

2016-01-10 Impermanence

Fri, 9/25 2:51PM • 37:36

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

thinking, mind, impermanence, driving, buddha, moment, longer, river, change, meditation, idea, life, stay, arising, perceptual, buddhist, perceptions, mesmerized, passing, noticing

SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

So this last week, I had the kind of the coincidence of encountering being with three different friends, who was bet a lot of time with about 30 years ago. And that we were kind of a little bit of a group, we've spent a lot of time together. And, but I kind of saw them individually, some of them together. And so he brought with reflections about change, and how things don't change, and what changes what what does change. And what changes, you know, different people, different ones of them have gone through challenges over the years. Some of them had children, including me, and, and so the changes of the children, you some of them that children are growing up now and off to college and, and so to go off to see the whole trajectory of change and children is quite quite an amazing thing. And my own impression is that parents see the change much more acutely than the kids, three kids, it's just like, you know, this, whatever is happening that week, or that day is like so always back way, right? You take it for granted. And they think was Tom, Mark Twain who said something like, you know how foolish his father was when he was 14. But he was so surprised by time he was 18, how much his father had learned. So this change thing, and turns out that Buddhism puts a central emphasis on change in two different ways. It talks about impermanence, in the form of the things come and they go, come and they go. And the other is that they don't just come and they go. But over time, they change some things get transformed, and some things disappear entirely. Some things get old and you know, our cars, we buy a car, maybe it's newish. And then after some years, and it gets old ish, and it changes. And our bodies, you know, started off somewhat newish. And then it seems to slowly get old ish. It changes over time. And then if you're involved in any kind of discipline, the regular practice of something. Yeah, generally, you'll learn a skill, you change in relationship to the skill, the discipline you're doing. And so there's this transformation that goes on. So same thing with meditation, that if you do it regularly enough, there is a change that goes on, change in your skill, how your mind works, changing the kind of impulses and reactions that you tend to have and tend to act on and respond to. There's a change in maturation. And it's kind of impressive to watch people mature, in some in a spiritual practice, like we have here over time. And the teachings on impermanence and change, you know, are meant to be liberating. And the teachings on change are supposed to be very encouraging, because the mind or the heart in Buddhism is taught to be malleable and shapeable. And changeable. Many years ago, my son was, you know, in the particular wonderful phase of change that he went through, he was in kindergarten. And they had every once a week they and his kindergarten, he went to they had the kids work with beeswax. And the way that they would work with beeswax is that they would take the cold beeswax off the shelf, and the kids would put it between their palms and hold it there, while the teacher told them a story.

And story was long enough so that the body heat from the hands would soften the beeswax. So it became shakable. And he couldn't it was no longer hard. And then you could kind of make it into some beautiful thing. And then once it wasn't usually it'll animals they would make. And then the next step was that let go of it, they put it back up on the shelf, where we stick there for the next year. But it for the

next week. And if you try to shape do something with beeswax when it was hard. All you could do is break it which is not very nice, I guess. But if you soften it so the same thing with our minds, if we try to force our minds or hearts or in our life to change, demanding to change expecting to change quickly Then something can break. And I've known people who've had to actually have mental ruptures of certain kinds when they try too hard. And the Buddhist approach to change is to put together the conditions that support a healthy and appropriate change. And so to have warm, to hold yourself with warmth, to hold yourself with kindness to, to not be in a hurry, take time, to kind of just sit and be with yourself and create the conditions where something begins to soften inside, like go relax. And then once the heart and the mind is no longer tight, contracted, afraid, you know, it's gotten soft and relaxed, then the mind is shapeable, the malleable workable, these aren't the kind of English translations of ancient Buddhist words, the Buddha used to describe the mind. And the Buddha said that when his mind was most malleable, soft, workable, that's when he turned it to do the work of liberation. So he took the time to develop that kind of mind. And it was kind of a little bit the good news that we can change our minds, we can change our hearts, we can change change our inner dispositions, or in our life, we don't have to be stuck with some of the habits that are unhealthy to keep doing the same reactions responses that sometimes are quite debilitating. And so it's kind of this idea that there is change and change can be beneficial for us.

