

# 2013-07-21 In The Wake of The Trayvon Martin Trial

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## SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

Good morning, everyone. And thank you, Richard, thank you for your what you offered this a little while ago and your statement about the benefit yesterday, I was only able to be here for a very short time of it, but I was very happy that IMC could offer itself. We had a free Saturday to inside out to so they could have a benefit here. And I one of the organizers is Chuck verda, who years of work in the prison and in exchanges with him earlier in the week. He said that he expressed his feeling that felt to him quite appropriate that his benefit was happening on Saturday, that kind of the National Day of of demonstrations and concerning the Trayvon Martin case because the kind of work that inside out work kind of addresses one way or the other those kinds of issues. So it was very happy with here. And now, one of the remarkable things that happened yesterday was the speech by President Obama about his response or his thoughts about the verdict for Trayvon Martin's case. And one of the many remarkable things about that speech, but in terms of IMC, he seemed to suggest to the speech that one of the honest places where discussions can take place in our country, around issues of race relationships, is in families, in places of worship, and in workplaces, and churches, and I think that qualifies for qualify for that. And so, is, are we are we being called upon to also participate in this national dialogue and what's our role? And that is a question that I have as a teacher here, what's our situations like? And it's certainly very prominent in my heart, the degree of suffering that goes on in our society, because of the way that people are treated because of racial differences, people get seen certain ways, treated certain ways, in all kinds of different directions. And it's been going on for a long time in our country, but it's been going on for millennia. Even the Buddha had to address these issues in his time. And just like Obama said, that said something, something like, when are we going to stop judging people by the color of their skin, and instead use their, the quality of their character as a judgment as a way of evaluating and that could come right out of the mouth of the Buddha. He said, pretty much the same thing. So words that that racial categories that the caste categories of his time that he was living with, were not the categories that he wanted to see to evaluate a person, but rather to evaluate people by their ethical behavior, the goodness of their heart and how that actually behaved. And he said very emphatically, that in his time in his area in ancient India, that people of any caste was equally capable of doing that unethical thing, and equally capable doing ethical things. And so it's the equal capacity for ethics which he wanted to use to look at people. And certainly, he considered to be some of the highest people or their most worth a worthwhile people, those who lived ethical lives. And so, you know, so what does it mean to live ethically, in a culture a society where there are tremendous disparities from different people in our society. And what do we what does it mean to live ethically in a society where racial characteristics are still used to limit people and you know, create conditions of inequality and injustice? And how does a community like IMC participate in this discussion? How do we didn't get

involved? I don't have an answer to these questions. I wish I did. And I've been thinking about them for a long time. The

I do feel that one of the contributions we could make and all this is a contribution which I've people who have suffered tremendous injustice around racial inequality and other forms of discrimination have found in Buddhist practice. And they found that their anger, their pain, their their, their suffering, their fear, their anxiety that they've lived in, that the have enculturated with maybe over many generations even can be addressed by the practices that we do here in our center, or other places that the practice of sitting mindfully practices of compassion, practices of insight and mindfulness are extremely powerful they report to help help them to shed their anger, their anxiety, their hurt, so that they can see in fresh ways so they could not carry that legacy with them. And I know that there are people who have suffered these inequalities and ratio stigmatize Asians who are waiting for the rest of society to do the same. People sometimes have been up against the edge in our society around these kinds of issues. Feel the sting of it, the pain of it, staying is probably too mild of a word, the pain of it so acutely that they have to deal with it. So, when the men that former inmates that came here to IMC yesterday to share their practice of mindfulness with us, some of these men you know, it was life saving for them to be into to do this mindfulness practice into the training that the insight, insight, prison project to offer them in San Quentin, one man that I met yesterday here. It's been 33 years in San Quentin. And that's a long time. He said it was been out now for over a year. So it's quite hard to make the transition society's changed a lot since 1978, or something like 1980. And the so there was other people for whom it's really consequential to do this kind of work. And then there's people for whom the work of mindfulness is consequential in their lives for other reasons, but not for the reasons of social inequality, discrimination that goes on in our society. And so those that part of our life, maybe we don't address it or look at risk, we have other things to deal with other sufferings other kind of ways of looking at what practice is doing for us. But I do know that there are people who are in our society who are waiting for, especially the white populations, that our society to get on with it. Look at how this operates in your own lives. And it's quite remarkable how many people I meet of who, you know, could be considered non Caucasian who are who are a little bit a little bit even discouraged or dismayed or by well meaning white people. That there's all these good white people who have good intentions, but who don't understand And the degree to which some of these issues are part of a wider social system, and cultural systems that go on. And so even though people are well meaning, and we're still participating in the wider cultural matrix that that I think is important to consider when we consider the situation like Trayvon Martin's killing. I think that it's maybe not so much to the point to spend a lot of time analyzing and re analyzing and judging the verdict and what actually happened in his case, it's very hard to look at it mean to kind of consider all the different factors, but it has it happened within a wider context, in such a wider context that that killing resonated very deeply in many, many people's lives, who feel like it could happen to them. You People who feel like they can't walk through neighborhoods without being concerned that there'll be stopped. And maybe, you know, their life put on danger, and just because of the color of their skin. And so it kind of speaks to this huge kind of fault line fissure in American society, that it's been here for a long time. We're probably think one of the most dramatic fault lines in our country is that between

