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SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

The topic for this evening is community in relationship to this practice that we do the mindfulness practice, meditation practice, Buddhist practice. And, you know, last week I talked about mindfulness of the body. And I think sometimes a body that we talked about a body of people, sometimes as a body as well occasionally, and it's going to be nice to kind of see the two close together, that the greater your mindfulness of your body. There's actually a wonderful way then to connect to others, in a sense through that awareness of your body and have it helped create community, the less we're connected to our body into ourselves. You might be in some ways, kind of very connected to people. But it's probably not the kind of makes us connection to others and communities probably not going to be so deep. Because the depth of connection has a lot to do with how well we're connected to ourselves. So community has been a very important part of my Practice. I practiced regular meditation by myself when I first started, I did it twice a day, morning and evening, for two years, my last two years in college. And it was great for me. And then I during that time in college, I went to visit the San Francisco Zen Center. And one of the wintersports spend some days there at a time. And one of the things that stood out to me when I went there was that all the normal social games that I innocently played, was engaged in and trying to get people to like me or make an impression on people or represent myself a certain way and show people how smart I was or something wasn't received that sense Center and the way that my friends received it is like there was no response to these get the games I was playing. And because there was no response The people I met there, they became mirrors for me. And I saw myself better I saw what I was doing. Whereas with my friends, we all kind of were doing it together. And, you know, and so you know, kind of were lost in what we were doing. But there I got to see what I was doing much more clearly. And I thought this was great. I think I need some help to see myself better. It's one thing to meditate. It's another thing to have a community that reflects back to you. And so that's one of the first first motivations I had to go live in a Buddhist community was to get that reflection back from people who could be the mirror for me. Then, so practice first alone, and that was great for me. And then I went practice community. And that was great for me, practice at the monasteries and monasteries for a number of years. And in Zen monasteries, everything's done. A lot of life The practice is done collectively. So it's kind of communal practice. And so you're supposed to kind of be in harmony with other people in the community and practice together. And then I went to Southeast Asia to practice in this tradition, vipassana tradition. And I showed up at the, at the monastery until the abbot that was there to do his practice work, what should I do? And the first thing he did was he sent me to a little, little, what's called a cootie little one room little hut, on stilts. Out on the edge of the monastery above the swamps. There was a long kind of planks that went across the swamps or whatever to get to the middle hut. And, and I was supposed to go out there by myself and practice alone. All day long, meditate alternate between the meditation and walking meditation. And because it was kind of swampy right there and the only place close to where I was staying, I could do walking meditation on was there was a kind of a long kind of cement thing and there was a great for someone. And so I would walk back and

forth in this, you know, grave top or something. But the thing that stood out to me I was practicing alone. After about four years of practice over five years alone, practicing Zen center with people, it was a real surprise to me to find myself practicing this long period of time for myself. And then I saw how much how helpful it had been to practice a Zen center to have the communal support for practice. And I realized that I wouldn't have practiced as much as I did, in my Zen time, without momentum, the support, maybe the peer pressure even of other people who were involved as well. And I was really carried by that in a very important way and very grateful for that caring because it kept me focused, kept me engaged, kept me involved. But then when I went to was alone, that what I realized was well, now that was great to have that as really grateful for all the support I got. And now it's time to figure out how to find the motivation to do it alone.

