I look at my mind? Can I see this working in my mind? What is my mind? The mind is so important here. What is this mind? Oh, I wonder what it is what goes on in my mind? How does what? And here it talks about two different functions of the mind. It makes a dichotomy or the distinction between what here's called corrupted and peaceful, are there distinction are the different ways in my mind functions. What happens if I if I'm curious about this and open up and look at it? to approach these verses with that kind of curiosity lends itself to being more open. A sense of wonder, a sense of possibility, sense of like, let's look at it. There's many possibilities. Let's find out. And the suggestion I have here is that that that kind of approach to being curious to wondering what's going on to look at what's happening here, stepping back and being curious opposed to locking in, for against these kinds of statements in that curiosity and that wondering and that opening to possibility, what is here is found freedom is found some kind of peaceful mind. The peaceful of a kind of peaceful mind is found by being curious, interested, not reactive, not clinging to something. So the tendency in Buddhism to emphasis in especially in our school of Buddhism, is to keep turning attention back and look at the quality of the mind the activity of the mind and the consequences of that activity. And how do you hold beliefs like Buddhist teachings is not as a how you hold them. It may be less than Working for us than what you believe. Because you could hold, you could hold you can resist teachings, you could be dogmatic and fundamentalist holding on to teachings religious teachings, were they tight? Or you could have you can have teachings and how you hold them could be one of this is interesting. This makes me curious, this makes me want to wonder what's going on here. Let me see how it works. Let me see what's going on. And so the teachings are held in a very open light way that facilitates the sense of wonder or investigation or a sense of exploring what's possible. So there was a two weeks ago I gave a talk here on willpower. And after I gave a talk, someone sent me a Scientific American article on wheel willpower that and it was very interesting article little article and referred to A an experiment, a psychological experiment that had been done. where two sets of people were given the same puzzle problem to solve it was kind of an anagram was like they gave them a word and the puzzle was to figure out, what are their words can you make with the letters of that word? So, so, you know, but so they divide into two groups. And one group, they said to them, you're going to do this experiment. This is what you're going to do is to figure out what what other words you can make from this. The other group, they asked something like they said to them, spend a little bit time now wondering what it'd be like to do this kind of puzzle. One group, they said, you will Do the puzzle. The other group, they said something more like would you be willing to do this puzzle?

And then they did that puzzle and they saw the results. And the people who were instructed to, to wonder more or to open ended would be willing to do this or what would it be like for you to do this? scored much higher. On the experiment, those who were told you will do this scored, scored not as well. And the theory or they're kind of the that researchers make as a result from this was that the idea of being willing opens the mind for greater possibilities, makes the mind wander more, the idea of you will tightens things up and then you will do it. And so the role of willingness to how how the mind is and maybe we don't want to call strong will corrupted, but strong when when you have a strong have tight determination. This has to be this way. Even in practice and meditating, this has to be this way I have to get focused and concentrated, you narrow the possibilities and you lose a certain kind of freedom. But if you come with the question of what would it be like to get concentrated? What would it be like to explore? They get to know the mind want to be liked? What's it like to be mindful? I suppose, I suppose to be mindful. And suppose you know, I have to be mindful, or else there's disasters going to happen when he's only like, what is this mind? So the approach of practice, I think that mindfulness that really helps is to have more sense of this willingness, open curiosity, what is this mind what goes on in this

mind? What happens in this mind? And so if we start looking at our mind, and there's a number of areas that I think is helpful to investigate and get to know the nice trick about this is that as you're wondering Looking in your mind, you're in the present moment. But now you're in the present moment with a sense of curiosity and interest as opposed to a sense of duty. So maybe a little bit easier sometimes in a sense of duty. Or maybe it's maybe it's not as easy to be in the present moment with that open wondering, in the short term, but maybe in the long term, you can sustain it much longer and settle into it. To be too willful and kind of like gotta do this takes a lot of extra effort and energy. That's a strain that will wear you down after a while. And then you have to kind of tighten up even more. But if you have this more sense of wonder and look what's going on here, your mind might wander more a little bit in the beginning, but it might be more sustainable and you settle down over time to become more focused and concentrating. So what goes on so to look at the mind what's going on here. One of the real interesting things to look at. Be mindful of, is what it's like for your mind to be not concentrated. what it's like for your mind not to be mindful what's like for the mind not to be present? What's going on for you be curious, what is the thinking mind? Like, usually because people are thinking a lot. And so instead of thinking I gotta stop thinking get focused here. Because that narrows things, but rather, what is this thinking mind about? What's happening me I think and then perhaps let go of it with a question what happens if I let go what happens if I'm not so focused on my thoughts? As opposed to I'm shouldn't be focused on my thoughts. I'm supposed to be free of thoughts. But what happens if I let go? Maybe it's easier for the mind to be willing to let go a little bit. My wife, I told this, my wife this morning little bit about this experiment. And she said to me, Oh, she read Recently, in this book on willpower I read further than I had. So there's a chapter here talks about people who diet. dieting is a big issue and for many people, and then and there's a very huge percentage of dieting failures, right people who say I'm gonna diet, and I'm gonna do it and then you know, they can't keep it up. So they did experiments or they studied people who diet and they found that the P there's a look at three groups of people, the people who weren't in diet at all the people who determined they're going to diet and eat better or whatever. And the third group was the ones who approached a dieting was I'm not going to eat this now but I'm going to do it later. And then they studied you know, who had the best success in dieting or eating less or whatever.