And actually, Buddhist practice works with a possibility of changed for one of the things that we had said when he when his mind was most soft, most malleable, most workable, most use other words like pure and bright imperturbable for this kind of developed mind. That gave him an ability to see impermanence in a different way than just noticing change over time. And this is usually referred to by the, by the word *anicca*. And this Pali word, usually translated into English as impermanence. And the refers to the seeing the arising and passing a phenomenon. And things can arise and pass repeatedly. So it can give the sense of semblance of permanence like just constantly there. But when the mind is quite settled, and constant and concentrated, we start kind of tuning in to the, to not the ideas we have about life, not the gross kind of way in which we perceive things, we get to start tuning in to the very nature of how we perceive how we take in all the sense data of the world. And since data inside of ourselves, to the, to the point we start seeing the building blocks by which we build our lives. And it's rare that we see the building blocks, usually we see like the whole building of the you know, and we then we react to the building, but but to see the actual, you know, bricks that get put in place. And to realize those bricks are not solid, like a bricks of a building, but are because they're mental bricks, in a perceptual drip of bricks. They're constantly shifting and changing and moving the and so to start seeing at this kind of more, more fundamental level, that our experience is constantly flowing and changing, arising and passing arising and passing is a central insight that the Buddha used for his awakening experience. And what the Buddha's teaches over and over again, to the emphasis in the center, Buddhist Buddhist teachings on seeing arising and passing a phenomenon. But your mind has to be quiet and concentrated enough to really are still enough to really tune into that we still enough. And the reason for that is that most people are seeing their experience of life, through their ideas of life, through their concepts. And we're negotiating and most of you know, we have a difficulty with a friend of ours. And so we have the notion of our friend and the history with a friend and what am I going to say to the friend and what my needs are, all are reasonable things to think about. But they are also somewhat complicated abstractions or ideas, concepts that can easily take us away from our direct experience of the moment. You can get lost and you know, you can sit you can sit and probably some of you did it today you sit in meditation, and you weren't that present, because you had a concern about a friend and a conversation you had to have and what who said what to who yesterday and what happened and reviewing it then it's like, and so it's real enough in a certain way. But there's also a little bit of a virtual reality. And then you might think of merit, you know, if you spend a lot of time thinking about that The past and future of fantasy and meditation, you might think of it just completely put a label next to it, virtual reality, you know, the original virtual, the original virtual reality experience that you're having. And

it's not quite having to do with what's right here. But if we can come into here, right here, then we start seeing that the concepts that we have, even though they might have some semblance of accuracy, don't really represent, you know, in detail. And well, what's happening right now. So I'd like to be have a conflict with a friend. And if you kind of stay by yourself and think about that conflict, you have, probably chances are, you're probably a little bit of this fixed idea of your friend that you're working with in that conversation. But if you actually meet with your friend, to have a conversation about the difficulty, then you have the multi dimensions of the friend. And it's hard to kind of view them just in one dimension. And you start seeing that, you know, all kinds of things you'll learn about them. And maybe they showed up in there have a migraine, you know, you're still operating about you know, your resentment, what they said yesterday, but now they come with a migraine and like, wow, you know, now you kind of like my take care of them, and we'll have the conversation, but let me take care of you and get you just right, let's turn off the lights in the room and in the whole different orientation, right to your friend. So this is, there's so many coming multi-dimensional in the moment, we tune into, into fixed idea. And sometimes maybe dissolves, it's hard to hold on to that fixed idea of, you know, the resentment you have for your friend maybe.