African Americans and much of the rest of the population, Native Americans and much in the rest of the population is a societies that have been living with legacy and history of inequality for so long. That it's hard for it's hard to kind of when the whole system is sort of set up in such a way and whole the way that society and geography and so many issues, keep them segregated or keep them keep they keep being seen through certain filters and eyes. So What do we do? What What does any of us do? What is the practice have to offer? And one of the things I think that one of the things that I feel very strongly that the practice has to offer for all of us is an ability to deconstruct the constructs the conventional ideas, the ideas in which we live under. And it's been said repeatedly that racism is or the category of

race looking at people is a social construct. It doesn't exist in nature by itself naturally, but rather it's somewhat of an arbitrary construct that was created a little bit for its own purposes, some people say was created in order to discriminate and, and in the end, that is a social construct, not part of nature, that then we can look at Constructing mind, we can look at how the mind constructs ideas of other constructs ideas of self constructs, ideas of who is in who is out who is safe, who is not safe, who we like, who we don't like. And these are all constructs of the mind, and to sit and become still enough, with strong enough mindfulness to do two things, to let the constructing mind the thinking mind, the mind that has ideas and evaluations and judgments. Have it all fall away is a very powerful experience. I did not know. I probably still don't know but I did not know the extent to which my mind operated through assumptions, views, conditioning of ideas from my society and my life experience. until I started to meditate. And so I started going on retreat, and my mind got really, really quiet. And I could see it shedding away, falling away, falling away. And I was no longer seeing through the filter of these kinds of ideas. And it's a, it's a, it's very humbling and very powerful to watch and see that you know, how our mind actually operates. And so to let it get quiet, and one of the associations I have with being on retreat with other people, is how it's what it's like to be in a room of people meditating still and to some degree or other have, all of us have a lot of the ordinary constructs of self and other and people and categories of people and things kind of fall away. And to be able to kind of sense and feel each other be in their space together without the usual ways in which we compare us measure ourselves with others. And so it kind of a little bit of this is a good example. But I've been told that in Japan, which is a, which is a class conscious culture with lots of different gradations of class and everything that when they go when they go to the public bathhouse saunas, all those distinctions fall away when everyone's there naked together. You know, it doesn't matter if you're, you know, there there is clarity there you meet equally. So I think of retreats in this kind of meditation where the mind gets quiet enough. And we don't, it's hard to we don't want to carry with us anymore. The judgments, the stories, the ideas of self and others, because the mind gets so simple. There's a kind of equality we see everyone equally, we hopefully are approached that way to some degree. That's the hope at least. It's this idea of kind of shedding that and being able to see with fresher eyes to see with with clear eyes clear eyes What I mean by that is with eyes that are not have to fill all these filters of ideas and categories on top of it, but just see someone for their heart see someone as a human being see the Buddha nature of someone see the beauty of people for what they are directly rather than seeing them through the lens of so many ideas that we can carry with us. Even the even the lens that someone is suffering, sometimes is oppressive to people. It's quite something not to have any lens.

