

2014-09-29 Not Getting Caught

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SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

Good evening.

So I just came back yesterday from teaching a two week retreat. And so I don't know what to say. The I thought I had nothing to say because I gave a lot of talks at the retreat every night every afternoon for almost two weeks so that I know how much more can a person say. And, but I think it's more not so much that I talk so much but there's something about being on retreat for me sometimes. There's a kind of feeling of quiet or contentment, or fullness where it seems kind of odd to speak. So I have a little bit of that today. But I will. One of the things that stood out to me at the retreat is how meaningful it is for some people to become simple that human beings have an amazing capacity for making things more complicated than they need to be. And much of our lives are often lived in our head and our thoughts. And on retreat, there's a slow process that sometimes is actually quite a bit of work. of taming the mind. So the mind is not spinning so much into its world of thoughts and imaginations. And finally, when the mind quiets down enough, so it's not the mind not thinking about other times in other places. Some people report that things seem very simple, but at the same time, very full or same time very meaningful. It's quite remarkable and retreat that people come to interview sometimes to meet with me. And what they want to talk about is the sparkle of the do on the leaf. You know, the like, Wow, look at that, you know, the way that the light was or, and, and it's, it's because so there's something in contrast to the mind that's caught up in a lot of thoughts and concerns and worries and fears, to have all that go away and have like the curtains pulled from the eyes and see with clarity, the world. It can be kind versus beautiful thing to see the world. So we live often not in that world of clarity and simplicity, but in the world of complexity. I told the story, a couple of stories from the retreat I'll share with you. One is that there's a Mahayana Buddhist scripture that's quite elaborate is quite a big scripture, but a big part of it is a is a description of a journey of a spiritual journey of some person, mythic person. And then part of his mythic journey. This man named Sudhana goes up to some heavenly realm where this great God, we're just having the realm and there he meets this kind of celestial being. And the celestial beings going to show him his palace, Celestial Palace, and the text then describes in vivid detail The palace. This is written for a time and place where they didn't have TV, you know, or movies. So, you know, a storyteller had the kind of spin a tale that would create images for people and they would people would enter into the images that were created. And so the Storyteller here in the scriptures that paints a very, probably for the time very compelling picture with a lot of detail of this massive beautiful palace with jewels and gold and silver and marble and, and, you know, the scale of it is phenomenal. And so this Buddhist pilgrims standing there in the middle of this big palace looking at it and wonder, as it's being all pointed out to him by this celestial being. And so imagine the audience who's listening to it or reading the text is pulled into this world as well. And then texts, suddenly without any preparation, the celestial being who's doing a tour, snaps his finger and the palace vanishes. And pilgrims looks for what happened.

And it's sparkly then to be a teaching on emptiness. Everything's empty. I think more important, it's, it's, it's a description of how quickly we can snap out of our fantasies and our delusions illusions. We live in one world and then we see actually, it's not that world at all. But the retreat also I told the story of when I was in, so I lived for the three years in a Zen monastery that Tassajara down here and, and then I was Padres National wilderness, off the big coast, Big Sur coast and the way that the monastery supports itself in the way it's kind of set up is that during the summer months, it's kind of a resort. Then guests come and pay a lot of money. And then the winter, from September to through April. It's when it's a Zen monastery and it's been closed to public we do a lot of intensive practice. So I spent a year assigned in the monastery kitchen, I didn't know most anything about cooking. I started and by the time I finished, I had learned a lot about cooking. And I thought of myself as a fairly good cook and had been promoted in the ranks of the kitchen and had become kind of the kitchen manager kind of position. And kind of working with me under me aside me above me or something was a group of people called three people called the guest cooks. And the guest cooks were the cooks who cooked for the summer guests and the Summer guests got really good food. And it was like the baby, you know, kind of go make food wonderful vegetarian food. So I had become such a good cook and so competent in the kitchen. And I looked around the monastery. And I knew everybody and I knew that I happened to be the most competent cook, left standing. And so that my year in the kitchen ended in September. And so then we went, we went into the winter months of being intensive monastery. And we spent a lot of time meditating. And a lot of time in the meditation hall, especially three meals of the day, we would have in the meditation hall in meditation posture, sitting like I am with a little space in front of us, like here on this platform. Then we'd have bowls and the whole choreographed way in which they come and serve you and you chant and you'd eat and you eat in this very meditative way. Well, starting in September, After I left the kitchen, I was convinced that I was going to be assigned to be the guest cook the next summer. Because I was the only person, you know, most qualified person. So I spent a lot of time that fall and winter planning menus and recipes, and all these meditative meals that we had. I was evaluating the food and thinking about what I was doing, how would you How would you be different than how I wouldn't expect a different combination of food and all this stuff, right? We're sitting eating like meditation posture, right? So you're supposed to be meditating and I'm very present, but I was, you know, present imagining and fantasizing and thinking about this wonderful job, I was going to be so wonderful that so that went merrily along for the fall and the winter. And then come the end of April. It's time in this wonderful Zen way. The ritual announced of everybody's jobs for the summer. And we all go standing in the zendo and meditation hall and we're all standing at attention and someone's reading out the names and your assignment because you never know where you get assigned the sign the monastery you get signed someplace you've to do a job that you know nothing about. And so they came to my name and lo and behold, they did not read my name. Oh, they didn't they did not put me in the kitchen. I would did not become a guest cook. And I was like flabbergasted. I mean, how what? But, but as soon as I got over my surprise, the next thing that flashed in front of me was all those months where I sat in meditation with meals, you know, kind of supposed to be meditating. Well, I eatings all those months all those hours where I was fantasizing and thinking about How great I was going to be or how great the food was going to be in my menus. Knowing that, wow, I spent a lot of time doing that. I could have been doing something different. I could have been meditating.