As the people who said later, who had the greater success, I'm going to, I'm going to put it off for later that people who said, I'm going to not going to do this, and if, you know it lends itself to being fixed and tight, I'm not going to resist it. And perhaps the mind then it takes a lot of effort and energy for the mind to do that, then it evolves resistance and struggle, which when you're struggling, it takes a lot of energy, effort. And people cannot can't human being can't sustain endless effort. And so at some point we get in. But if you ask, but if you say later, it takes less willpower. It takes less effort and energy to say later because you're not resisting it so much. And then later, your chances are you're not going to do it. The wave of desire and, and, and, you know, his past. I mean, I've had I've had desires for food. And it seemed like it was pretty imperative To have that ice cream, like now the most important thing in the world and I see it with my kids, it has to be now. But then, and 10 minutes later and half an hour later An hour later I hardly remember that I had that desire. A day later, I don't even remember I had the ice cream. So the idea of later, you know, so it's not so tight. So to look at something meditation, how does this translate? What does this mean meditation to look at the mind and see what's going on? and not have a fixed idea? It has to be this way. I have to have a concentrated manner. All right, I can't be this kind of person. I can't be this kind of way. If everyone here knew what I was thinking, your meditation, you know, it would just be certainly embarrassing, but they'd know that I shouldn't be in a Buddhist center right? You know, this is bad. But the approach of this, you know, to have those, that's all all approaches which are counterproductive that tightens up. What happens if the approach is more curiosity and wonder, what is this mine? How does it work? And what is it like if I let go for a little while I can't say stop thinking, like, I can't die it I'm gonna start dieting. But you can say, I'm going to think

about this later. Maybe this is good that I'm thinking about, but I'll think about it later. As opposed to No. After meditation, I'll think about it. Maybe that's more conducive, more helpful for the mind to be relaxed and calm, and open up and be willing to open up into the present moment and you're further away. And so we start looking at the mind and looking at what's going on. So what are the interesting to look at, we're thinking, and thinking is often where people struggle with meditation is to look at the difference between Clean a mind that's involved in thinking and a mind that's not caught up in thinking. And so that study that investigation works best. If you have a little bit of a contrast, visceral kind of experience that you haven't experienced contrast between when your mind is common settled, and not so caught up in thought. And when your mind is caught up in thought, and to see that difference, and sometimes if you're lucky enough, settled enough, you can notice your mind is caught up in thinking you're involved in thinking that's what you're absorbed in. And then perhaps you can let go of it enough that you see what it's like when your mind is not caught up in it. And some people report the difference this way. That when the mind is caught up, obsessed with thinking involved in lostness thoughts, there's a way in which the mind seems darkened, narrowed, constricted, tight. Last on itself, but when the mind It switches to let go with those obsession not be so locked into those thoughts, but becomes more mindful more, lets go of them. The mind feels more light or light in the mind luminosity, mind, openness, the mind space in the mind, clarity of the mind, peacefulness of the mind. There's this there's the experience of our own mind changes whether we're caught up in what we're thinking about, or not caught up in it. And that contrast is very interesting to be curious, what's this like? And then where do you want to be? What would you rather have your, your mind be right? Have the mind being dark and caught up and constricted? Or would you rather have it open and light and more spacious? That question I think, not to say you should one or the other. But to have that question, what is it better for me? What is more useful, what is more pleasant what's more enjoyable, what feels free here?