Just Just to meet someone and be with someone. And that clarity. It's quite something can meet yourself that way. And it's part of the why it's so liberating. To do deep meditation practice is because many of us have internalized a lot of ideas about ourselves. And there's used to this phenomenon called internalized oppression, that people who are oppressed and there are all kinds of ways. internalize it and believe that for themselves This must be actually the case. Sometimes there's kind of self hate because of this internalization. And so to sit quietly and learn to shed all these things, let them fall away, fall away, fall away, and to see oneself in fresh eyes to be able to see oneself independent of all these ideas. And in doing that, hopefully see the beauty of our own hearts see the beauty of our mind see the dignity and the value of ourselves is a powerful thing to do. The but the other thing, I think, so that's what that's what that's, I think, part of the strength of our tradition meditation letting go dropping down. But is that enough just to be the kind of lends itself if that's all it is the kind of passivity and, you know, it's okay, you know, so, you know, I've done my work, you know, I'm peaceful, I'm a good person now. And, and so forth. When You know, I MC started many years ago, in Menlo Park before me, before I even joined it, you know, started as a small city group in 1986, I think. And, and I joined in, I was asked to join it to kind of start teaching for it in 1990. And there were 1215 people looking. But I could imagine that as with other sitting groups, that sometimes they start with just a few

people, two or three people can start a sitting group. And people are one person starts to sit in group at home themselves, right sitting group for themselves. And let's start with one person, that one person sits down and is suffering and struggling or, and then somehow they feel that meditation is relevant for their lives. And so they start sitting maybe in their bedroom, and they find it meaningful. And so they find it meaningful in that they go find books on meditation practice, and they read about it. They don't look for a book. They don't look for books on social policy. But they look books on meditation practice to help them support them in this personal process process they're doing. And then at some point, they decide, you know, it's good to sit with other people supportive of me. So when they go find a friend to sit with, and then they share among themselves, what it's like to sit and meditate and this personal process they're doing, and then they find other friends and then the former sitting group. Now there are people come, and then we have IMC and back in Palo Alto days, and then it slowly grew from 12 to 15 people to 40 people, we move to a bigger place. And then we grew it to be 100 people and we decided, well, we have a second sittings. We started Thursday evening. And then we kept growing and then when we you know, we're bursting here in this little room we have, I think we should start a Sunday morning program. So we started in a Sunday program and then we started a children's program and then we did one day sittings, and we did this and retreats and eventually we decided We need to incorporate and maybe think about having your own place. And at some point we bought this building we're sitting in now and then it keeps going growing right now we bought a retreat center now we have that and so it keeps growing. So the tell you the story because it started off maybe with this this kind of made up Dennis idea with one person meditating because of his or her own suffering. At what point does a community become large enough? A church, you know, in American parlance, become large enough that it's appropriate to not only not only focus on personal inner practice, at what point do we open up and look around and have our practice and our teachings and our community? Look up and consider some of the wider issues of our society. So it was a small example back at night. 95 when we were still in the process of growing slowly, I remember there was someone who came to me and said, Gil, there's there are some of us who are getting old. And we would like to have a group support group of the elderly and seniors to talk look at practice and the process of aging. So it's kind of looking a little bit wider the issues what goes on. And

and then there was some of us who started a chaplaincy program here in order to be able to reach out and touch the lives of support people who are suffering beyond the walls of IMC. So at what point do we look beyond? And so at what point do we as a community, look at the issues of race and racial inequality and injustice in our society? is an open question. I don't know the answer to that. We've tried over many years, probably for the last 15 years, periodically to as a community to look at these issues. In different kinds of ways, but I never felt they were particularly successful. And so, you know, I don't know all the reasons for why it wasn't particularly successful. I think probably once one reason not so successful is that fair number of people who come here are here for the personal practice. That's what they want. If we, you know, if you came here for the next year, all we all I did was Dharma toxin, social issues. I bet that embers would shrink, because that's not what people are looking for what they need when they're suffering and how their suffering is addressed. But what's the balance between looking at this, the president says churches should maybe should look at these issues and discuss them because it's an honest place to discuss and where do we fit into this? So that's a long introduction to the next point, I said that our practice offers two things. It offers our ability to deconstruct and experience ourselves free of the constructs of ideas, very powerful and liberating to Do that. And then the other thing you can do is once we do that, to some degree, the mindfulness practice and the degree of stillness that we have becomes a very important vantage point from which to watch us reconstruct our ideas or thoughts to watch how our mind operates. Because when we leave our meditation and walk out in the street, our mind our thinking mind, our idea of making mind is going to kick in sooner or later. And probably most of you appreciate that it's sooner rather than later. And, and so, to leave your