You know, day after day, all alone, sitting there alone a little hot, you know, People nothing on the walls there was nothing right and then doing this walking meditation by yourself near the swamp swamp with the scrape back and forth and you know there was a strange animals who lived around that. And the monastery had this big pig that sometimes came close by and walk grunting around with. And so then I then it was valuable for me to learn to practice alone. And so that I practice in Southeast Asia a lot alone in rooms with myself and it was for me, it was actually quite wonderful. And so then I applied to go to the three month meditation retreat in Barre Massachusetts, a place called IMS and, and I knew the teachers there little bit. And so I wrote them a letter beforehand said, Well, I'm used to practicing alone. And that's what I like to do in my room. And can I have a single room so they gave me a single room. And when I got there, I found out that for the most part, it was really nice to sit with other people. And, and so then I spent the last two or three months, sitting with people and found tremendous mentor and so supportive again, to feel the cocoon the nourishment of being around other people who was I was practicing with. And so my kind of career in Buddhism has been this oscillation between solitary practice, and community practice. And both of them are invaluable for me. But today, the topic is community practice. Now that you know how it works, the importance of it. I would probably venture to say that for most people, and I'm certainly one of them. Doing an ongoing meditation practice, being seriously involved in Buddhist practice is a lot easier. If you're doing it together with other people. It's easier to be consistent. It's easier to not only be consistent, but it's easier to be consistent or engage more fully when you're actually doing it. It's there's a fair number of people who come here we find actually get more into the meditation here. Sitting with a group of people than when they're sitting meditating at home, there's something about the group momentum or energy or something that kind of supports it. And then of course, there's some people who is the opposite. So don't feel like you're wrong if you're the opposite. Some people find it better to sit quietly at home. And coming here, it's like so busy, whatever. So many people have to contend with. But so, being a community can be supportive for some people less supportive for others. But there's a there's a number of values of being in community. One is, we learn from each other. And we learned many ways. We learned by osmosis we learned by just sitting with other people, you'd have to talk to people to learn from them, how they carry themselves, how they hold themselves. The fact that says I'm even watching people meditate sometimes, when meditating next to people. There's a kind of a learning that goes on just by kind of by visiting, you know, by watching or sensing or feeling what they're doing and feeling if they can sit still. I can see Still, this is I was done. And I would emphasize how tremendously important it is this kind of silent learning and modeling and examples of people it's been was really important for me to see how some people practiced with real intent. And that kind of engagement. When I knew they were having tremendous difficulties, inner difficulty, psychological difficulties, difficulties in their life, and they were, they kept showing up and be dedicated working. And that meant so much for me to watch them seem to do it. It meant so much for me to watch some individuals, you could kind of feel it I could feel and sense the raptness the way that they're, they're calm subtleness and how they were completely engaged and involved and just watching and seeing their face and the body how they were. I got a

sense Oh, it's possible. This is something that can be done. This is this is a very different mode of being than if you go to you know, like a 40 Niners game Watch people's faces and how they are in their bodies, you know, as you get a different kind of example of something. And we don't often get the kind of examples in our life of someone who's deeply settled and calm and absorbed and engaged in this beautiful way that sometimes can happen in meditation. So to witness that and be close to people doing that was very important for me. It was also very important for me to meditate with people be in a community of people, where the people were far from it, I didn't, didn't live up to my ideals.

And I found as many people find, that most Buddhist communities don't live up to the ideals are all Buddhist communities don't live up to the ideals that people have what a Buddhist community is supposed to be what a monastery is supposed to be. I've been many, many, I lived in many Buddhist communities, and Buddhist monasteries in places. And it's a very common phenomena for people who are come from the outside, looking from the outside, come visit for a day a few hours, say, wow, these people must be saints. This is great. They must be floating on clouds or something. And then they come and live there. And is what's going on here. And it isn't that, you know, Buddhists are specialized in being non ideal people, but rather that Buddhists are people, first and foremost, and generally the people who tend to go live at a Buddhist center, and maybe people come here as well, I'm not saying all of you, but come because there's a good reason for it. And there's a need for suffering, they're suffering for right reasons, they don't quite fit in, in some ways in society and their life. There's not quite working and so you know, some people are quite challenged to people come here because sometimes their tremendous suffering in their lives and, and some of that comes because, you know, comes with not being, you know, saints and so, the idea is community like this is open and welcomes people of all kinds, every situation hopefully we can be very welcoming. But what it means is that you as people you have community with, you wouldn't choose to spend time with ordinarily, when is that opening that you know, that open? And so I've had to contend with that. And I'm much better because of it. To spend time with people I normally wouldn't spend time with have all kinds of stripes, whatever people are, like, all kinds of ways, and different cultures, different ethnicities, different temperaments, different psychological conditions, different challenges they've had, and to spend time with these people, just be around them and see what they're doing and kind of get a sense from them. And then there's the people for whom just irritate me. That was a really important teaching for me. And you know, you know, there's a great story of it was a spiritual teacher and then Gurdjieff there's a story people tell of Gurdjieff in a community outside of Paris, and they had a person living in the community who apparently irritated everyone in the community. So called difficult person. And, and so Gurdjieff went away when traveling because he came back and while he was gone, that difficult person so called default the person said he had enough without everyone else. You know, he wasn't getting along very well. It's like had enough of these people who are treating him Well, I guess or something. And so he left. And he just came back. He said, Where's the person? And they explained when he left and they were all kind of, you know, and girge have said, Well, I'm gonna have to go find him and bring him back. And what it was so really great. And in fact, he went to Paris found him and talk them into coming back and he thought it was really important for the community to have had him there was part of the teaching part of the training to learn how to work with and so for example, when I did a long retreat, that IMS, this retreat center we have in Massachusetts. You know, it's a kind of long, quiet, Silent Retreat, people get quieter and quieter. It's very nice kind of Except for the person who sat next to me. And I like to agree to describe him as having the lumberjack approach to entering meditation hall late, every time late like lumberjack is you could hear the stomping or the feet across the hall and, you know, and then he'd always show up and sit down next to me and it always be out of breath. And we spend the next five minutes catching his breath. And you know, we're always you participate what's been doing, you know, it's a meditation retreat. And so then after a while, he'd settle down a little bit little enough and then the Velcro jacket