So I was rather embarrassed is kind of like a little bit of a shock. It's like, wow, I really wasted my time in a certain way I could have you know, as a monastery, I was very serious about being a practitioner, I thought and so I could have been practicing. So but just you know, as soon as that my name was announced with my job for the summer, it was kind of like, someone snap their fingers. And I woke up from the dream that I've been dreaming for all those months. And this idea, so we know this idea of waking up from the dream. And sometimes we're lucky and it's sudden, and sometimes it's a slow

process. And meditation is one of the ways. Sometimes it's fast, but more often is a slow process. Because one of the things we're doing in meditation is we're learning to not give in to the strong currents of thinking that goes on in the mind, not to indulge in it, not to be hooked by it. And the forces of the mind that are of interest, that are driven by desire, driven by fear, driven by hostility, driven by all kinds of things driven by issues of self identity. One of the interesting things about the thinking we do is, for most people, most of the obsessive thinking that we do, generally were centered about ourselves. We're like a main character in the play. And so that's very interesting if you're, you know, you're at the center stage or close to the center stage or somehow has to do with you. So to discover that power in the strength of the interest of the hooks that keeps us engaged, and then learn to slowly relax the mind, relax those tentacles that hold on to our thoughts. And to be able to relax and relax and relax, until finally we can wake up. And we see the world see the situation, not through the lens of the thoughts and the beliefs and ideas that were caught in. But rather we see it directly, ideally without any lens at all just to see something clearly. And that process, some people wake up to how much time they spent in delusion, how much time they spent lost in thought and it's very hard to think to see how that the way that we think color our experience of life dramatically. And we don't see it that way. We think it's real, because that's all we know. So we see our you know, we see our for other people in our lives. Our jobs are here the work we see what's needs to happen in the world, we see the world itself very powerfully through the filter of certain beliefs, certain emotional feelings, attitudes towards what the world is, who we are, who other people are. And because it's, you know, the kind of what we've always been familiar with as much as we can remember, it's sometimes invisible to us how much of a filter we have. And so, to sit down and meditate is one of the ways I think, very powerful ways to begin not only to kind of clear the veils, so we can see directly, but I think more importantly, maybe more importantly, or is as important is to learn the skill there in the capacity of mind, to be able to see more clearly, what we're doing when we caught in our thoughts and how to put our thoughts down how to be free of them. What you know if all you want to do is to clear your mind? You can do there are things you can do to clear your mind and you'll certainly wow you know, that's something but you won't learn anything in the process you won't learn how to tame your mind how to take responsibility for your own mind and the process. My favorite Claire your mind story was many years ago, I read I saw a little documentary 10 minute or so long. And it was about a man who before he was married, had children. I think he had been like a motorcycle racer. But you know, he just the weekends he without the motorcycle rider and he found that racing his motorcycle around cleared his mind from the work from the from working for all week long and it was great. But what after being married have Kevin kids he couldn't had didn't have a time to go out and motorcycle racing rides or something. So you have to find something else to clear his mind.