mindfulness at IMC and not watch means that those ideas and assumptions that you put down here, come back and operate unconsciously when you when you leave. But important part of the practice is to watch the creation of these things. And to and to watch and see and be able to read Recognize that when you look at someone that you are, you might be constructing your mind and evaluation, a judgment of you a prejudice towards that person. And the and so the question is, so what do you do when you can see it? If we don't see it, what's very easy is that when we see that person, we assume we don't think of our judgments as judgments. We think it's the truth. That's what it is. So if you're walking down the street and someone's walking towards you, and for whatever reason that the characteristics of that person are such that you associate that with a dangerous person, that person is dangerous. If you can watch the construct the arising of thinking, the thought that person's danger right in your mind, if you can watch it arise, that gives you the opportunity to put a question mark at the end of it. Is that true? If you don't watch the arising of it, it's very easy then to believe that person actually is not safe for me. It makes sense. So the ability to watch the arising of thoughts, ideas and feelings gives us the ability to question investigate and bookmark carefully. Is it really accurate? So we can give something a second look, I love the word that the expression respect, I like to think of respect, meaning, give it a second look, to respect to respect the copter once again to look and look and see is that really the case? And maybe it's not going to be the case. Maybe you will get different information. If you look more carefully, and you'll see maybe the person isn't dangerous. It can go the other way too. Of course we can assume that someone is safe and then it turns out to be nothing. But to watch, the construct the rising, obstructing mind is very important. So I'll give you an example of me how I did it yesterday. I hope it's not. I hope it's okay example.

It's part of the risk of talking about these kinds of issues is it's so easy to be, you know, I don't understand. I don't know, I don't know how to talk about this or how to address these issues or even myself in relationship to them. So, but I'll offer this. So we had this event here yesterday. And there were a bunch of men who had spent a long time in San Quentin. 33 years in San Quentin. Chances are he was a lifer. And jazz I think it was before three strikes your outlaw. So it's pretty serious crime to stay in prison for 33 years. And so I came down here yesterday morning early, because I wanted to make sure that someone was here to receive them when they came, but also to unlock for them so they can come and set up. And but I couldn't stay very long because I'm a single dad this week and I have two kids to go home and take care of and drive around. And so I came down here with my younger son in the cars, I stay in the car, and I'll go do it. And there was only one person standing here when I came. And I introduced myself to him and it was one of the people that will invite one of the former inmates who've been invited to come be part of the program. And so he was the only one here I came to open unlock the door, and I was gonna leave it unlocked and leaves so I washed my mind you're laughing That says something already. So as it would be for anybody I would say if I unlock that, if I unlock this door and leave, leave this person alone in our building someone I don't know, Is this okay? That seems a reasonable question. I do ask that question happens from time to time. But I also know that I periodically open the door and let someone in and left who I don't know. And usually I say to them, you're in charge. You know, there's no one else here. And so I looked at this man, and I said, Here, I'm gonna unlock the door. Let me show you how it works here. And, and you're in charge. And as I as I, as I was saying that I was thinking of saying that, I wonder, I wonder how often this man receives that well Trust, you know, I knew that he I knew that he told me he was an informer ma tonight. And I can imagine that his experience in the world is saying, you know, I'm just released from San Quentin after all these years that more common experiences distrust, is this person safe. So I thought that one, so I could watch all these these kinds of concerns, not that I would I didn't feel like he was unsafe, but I could watch my mind create these, you know, have these kinds of valuations thoughts can take in the picture this way. And whether it was appropriate to think, this way or not, I don't know. But I thought well, maybe this is this is I do this for other people. I may do it for him. Maybe for him. It's even a good



thing. It's a gift to him to feel that he's trusted this way. And not to, you know, feel like I can't let you in because, you know, I'm sure he would pick ups, you know, something. So, this is an example of me watching my mind. Right? And try to try to Be responsible for it and, and trying to take into account to the person that I was meeting. So those are the two two things I think this practice can do. It can help us to deconstruct the judgments and prejudices and advice we have. Obama had a great expression in his speech was something about the process of ringing out our biases. I think we talked about shedding, he talked about ringing the mouth maybe because for some people, it's you know, it's harder work or more painful.