would come off us ripping now. And you know, the way that you know so this was, you know, my great teacher.

So you can imagine I had all kinds of responses and judgments and ideas about that and feelings about that. And, and it was a great very important teaching for me to learn how to be economist without learning. To not be reactive to that, to be able to hold that in a peaceful mind. And I think that that was more important for me. And learning something very profound, important about myself and learning a different way of being in the world than it was if the person next to me it can be completely silent, the ideal Buddhist silent type. So I'm very grateful for that person to give me a great service. So to have this a willingness to look at what's not ideal to be in community, we have all kinds of people, you have people who are inspiring or people who are far from inspiring, and all of them become our teachers. All the people that we learn from is a very important thing. And then part of what's important in being in community, there's all kinds of communities in Buddhism, there is, you know, like a very could be a very informal community. For some people who come here, maybe Monday night, some of you it's kind of informal, you don't really know people, you're happy to come and be quiet and go home. It can be more formal or closer intimate community for people who get started knowing the community. Knowing people and then participating more and it becomes some people becomes a really primary community for them and the way that it is, for some people at church or synagogue or mosque might be, that is their primary kind of home and community for them when they center themselves. So some people that's the case here at IMC. There's communities that are temporary. There's a community that gets formed when we do a retreat, we do have maybe a seven day retreat. And during that time, there's a sense of community that gets formed. And one of the interesting things about that kind of community is that there's very little talking that happens no seven days or 10 days of retreats. And when you sit near someone meditate near someone, sometimes you get to know that person in a certain in ways that feel more intimate and deeper than if you spent 10 days talking to them. talking to them, you get to know a lot about them conventionally. And they presented several kinds of way. But there's something you learn about people when you spend seven days to the next to them silently. You kind of sit you kind of get to know the socks they wear and when that's not that important, but you know, it's subtle, you notice subtle things and how they carry themselves how they hold themselves. Maybe you're there when they're crying. And you see how that's is you see them in a peaceful you see, you know, when they're having struggles, you get a sense of their breathing. I'd sat next to people, especially when I did Zen practice and the eyes were open. And I would become very sensitive the person next to me, there's their breathing, and I felt very close. It's very intimate, to feel like you're with someone or so breathing, breath after breath. And so you feel like you get to know people. And in a certain way, that instance, very precious is very interesting to know people in this kind of deep way they can only do in retreat. So there's a community that gets formed there, that we create temporary one. monasteries have, you know, long, longer, or Buddhist centers have longer communities. But as we enter a community of any type of formal, informal, casual, more formal longer, one of the things to learn What your relationship to community is? How do you what do you think? What's your what's your attitude towards being in community to be in relationship to other people. And there's so many different ways there's not a right or wrong way. But there are definitely different ways to be involved in community. So I'll give you an example of two different people with radically different reactions, relationships, understandings of being in the same community. So I was at the Zen monastery at Tassajara. I'd been living there for a year or so. And then, two people arrived to be new students there to live there for a year or so. At the same time, so you know, in terms of the experiment, you know, the conditions were the same for the experiment. The only thing different was the environment is saying that the difference was they were and they were there for a while, and after a few months, I had a chance to speak to both of them about their experience there. And one of them said, the man said This is really hard here. There's so much community, so many people we never alone. And, and, you know, I just, you know, it's really hard to be I