Some point people who are meditators, I think, could begin asking this question. Because as you as you begin getting into meditation, you have started understanding that you have a greater range of possibilities of how to conduct your mind, how your mind can be. And so rather than means, kind of stuck with the mind that you have every day going through your life, you realize that there are other options for how you can be with your mind. And so then perhaps you can begin, not because you should choose to do them. But because it's nicer to choose to do them, you start choosing a peaceful way of being a more open way of being. So that's when we're thinking other thing is your desires to notice how you're related to desire. What's it like when you're in the in the grips of a desire? And what's it like when you're not in the grips of it? What's the quality of the mind? what's the what's the possibilities of the mind one way versus the other way? What happens when you're in the grip of hate and aversion? He'll We'll, and what happens when in contrast when you're not? What's the quality of the mind, then what's the situation in the mind then? And what are the consequences of the mind that's causing desire? What's the consequence in the mind that's caught? In ill will? And what's the consequence of the mind which is not? So it's a stepping back and wondering, what is this like, What's going on here? What's happening, and in that wondering, and then stepping back and being curious, there is greater autonomy, greater freedom, and greater choice, which in and of itself, feels better. It feels good. To live a life that has very little choice, very little autonomy doesn't feel so good. From the point of view of stepping back and having autonomy from the point of view of being lost in your obsessions. It can seem like your obsessions and your beliefs and your desires and your versions is the most important thing in the world. But if you step back then You maybe you realize that there's a better quality of greater happiness, a peaceful mind that leads to greater happiness. So, how do we relate to the act mind? How do we understand the mind? How would you like your mind to conduct itself and to be? What is a useful way of being in your mind? When you sit down to meditate? Do you sit down? How do you sit down? What's your attitude as you sit down to meditate? Do you have a should? Do you have a requirement? Do you have a black and white thing? Like I can't do this I have to be this

way. Or do you sit down with more of a sense of curiosity and interest in what is going on? What's happening? How is it functioning? Now my mind what is going on now? How would it be if I run some experiments in the mind? What happens if I let go of thoughts? What happens if I you know, study and investigate? The nature of my desire as opposed to being in it, what happens to me look at this in the Explorer, let me get to know.

And then the last thing I'll say, then is the idea that behind all this, perhaps is a willingness to be present a willingness to explore a willingness to be concentrated a willingness to be mindful, as opposed to a willfulness for it. But it's not in one way or the other. And then one of the I think one of the great things is, is once you get to appreciate the peacefulness and the autonomy and the freedom that's found in a willingness and an openness and a wonder, then you can be very dedicated and vigilant and willful to stay willing. And rather than it being exhausting, it helps them Mind be refreshed. Because what you're committed to is a mind that's at ease. And so there can be a very powerful resolve and commitment to stay in the place of ease, to stay in that place of openness of wonder, without that strong commitment, constricting or narrowing or darkening the mind, but rather supporting the mind staying open and peaceful and presence. makes some sense. So, that's what I had. And I'm wondering what some of you think know that. So is there a mic over here and that side

so I'm wondering

Since we're on the topic of the mind, what it is I've always, not always I used to think, for a long time that the mind was the brain.

And now I think the mind is everywhere. Yeah, yeah, no. So you know, what, maybe it's a little entry point to this question is to say the brain is the hardware and the mind is the software. And so, you know, software can change. And you have to go to the store to get new hardware. But, you know, generally, humans don't get more new hardware for their brain. They're kind of like you're given the, you have, you know, author 2.0 or whatever. And you can get new software and so and so the, the mind in Buddhism is not a thing. It's not a thought, you know, it's not the brain, but rather is a series of processes is a process an activity and associated activity. That's why it's more like the operating of the software. It's the activity of how, what goes on the mind. And the activity and the processes of the mind are malleable and can take and change you're not stuck without those are an important part of Buddhist spirituality is, is beginning to help the mind become more more malleable than it is because sometimes it gets, the process gets locked into grooves. And there's, you know, there's attachment, then the mind is not so flexible, and so and so the processes are not so flexible. But as people relax and open up and more mindful, the mental processes become more malleable and softer. And then as they become malleable and softer, then it's also possible to begin choosing to strengthen certain processes of the mind and weaken others. And so part of Buddhist spirituality is to support those processes of mind that lead to greater wisdom and freedom. So things like developing more loving kindness or compassion, or mindfulness, more patience, more generosity, all these kinds of things can be done in such a way that they support the softening the opening that loosening up with the processes. Things like hate greed, tend to gum up the system. That makes some sense. We can thank our ancestors, that's for sure, because we've evolved these amazingly powerful minds that have a lot of different capacities. And there's a lot of multiple processes that are within us. And so the question is, which of these processes Do we want emphasize? We've evolved probably because at some point or other was really useful, to be greedy and have hate. Probably it helps certain tribes survive. But we also evolved to have tremendous generosity and nurturing and compassion and warmth, because that also probably helped people survive. And but somehow we'd all got mixed in together, right? So in there, because probably what was best for our ancestors was to have in the village people who could do all kinds of things