So He discovered that if he early early in the morning or just before dawn, he and his buddies they would drive to some someplace in the city where there was a skyscraper being built. And they would sneak in to the sky carpet and climb up to the top. And then he would jump off the top with a glider which is like, like parachute gliders or something. And he would just slide and glide down to the street below, where his friend would be with a car waiting to get away car. And then he would take his parachute lighter and wrap it all up, then they get in the car and drive off. It didn't take very long to jump off the building and glide down by time you got go on down to the bottom, his mind was clear. So you could do that too. But the issue with that is it and keep everyone like many people have things they do for that purpose is does it teach you about how to take responsibility for your own mind how your mind works. So you can get in there and actually watch and track it, and perhaps do the kind of preventive maintenance, where you don't even get caught in the first place. And that's really, I think what we're hoping to do is to come to a place where we're wise about wise enough about how our mind works, that we started living in a way that we don't get ourselves caught in stories and ideas and fantasies. And we see clearly, you know, see clearly what's going on. And then we're just there. And it's easy to get caught. I didn't get caught today, but I had one thought today that that, you know, many years ago, I

probably would have been caught too caught up in and, and that was was the importance of giving a great talk today. You know, like I you know, I didn't have anything to talk about I thought so. So there Oh, that's not good. I mean, I should have gone rea talk and probably had great guest speakers last few weeks, and I better kind of, you know, rise to rise to the standard. They set the night to give you an exceptional talk and while everybody and so that I could see, for a brief moment, those kinds of thoughts went through my mind. But I just saw them wow, look, Gil, you're still doing those kinds of strange thinking. And that's not true. I don't have to believe those. I don't just spend fall and winter thinking about the talk I'm going to give. And that's not the Dharma, that's not freedom. So I had the inability to see that and not buy into it kind of smile at my mind thinking that way. And have some little slight slight apprehension that if I didn't come down here with something prepared well, that it wouldn't go well for us to that tonight. What's this about anyways, about coming and giving a great talk or is it about coming in or being concerned? to people like me or something, or is about seeing how that operates in the mind and not being caught by it. being awake to it is okay. I don't go there. I don't need to be involved. I'll just I'll try to be free of that. So that's my little thing for today. So now it's your turn. Because one of these really great spiritual teachers, Buddhist teachers who really want to wow everybody by how you know, right and that they're talking all that gives a responsibility to you. So now it's up to you. I'm done. So this is going to be a great evening now. I've done my share. Now it's your turn. So do you have any questions or comments you'd like to make or anything at all? You're welcome to ask. Yes, please see me actually waiting. Use the mic, please. It's nice if you say your name also when you begin to sorry.

My name is Noel and I decided about a week ago that I was going to give a party because you know, I have this first grandchild and I have friends that want to meet the baby. And so um, you know, my son and daughter in law thought it was a great idea, but I never give parties and I'm just like, that's all I can think about. You know, after I've gone through this really pleasant experience of you know of being at IMC and really getting with this program and seeking I'm you know, on my way, you know, this is this like, a supposed to be fun, and it's not at all and I just you know, and I know that what you're going to say you're going to say, What are you worried about? You know, why is that important? Why is that important to you? What if you just did this? And still, it's just like, I don't know, I just don't know how to, you know, stop, you know, less suing, you know, the cold and you know, just just am very agitated with this whole process. And so I'm asking you like, how do you? How do you cool it off? How do you pull it off?

Great question. Great tag. I appreciate that a lot. Thank you. And so one of the jobs of a meditation teacher like me, is partly to be a cheerleader. So I want to be your cheerleader. I first I'd like to comment that the fact that you see it so clearly, what you do that you describe it very clearly. counts for a lot. You have enough presence enough mindfulness enough. wisdom to see how this operates, and see that that must be another way. You don't want to do that. And it can be uncomfortable and some people can feel kind of bad about themselves to see all that I'm in bad Buddhist now I'm not doing it right. But actually what you what you what you describe how you saw that and what you're to how you're taking responsibility for it. I want to be a cheerleader that was really great. So But still, it's hot, right? Still, it's, you know, still not comfortable. I think so then then some people find it very meaningful to know, once they realize what your real, what you understood is, it can be very helpful to see if you had if you have any confidence in the path you're on the practice you've discovered here I'm see the mindfulness path is a very powerful path. And it might not be so effective committee effective as you want this time. But if I didn't know that you have a path that technique that works that can lead you over time to be free of this kind of stuff that can also help you relax, sometimes cool you down because of the confidence you have. Yes, yes, I have something that can really help here, if you know that. The other is it really helps also to have a lot of forgiveness, acceptance, compassion for yourself. Some