feel claustrophobic and then around the same week or so I was talking to the woman, and you said, it's so nice here, I'm finally alone. There's finally there's no people around to bother me and you know, you know, just and you know, it's just feel so good finally. So then I asked him both about the background that brought before they came there. He had spent 20 years living alone. In Daly City. He had a house in Daly City.

She had grown up in her house with a lot of siblings, and had immediately at 18 or so gotten married and never had her own kids, whole pack of kids. And then and so when the kids grew up, and I guess got divorced, I don't know what happened. She came to the monastery and she'd never had the You always had the experience of being an intensely spent family communities or whole, you know, a life that you have to that time. And so for her coming to the monastery was the exact opposite for her, it was like Finally, it felt like she could be alone and be herself. The community was the same. I mean, you know, the form that much contact there was us all the same, but how people related to the saw it was so radically different. So I when people come to IMC, like am I denied? I suspect that I don't know how many people are here 7500 people, I suspect there are 75 100 different ideas of what this community is, each of you brings your own. And one of the things that happens for many of us, maybe not all of you but happens to me is I could easily get locked into my view. What I see is it and part of the value of community is to help us to break out of our view as being the only view and I know that I'm a much better person then because I've had people around me who have shared their views and I've seen their views are different than mine. And I've expanded my perspective on so many different situations in life in a way that I could not have done myself. You know, the, the, the idea that I could do it all by myself and figure it out and I'm the one who understands everything is not as slowly has been kind of whittled away because I see how much how helpful it's been to expand my horizons by hearing how other people are now people see things. So in terms of community, we come we come with different needs, we come with different perspectives, different orientations. It was very powerful for me to be to practice in a monastery in Japan, where it took me a few months, but to because I was I was living 24 hours a day. We slept in the same room, we ate together, we took breaks together in the same room. We were always together in this Japanese monastery. The only time I was alone was I jumped over the wall snuck away one day to buy powdered milk because I was getting protein deficiency. And I needed to get some protein diet. So otherwise I was always together. And so you know, you get, you know, I was the only Westerner there. And after a while, as I started learning Japanese better, it dawned on me that I was living in a different social world universe than the Japanese word. And in a sense, it's a collective culture, Japanese culture. So it may be say this way. They were first and foremost a group with individual members. I saw it first and foremost, as we were a bunch of individuals who formed a group. And so for me, the individuality of everyone was the most important. The for them, the collective group was the most important to how they saw it. And I didn't think that one was better than the other or right or wrong. longer than the other. But I saw how different that was. And then when I started raising kids, it was very interesting to watch myself and see how that my kind of more individualistic, acculturation was in subtle or not so subtle that I was kind of passing it on to my son. That's what I knew. That's some ways what I valued. And I could see that I was conditioning him and I partly I could see that because of that contrast by having spent time in Japan and seeing who's different way of doing it. So when people come into any community, they come with their own cultural background, their family background, what it means to be in community. Some of it is cultural, like Japanese collective, some people see collective and so what's really important is feeling how do I join how to be part of the collective and how do I belong is really represents their one of their great needs when they come in other people. That's the last thing they want to do is to be part of a group and they're so strong individual individualist, that they're looking for how they can Kind of settling into themselves and be alone or going to be more, let be left alone. I saw this an interesting way when I was split for two years in Hawaii, which as a very wonderful mix of all kinds of different cultures and

ethnicities and things, culturally very rich to kind of see the diversity there and be part of it. And I was asked to be on a panel when I was at the university there to talk about how we got involved in our respective religions, different people in the paddock like absolutely two of us on the panel.