And so the same thing with ourselves, our relationship to ourselves. So we think about ourselves, many of the ways in which people think about themselves that causes them distress difficulty, could also be considered to fit into the category of fixed idea that we have, this is who I am. And one friend told me recently that her common or at least the way she tells me about her common attitude towards herself, is that she's bad. I'm not quite sure what maybe she doesn't mean know what bad means, but it's not good. You know, she's so that's kind of sad, you know, to go around with it, I'm a bad person, you know, such a, such a vague abstract idea. And you know, what happened that kind of brought that on this idea that person carries that, you know, with wherever they go. And so the, so it's a fixed idea, but to really kind of, just like when you were with your friend, and you start seeing the multi dimensional aspects, to sit quietly with yourself, and really tune in to what's happening here, who are you at this moment, it's hard to hold on to the fixed ideas, it's hard to kind of, because it's a filter through which we see and we take off that filter, we start seeing a multi dimensional aspects of who we are, and the various all the different impulses and thoughts and ideas. And, you know, it's we're more than just one idea. And so to begin seeing the multiplicity of who we are, is often very freeing. And so as we do is to actually see it more and more with the direct experience. And then the more we're here, then we start seeing the things arise and pass things are constantly shifting and changing. I saw I had this Toad said this many times. For a while, when I used to drive up and down Highway 101, here at a commute, regular commute, I really enjoyed tuning into the kaleidoscope of changing perceptions, changing sights, and my reactions to them. And, you know, if I was kind of driving up the highway, which was quite quite capable of doing and thinking about something really important, then I was just on that important thing. You know, and just like this one thing that I was concerned with, but if I let go of my usual kind of preoccupations, and tuned into the moment of driving in all the different perceptions we're seeing, when I was driving, and my reactions to what we're seeing, it was fascinating to watch how quickly it shifted and changed. And the mood wouldn't change in my reactions wouldn't change, if I was, you know, thinking about some difficulty I had with some person or some situation my life and then I was just kind of like, you know, irritated, you know, you know, that 20 minute drive and one on one is irritated, you know, but if I kind of let go of what I was thinking about, you know, my problem with whatever and just stay right in the moment, the perceptual moment what's actually happening right now, right now and driving. And what all I noticed that my perceptions are For good driving, you're constantly shifting, right, you're moving, looking at this and looking at that, and looking at that, and looking at rear view mirror, looking at this car, and what were they doing up there and you kind of constantly kind of moving and shifting and kind of, they take in all the different. And it's a good driving, right. And so you know, there's a blue car, there's a red car, there's a new car, there's this kind of car, that kind of car. And that's nice.

But then also my, my reactions, my mood inside, my emotions shifted and changed as quickly almost, it was very subtle, and sometimes it wasn't so subtle, the police car would pull up behind me look in the rearview mirror, and there's a car. And if the lights aren't on, that's good. But even so, I mean, it's, you know, it has a different impression on me, you know, I kind of wake up and more cautious. And then, you know, some other car cuts me off, you know, or comes a little bit too close to me. And then I have a little you know, attitude about that, that appears flight that kind of goes through and, and then some beautiful car goes by, and I admire it and, and maybe even I want it. And then you know, some, you know, attractive person, you know, happens to be driving parallel to me for a little bit too long for my purposes.

And then that brings certain thoughts and attitudes and ideas and, and so you know, if I'm relaxed and stay in the interest in the moment of perceptions, what's actually being perceived in the moment it's driving was this wonderful kaleidoscope of shifts and changes. And it was fun to see the changing moods and attitudes and feelings and thoughts that came and went and came and went. And generally, when I drove that way, I would end on my commute, I'd be more relaxed. And then if I was stuck on something, just thinking this is you know. And so one of the things we're training ourselves to do, and mindfulness practice and meditation practice, at least in the context of this particular time of meditation. You don't have to do this all the time. But this time, is to learn to let go of the preoccupations let go of the way we think about life, where we hold, we see our life through these grosser concepts and ideas. And so we're not really, in the moment, perceiving the moment, we're in the moment, concerned with our ideas about what's happening, sometimes their ideas about the present moment. But that's very different than really perceiving what's happening at present moment. And one of the most common verbs that the Buddha used for describing practice, is to see one way or other, the idea of seeing was really a key aspect of the Buddhists. And the proceeding is like, it's not thinking it's perceiving. Here, it was meant both literally, with the Buddhist center, also with the inner eye, kind of just to perceive to see here, what's here, what's been the moment what's in the moment, what's in the moment here, can't underscore how this is where it's at the as the mind gets quieter and softer, and still there, to stay here to stay here to stay here. And then as we see here, then we start seeing that things begin to or arising and passing quickly. It's kind of like driving on the freeway with a car. That in fact, you might have some stability, where you stay maybe with the breath over some time you're focused and concentrated. But even so there's a constant of teeny shifts of paying attention to the breath, noticing your thinking, noticing that you're feeling kind of soft and cozy with your breath, noticing that there's a sound noticing that there's, you know, a constant shift of a different kind of sensations, perceptions in the moment, again, the building blocks that we build our life on, is the perception or what they lead the immediate direct experience that we have. And to start seeing that arising and passing arising and passing. And one of the consequences that the Buddha described that comes from this ability to stay in the perceptual experience of the moment and see it coming and going coming and going. He described it in a word that I think is a very evocative word. Use the word disenchantment. And disenchantment is a fascinating word because it's the opposite of being enchanted. And you can ask what's wrong with being enchanted? It seems kind of you know, kind of nice you know, it's could be nice. Until you remember then being enchanted is also being under the spell of something.