And so this deconstructing process, and then and that often means we have to look very honestly about ourselves. And the greater our ability to look at ourselves honestly, the greater Our greater is our ability to shed deconstruct, and so do we put ourselves in situ ones where we can look at ourselves honestly, if we live in safe, play it safe. And society for many people, privileged people play it safe. They live in their own kind of communities and not really see what's going on in other communities. If we live safe, then we don't get to see how some of our minds operate. And in fact, what I've seen is that I've seen very diligent, very sincere and dedicated Buddhist practitioners do really deep and important work at shedding letting go of attachment, shedding go bias, on retreat, but because they don't put themselves in situations where certain thoughts, latent thoughts get activated, they actually don't see that part of themselves. And they might I've known people who think well, I'm a good person. I'm a wonderful person. Because they had never had occasion to see that they have these quirky sides. And so the willingness to wake up the willingness to look around to enter into society to connect to places that don't feel safe to look at some of the issues which are uncomfortable, and to be slow in defending oneself. justifying myself is slow because I think often there's a case of Oh, you know, I'm not that way. But there Look, there's all these people who've been saying, some people have been saying, going president a year ago, I think, you know, I, you know, you know, we're all Trayvon Martin. Some people can say it, some people say it and it's painful to hear. But how many people have said that they're Zimmerman. How many people have identified with him a part of themselves? And I think it goes hand in hand. If you do one you should do the other. Why, why separate mouth? This is one of the great contributions I felt I'd benefited from tick, not Han, who made this point very eloquently in a poem called, call me by my true names. That, you know, we, you know, we have a tendency to want to be the good people, but to actually see that where we hit where we have where everybody would, and to have our hearts big enough and open enough to be willing to take in everyone to see everyone or recognize ourselves and everyone. I think then, the process of deconstruction, the process of freedom and liberation, stands a better chance. And then I think, I believe that as we do this deconstructing process, it isn't just a mental thing of letting go of ideas. It opens up the wellsprings of our hearts of our compassion, or willingness to kind of feel and sense heart to heart, other people and then it becomes even more important to continue This process as our heart opens up, it becomes more important to do it because as a heart opens up, we don't want to be part of a system even that is contributing to suffering in our society. And then and so then becomes even more important, start looking at more and more, what does our mind do? How do we think what are our biases? So the end with giving you one little practice, since we're into mindfulness practices, personal practice thing, to give you one little practice that can maybe support you in this endeavor, and that is anytime that you find yourself uncomfortable with anybody else, individual or group of people. Anytime that you're uncomfortable. That's a time to watch what's going on in your mind. And to understand it deeply reflect on it Look at your beliefs, your ideas, your constructs. Look what's going on inside of you take responsibility for it. And I'm not saying that you are responsible for all the things that go on. But if you want to get a window into, you know, into doing this deeper work in our, that our whole society needs us the mindfulness cue, used a mindfulness cue of feeling uncomfortable. And the more you in the in, the better you get at it, the

more you'll pick up the subtle places you get uncomfortable. stop and look at that. Look at that more deeply.

So I'm have now right now I'm of two minds. We have five minutes left. I'm we can either take few minutes of questions or comments. That's one mind. The other mind is I don't there. Which fine should get which bind Should I give into?

Would anybody like to say? That's the uncomfortable route? We'll go that way? Yes, Richard.

One of the people in the event yesterday is someone who goes to San Quentin as part of this program, because she's the victim. Her mother was killed. And part of this insider program is for the folks in San Quentin, who have victimized people to talk to someone who's been victimized.

And I'm going to share this because she shared this openly yesterday.

Her grandfather was in the SS in Germany, and was responsible for many people dying.

And

there's no boundary to where the violence is. It's just woven in our culture in our lives in our history.

And there's nobody who's who's

you know, who's clean

I think it's good to feel we're all in it together. That's where all this world, the society appreciate each other all together. No inside no outside. Yes.

Green Light

Then the battery's dead.

I'm moved to make a comment about what you talked about when you let the man in. And when we were doing our, when we were doing our prison work, which is still going on there people in this Tsonga, who go down to Soledad and work and teach meditation down there. And so the program started in about 2002. And I definitely felt over and over again that the place that we were able to actually reach inmates and with any kind of authenticity was where we establish that connection of trust. That they recognize that we were treating them as human beings not treating it was a category of, of untrustworthy people.

I really felt that over and over again.

Yeah. Every year I take a group of our chaplaincy students to San Quentin. And it's, you know, we have this year launched Buddhist chaplaincy training program and, and then quite a number of our students say that the it's the most significant and powerful part of the whole training. It's to go spend a day with the inmates at San Quentin. And most of the some of the inmates actually that were here yesterday, former inmates I'd met in San Quentin, some of these visits some of your penny years ago, and now they're out. And it's, I mean, we kind of see what we get to work with some of the people we encounter.

They're the cream of the crop of people who have taken this practice really far, and had been transformed into really dramatic ways. It's really inspiring to see what's possible and I wish I could take you all to thinking okay. So thank you all for today and if anything I said I feel tender, you know, I don't know, I don't know how to have this kind of talk this kind of conversation. So if I said anything that is disturbing or, or is offensive to anyone, I apologize. And now you could let me know and I'll try to do better learn from that. Thank you