depending what was needed. And, but so we're multifunctional, and the question is, which was our inner functions do you want to give precedence to which are the most useful to develop and cultivate? And? And that asking that question, just asking that question is the beginning of a process of stepping back and not being a meshed in your mind. So just stepping back and you know, becoming autonomous, even autonomous, in your own mind, is a very important step in Buddhism. And I'm watching children grow up, and it's fascinating to watch them become more autonomous. And, you know, year by year, month by month, sometimes you see this greater capacity to be autonomous first from their parents, you know, and then from their own feelings and emotions and desires. And then also, you know, certain age kids become autonomous little bit from the moment to thank God. These kids sometimes are too much in the present moment. And, and so they're not kind of locked into the present moment anymore. So that's good. And then at some point, they have ability to self reflect and to kind of realize that, and, you know, see their thoughts and feelings and desires and, and start becoming more autonomous to them. And everything's not so consequential and the way it was before and so this process of autonomy can continue, and that's what Buddhist practice is partly doing is continuing that momentum, of growth of human development. So that at some point, we have the capacity to be autonomous from our own mind. Isn't that nice? And then, so then the question is, you know, If if there's if there's something which is autonomous from your own mind. What is that? For ask the question. So someone else? Maybe what maybe one more and then we'll stop for our potluck.

Yes, please. Could you use the mic please?

If all the decisions are made by the mind, then what is the role of the soul?

But the role of the soul? I don't know what the soul is, what is soul for you?

Is the consciousness inside me?

The the soul is a consciousness inside of you. Yes. So and what's your what's the role of your consciousness? It's

it's always preventing me in many ways. It's always it's always stopping me in many ways, always helping you in many ways, helping me stopping me to do something wrong.

So your consciousness system Not only be something that was conscious and aware of, but it's also helping you help them make decisions. Yes. But, but but you distinguish between consciousness and your mind?

Yes. How come?

Because your mind wants many things your mind is always behind, behind money behind desire behind lust behind pride behind greed. But some eights are conscious, that judges what's right and wrong in your mind is always wandering around.

So in that classic Buddhist psychology, what you're calling consciousness would be considered part part of the mind, because the mind has these different functions. But that mindfulness, for example, has that function that greater mindfulness you have the more wisdom you have to make these decisions and distinguish and of choice. One of the interesting distinctions to be made is between that part of the mind that's different in identifying me and I and that part of the mind can can function without that strong

identification and so it's possible to have Be conscious and aware without the extra added on I'm the one that aware that it was going on. But it's still a functioning of the mind to have that

you say that both yes and no inside the mind

yes or knows inside the mind.

Or yes isn't the mind and noise in the soul

series

are both Yes and No. in the mind, or is it just yes in the mind and no in the south? I can give an example. If I want to go and do a robbery my mind say yes, but somewhere must soul stops me from doing a robbery because it says it's not a good thing to wrong.

Yeah. So in Buddhism, there would, it's all happening within the mind. These things, but we have a different is there's we have a different relationship. There's different functioning. So the Mind functioning in different ways. And so just like maybe brain scientists will point out that they're different neurological centers in the brains were different things operate and different things happen. So my guess is if you put a person underneath the, you know, a CAT scan or something and studied their brain activity, you'd see that the person who is deciding to that when the decision is made to rob a bank, certain parts of the brain light up, and when when another part of the brain lights up, that sees that you're doing that, and decides not to do that, to different part of the brain is functioning. And then what they've with what scientists have seen, is that when people are doing are identifying and selfing, making self self stories about themselves, it lights up a particular part of the brain. And they've done they've done experiments with people Having them meditate, where they, they'll show them a screen and what their own brain is doing. And when they're self referential thinking going on, that it's shown that's happens. And so when people can watch a self referential thinking externally by seeing their brains light up, it's much easier for them to get more peaceful in meditation, because then they see, oh, they're self referential thinking is the very thing that's popped me out of being calm. There's a constant consequence in the cost of being self referential. It's a certain activity of the mind. But if I don't do that activity, I can be more peaceful. And so by seeing seeing getting hit by a feedback system that can do so. So in terms of so in Buddhism, there's no need to posit a soul as an external from the mind. They're just as different but it's a beautiful concept that there is this part of the mind that has wisdom and his ability to make choices that are different than the egotistical mind are different than the greedy mind or the or the reptilian brain or something like that and how useful it is to label it as a sole distinct from everything else. Buddhism has some doubts about because the concept of soul lends itself to a magnet for a lot of other beliefs and ideas and lends itself to kind of a maybe not so useful. Hard separation between all the different functions of the mind. So the tendency in Buddhism is not to use the word soul but it's okay. Okay, so

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so we have a potluck now, and we had end of the month and everyone's invited to stay some of you who maybe didn't know and are new here today. Please stay you're welcome to be part of it. And now since we do have this potluck today, and we have a couple of minutes before formally starts, it would be nice if for those of you who have been here Before, if you see someone around you who you don't recognize or never said hello to, if you said hello before we, you know, break for the potluck or to leave so please introduce yourself to someone. It's a nice thing to do. Thank you