people, what they do is they add the second arrows, you know, but the second arrows. So it's bad enough that you have this, you know all these thoughts about the party. But then on top of that, you add the second arrow as you add, I'm a bad person. I'm a failure. I'm the world's worst party giver. You know, and, you know, and I hope no one ever asks me but how I am as a party giver because I've failed, you know, and so we build up all this stuff on top of it. And so it's really helps to have a lot of certain degree of acceptance of compassion, forgiveness and if you can some humor about it. And that doesn't help the original thing, but it kind of makes the things lighter we don't. Because one of the reasons One of the things that makes our challenges like this more difficult they need to be is we take it and ourselves often too seriously. And so, you know, to learn to kind of lighten up a little bit. It's much it's easier for me to say than to do. And then sometimes it's really good to do something that pulls you out of that world. If you're so like, go for a walk, even take a shower or to meditate, or go find a friend who can talk about something else with you do something to pull you out of it enough so that when you go back into party planning, you go in with a bit more, be more centered. That can help. And then in some quiet time, maybe in the morning if you meditate or some quiet time when you're you have more time to to reflect on what's going on, you can try to look more deeply at what are the underlying beliefs and maybe emotions that underlie your concern about this party. And there might be if you calm enough and present enough for yourself, he might see that there's some kind of catalyst, some kind of hook. That's a little bit subconscious. That takes a while to see and they say, Oh, that's what it's about. And so like, for example, something preoccupied me for a long time was that I didn't know about was wanting people to like me. And I would do all this mental gymnastics, social gymnastics to try to get people to like me. And then that was one of the also great things about living in the monastery. Actually, within a year I was in the kitchen. Being the kitchen manager. Kitchen No one likes in the Zen monastery. No one likes the kitchen manager.

And one person went up, he will work to my crib to set to kill, I need to talk to you outside. So I went outside the kitchen with him and he said, Gail, if you weren't so sincere, I'd punch you out. And so in that context, I, you know, the whole the whole endeavor tried to get everyone to like me and be concerned about it didn't work. It was just like, a lot of it's just a lot of work. And I could feel the pain of it. And so there I eventually saw that that's, that's driving my behavior. And once I saw that, then I could start getting free of it. So Noel, right, that's some of the things that I occurs to me to say. Does any of that's relevant.

Yeah, cuz I could tell I want them to like the baby too. So like, that's a double like, I want them to like me and like the baby and like the party.

With a baby who knows, you know, like, so I did, we did a baby blessing. My first my first son, and we went to Zen teachers, Mel Weitzman and Berkeley so we went out without going to go go over there. We had a private ceremony in them zendo in this Zen center in the meditation hall, and to do a little chanting and little baby blessing and I was holding him in the middle of that he just kind of vomited all over me.

So, you know, good luck with those babies.

Someone else? Yes.

I was at a recent retreat, and it didn't turn out as I had expected. And then shortly thereafter I read an article that put things in perspective anticipation is premeditated disappointment. anticipation is premeditated disappointment. I think generally, that's one of the great I shouldn't say this. I suspect that one of the great ways that men and meditation feats work for people really helped them a lot. is they're

never what we expect them to be. What do you think Richard? retreats are never what we expect them to be. No. They're exactly what they're supposed to be but not what we expected with me. Do you think Laura

speech She just came back from the retreat but then came from the retreat. So they're like quiet like me kind of anticipation is premeditated disappointment. The thing

that struck me as you were talking is, this is the beginning of the school year and I teach at the university, and these are juniors and seniors. And there's many of them that have a, you know, deeply held dream that they're going to medical school. And it just hit me that there's, there's a balance between, you know, in order for them to put up with all that's involved in succeeding in college, they

they have to have a really

strong vision, a strong craving for what they're going for. They would have stopped a long time ago. And it just struck me is how that's that's kind of a delicate line to walk between that. And your long winter long. What's going to happen? I mean, they're doing that with Oh, and I become a doctor, I'm going to be able to do Yeah,

yeah. Yeah. So I think I think the line between delusion and, and, and a healthy vision, you know, possibility. And also, you know, so what, what's the fantasy? What's the purpose? What are we trying to build and create. And so I mean, being a doctor can be a great service to the world and it can come at a compassionate vision too, but to be helpful. It can also become out of the vision of being, you know, the next Mother Teresa, and you know, you're going to solve all the world's problems and how great is going to be and you'll get to drive a BMW, and so you have all these, this whole the whole fantasy that's created and so you know what's driving it so that's what again also when it when it when we start, start being mindful of ourselves and have the ability to stop and really get quiet and to see what goes on in the mind and to track it, then we can start seeing the difference between what's pure fantasy, what's delusion? what's healthy vision appropriate perspective, and what our relationship to it is our idea we have a lot at stake. It's possible to devote one's life to a tremendous amount of one's effort, like maybe to go to medical school, but in certain kind of way, not have anything at stake, meaning maybe in a spiritual way, meaning that your sense of, of self importance who you are in the world doesn't have to be tied to success in the endeavor you're doing. You're already contented happy with who you are. And if you're trying to use something like, like a serious situation, becoming a doctor as a way to somehow make yourself into an acceptable wonderful, perfect person for you know that people can come and look at your baby or whatever and then, you know, then it's a fantasy, then it's usually pretty obvious. It's probably a setup, you're perpetuating certain delusion, which will probably come back and bite you over and over again.