And I was a little bit of an oddity being kind of a Buddhist being a kind of Westerners converted to Buddhism. So they wanted to hear how do you how does that work for you. And then they had a Japanese American woman who grew up in nothing. She grew up in Hawaii. I'm not sure whether you're maybe in California, but she was living in Hawaii and she had was I think she'd become a Christian minister. And so the question when she had Buddhist parents, you know, from Japanese Britain background kind of thing, and so that when she grew up in California, and so the question was, how did she come to her religion? So, you know, that was nice talk nice. I just want to, you know, share myself. But as we talked, the contrast between us, was quite dramatic. For her, what brought her into Christianity was the community aspect of it, she felt a part of the community that was was important. And as I talked about, what brought me to Buddhism, it was about meditation. You know, that's private personal thing, close your eyes, you know, follow your breath. And so for me, you know, this, the community was not the foremost thing, but the more individual. So this is a long way of saying that for each of you. You have an attitude and understanding and experience a relationship to being a community that informs how you enter into any community but certainly into a Buddhist community. Some of you have had traumatic variances in community. There was a many people. And this is kind of where we can be blind we don't understand or our horizons understanding, sometimes not so helpful for others. But like, like I had this view that spirit rock was a very safe place to go square rocks a retreat center we have in Marin County, it's so safe, that there's no locks on the doors, people asleep and so many people don't even think about the fact that they don't lock their doors there because it's feel so safe. And, and so you sleep in the room with no lock and the room, the door that goes into the building where the residential rooms are, there's no lock, it's just, you know, how often you get a chance to sleep in a room the building is unlocked. And, you know, it's a safe place. It's all these practitioners know that. But there was a man who came for the African American men who had been almost lynched and living in the south in the 1960s by, you can imagine by white people and most The people on the retreat are white people. And he described an article he wrote about how, you know, the idea that he was in this place with no locks in the door with all these white people. His conditioning, what happened to him was so deep, that it was difficult for him to be there. And only because he talked about it, that any of us have any sense that that's what it meant to be in that community. So people come with trauma that come with experiences of all kinds, and how does that affect how we are together in community? When I was in Hawaii, you know, the idea of inclusion exclusion was an interesting one, because I would I was taking taking classes there. And I was the only Caucasian in some of these classes. And it was very interesting to feel the inclusion exclusion. You know, I was more used to hear where I'm working and, and to feel what it's like to be the person who's excluded and it wasn't simply that was excluded, but what I found very useful thing was, it was mostly made up of Japanese Americans in the class. But there were some Chinese visiting Chinese students there as well. So I was kind of like, clearly kind of left to only when we had group discussions, you know, with Chinese visiting Chinese students that was where I belonged. Or where was left or something. So we have it, we do things to each other, I've experienced community is a complicated thing. You know, there's what communities does with the book, what communities do and I'm sure that there's all kinds of subtle and not so subtle things that go on here. There are things we bring with us when we come into community, there's our needs or personality or temperament. There's many things that go on. So each of us, you know, has all this to contend with and to learn from and to work with. And I would like to suggest in some ways that for the most part, none of this is wrong, when you come into a Buddhist community to practice because the one of the beautiful things about practicing is a way in which we say yes to at all. Not Yes, because anything, there are things which shouldn't be, but, but we kind of enter into it and say,

let's practice with us open to this. Let's be honest about this. Let's find out about this. Let's work through this together. Let's work through this as an individual by myself.