Well, what hit me is if people I mean, a lot of us are, have kind of been through the slings and arrows of life for a while and might have the wisdom to do that. But how many college students have got that, and others those that are there, they're not there yet, most of them. And that that's like, oh, wow, I'm watching some suffering, I guess.

Yeah, yeah. Sometimes with a lot of unnecessary suffering happens in this world, but they think about suffering. They say that this is part of the lower part of the one of the biggest lore of Buddhism is that no one comes to Buddhism without suffering. So sometimes you have to suffer enough to think I, you know, I think I needed an alternative then how would have been doing and so these are people that stuff people's looking around for an alternative and, and some people will come to place like IMC

because they're struggling in their life in some way. And so they think they find here something that's a path away that helps them deal with it. But until they suffer enough, and some people find come to like a Buddhist group, and they find some relief from their suffering. And some people then when they find the relief, which is great, then we'll leave the Buddhist practice because they got what they did. And when I when I was first being introduced to Buddhism many years ago, I was told by one of my Zen teachers that he saw many people come to Zen center, and after three or four years, they had kind of fulfilled what had brought them there. They found this stronger sense of self. They found their place in society, they weren't so stressed anymore. And it was good. And then they to go continue their life. But he said it's the people who continued after that. They're the ones who really started doing Buddhist practice a path of liberation that you know, went further.

And so just look at the new job stories just now. After you realize that you are doing all this social JMS CMS is to gain fame and to gain like, people have to like me Yeah, to like, you're right. After you realize that, how does it change how you approach other people and how do how do you deal with like, John Hennessy about that? I say, so. So after I realized that, you know, I was driven by this desire to have people like me, did all this social gymnastics, and I realized that how did that change what what did I do then? I realized that because it hurt, that's that was really what got me really painful and a drag. And so and that's often we it's often a lot of learning happens when things hurt when they're suffering and we feel the stress of it. And so seeing it didn't make it go away. But what happened when I started seeing it, I became much more sensitive to that form of suffering. And so I saw it quicker and more and more often. And as I got to see it more often I got more sensitive to it and be able to look at it more understand it better. And then I started one of the things that started has started to happening was that I was willing to experiment with not acting on it. I really take the risk of just kind of being being quiet or not trying to impress someone. And then I did the experiment to see how that would work out or see if I survived and my survival rate was very high. It seemed to work out, you know, well enough for me. So that helped me to relax it and not be so concerned with it. The other thing that helped me a lot was meditation practice. Because meditation practice gave me a sense of well being a sense of calm or peace or a kind of kind of feel that feeling kind of content or hole or something that became an alternative to the feeling of incompleteness that was driving the desire to be liked. Because, you know, I, I felt something was wrong with me, I was being like, that'd be safer, I'd be Fuller, I'd be you know, something. And so it helped also both both to feel the suffering, as I said, has helped helped, but also helped to really feel that alternative way of being. And as I started feeling, a greater sense of well being and sense of completeness, then the, the concern, the fear, and the concern for people to like me, began to melt away. And it was a slow process. It wasn't like, just like that. probably took many years actually probably, I don't know, five years. From the time I really saw it to I felt like I'm fairly free of it. But I'm not completely free of it right because I had to start earlier today, but I need to give a great talk.

Is that enough? Thank you. So maybe one more. Mary. What's your name? Harry.

Didn't have to act on it.

You said meditation had something that help. I think that that's is what's happening to me is that meditation

many years.

It's given me space between what I already

I'm so grateful for

great. So meditation gave you space slowed you down enough that you found where the freedom was? Wow. Hallelujah. It's good. It's great to be a cheerleader. That's wonderful. Marian. Yes, I think that's one of the things slowing down. And what happens what you'll probably notice if is that the did illusive thinking they're caught up in fantasies and the future and all these things, and the mind tends to be operating pretty fast than that. There's very little space. But as we slow down, there's space even in the mind. And that in that space, we can find the freedom you talked about. So that's beautiful. Thank you.

Okay,

so thank you for meditating together with all of us today. It's I find, you know, I love coming here to smoke this evening and just sitting and meditating with you. I hope it was nice for you. And I hope our conversation about this topic was nice and helpful. And Have a nice week. Thank you.