This is the place where hopefully a Buddhist community Buddhist center Buddhist practice is a place where we just keep opening to what's happening. We keep finding our freedom with what's happening, we keep finding our maturity, what's happening, we keep finding our compassionate what's happening. So I like to think of a computer's community like IMC. They the intention of the community is to be as open and receptive and welcoming to as many people as possible anybody who wants to come and we used to have before we did remodel, we used to have seven doors here to the outdoors to the outside. And somehow that words the number seven is kind of symbolic in my mind has some meaning Something and I just love the fact that we had seven doors to come in and out of, we kept the mostly locked most of them with this, this symbolic idea that, you know, we used to kind of, in some ways the mid my ideal image of a Buddhist Center has no walls, just a roof, the people come and sit in there together. And so it's a place where people can come and find themselves and but but to understand there's not always going to be easy. But the difficult this this is a worthwhile place to work through the things that come up and what's going on that then. And this is not a place where I hope the intention is anybody is turned away. And we've had people come here who have been challenging for some of the other people who come here. And we had once many years ago when we first came here, a woman who probably if you use the psychological diagnosis was probably schizo. phrenic. And I don't know if she was but you know, and she would sit here in the hall and, and have conversations out loud with people. What do we do? Do we say you can't come You know, so we were very careful with her and we tried to handle her and, and make it make her feel comfortable to come. But find a way that she could be here that it was also comfortable for other people. And not kind of say you can't be here was very easy. Some people were like this can't be it's too difficult. And one of the great justifications for have some difficult person to go is that if you don't have that, if you don't ask that person to go or stop coming, we're going to lose so many people are not going to come back because it's volunteer to come here. I think people don't want to come if it's challenging, they're coming here to have a good time. And, and I think that's, you know, it's you know, I think it's reasonable if people are stressed to come Come into place to get the medicine of relief and some peace and you don't want to come if you're stressed out you want to count places can be stressful add to it. That's reasonable. But my hope my wish is that the play a community Buddhist community is a place where we Our intention is to hold everyone and welcome everyone. And then realize that finding a way to hold everyone open to everyone to include everyone is a very profound way in which the practice unfolds and works for us. Just like it was for me with a difficult person who had the lumberjack entrance, the Velcro, the huffing and puffing. It was really important for me, I work through something. And I've had this over and over again in many ways that I'm a better person, because I've learned how to open and meet and receptive for the people that I'm in community with. So I feel I've been tremendously supported by community. It's been I don't think I could have done it gone as deeply and matured as much in my Buddhist practice, without discipline. supportive community, no way I could have, I would have been left I would have probably not been involved not continued as much as I did. And community itself has been supportive and community itself has been a tremendously important place for me to learn about myself about other people. And to open up and be I think I'm, you know, I'm very, very grateful for it. And that's true. Also, for me, as a teacher, teacher in this community. As a teacher, mostly, I think most people, I get the sense that most people don't know what, you know, there's all these projections on teachers. And I get to sit on this hype platform. So it's easy. Maybe, but, but one of the things about it, I think people don't appreciate is a teacher is also practicing. And I you know, for me, it's a practice to be a teacher. It's a practice to be in community as well. And I'm very grateful to have this community be practicing and growing and maturing in this community as well as we go along. So those are my words. About the community I

thought I'd leave more time but we have five minutes. If you would like to. Well, no, I you have a different idea. Rather than you bring questions for something, some people know I'm going to do.

I was just because of the topic community. I would like to suggest that for five minutes, you take the risk or the challenge to turn to someone near you, and share with them something you feel comfortable to share about what happened to you as you listen to this talk. Somebody you feel comfortable to share about what was meaningful for you or challenging for you or something. And, and that's part to help make community and, and you can be very brief, but you know, be nice. You can you're welcome to leave No, it's okay. That's as I said, we're open to everyone you know, that leaving as part of being open, you know, being open to that too, but I think it'd be nice sweet we We could we could do more more effort here. So maybe four or five minutes, please someone near you give me two it could be more than one person it could be two.

So that's quite a difference between the silent meditation time. So I think what might be nice given the fact we sat beside for a while, is take 30 seconds to close your eyes and just catch your breath check in, settle in. Notice what you feel like when it's happening with you. Read settle in and see if you can be okay with however you are right now.

So thank you for being willing to have those conversations. It's I think it's helpful and valuable as a community to talk to each other sometimes. And hopefully you exchange names and you're welcome to keep talking if you'd like and, and, and thank you very much for being here today and being part of this