And so you're not really in control, you're not really free when you're under the spell of something. So to break the spell, is another way of talking about this word need be de disenchantment, or breaking the spell. And so there's something about seeing things are in the moment staying in the moment that we can see the arising and passing of things. And we can start feeling it's, it's not really so interesting to cling to those things, or to react to them or be for or against them. It's okay just to be there to watch things come and go to come and go. It's like being at the edge of a river watching a river. It's okay just to watch the river go by. And it's can be very meaningful, very relaxing, just to watch the river go by it

comes and goes, the waves come and go, the fish come and go, is watching it flow. But as soon as you try to freeze the river, or as soon as you kind of lose touch with the perception of the river, and you're in your head, thinking about river and thinking, Oh, in California, there's a drought. And I wonder what it'd be like to, if I can just kind of channel this river back to my house. And I wonder how much what it'd be like to do that, and could I get the water rights for it, you know, maybe I should go get it become a state legislature. And one way would be like to be elected and, you know, then you have lost touch with the river, right. But in the moment, the rivers, you know, constantly flowing and changing. But it but when you get caught up in all those thoughts, but channeling the river, and you know, what it takes and getting the rights to and all that it's very easy to lose then the perspective of impermanence of change, with those thinking. But if you have those thoughts, and see, Wow, my thoughts are just jumping around. They're coming and going, I'm jumping from one idea to another, and I'm building a whole universe of, you know, you know, building a water company in California. And you see it as something that arises and passes, chances are, you're less, you're less and less mesmerized by it. But if you're mesmerized with this idea, then you can get lost in the world of water planning. Just because you're sitting next to the river, enjoying yourself. And pretty soon you're sitting next to the river, stressed out about all the issues, political issues about how to get water rights. You know, what do you would rather do this, he said that, you know, and you don't know anything about water rights. So what are you doing thinking about it? I'm talking from firsthand experience, not around water rights. But I you know, I spent three, three days in a retreat once designing helicopters and having a business plan. I know nothing about helicopters, and nothing about business plans, and, and no business kind of, you know, the mind is just you know, it's amazing what the mind is capable of doing. So I was mesmerized, I was enchanted by this idea of these helicopters, and how great they would be personal helicopters. way of the future. And so, split this, you see that even those thoughts come and go are coming and going and not be mesmerized by the content of the thoughts. But to see it as phenomena, it's coming and going. So this leads to what the Buddha called disenchantment. no longer being mesmerized by it no longer under the spell of it. And so and as so that was, that's one of the important consequences of being able to stay in the perceptual moment, the direct experience of this moment, and whether it's thoughts or whether it's sensations or experiences. And one of the best places to do this is in meditation. Because it's kind of safe here in the world, we live out the way we live in the world. Sometimes you have to live in concepts and ideas. So to start that, that's why we relax and meditation deeply so we can really allow ourselves to rest in the river in the watching the river flow, the river, the flow of our experience. And the Buddha talked about disenchantment, and then he said when you can start getting disenchanted, no longer mesmerized by it all. Then there starts to be a technical word is fading away, there starts to be the fading away of the drive, to claim the desire to hold on and to want to do. And this is a turning point in people's practice, when they start saving people's lives, when they get clear enough sense of what it's like for the mind to be caught and gripped in the in our ideas and our desires and our versions contracted around. And know that you don't have to do that.

And it's possible to soften and let that fade away kind of no longer be committed to it, no longer interested in it, and can continue to do that. And that's a turning point when the interest Starts fading not to the interest in our desires, but the interest in clinging to our desires, holding on to them. And this is a turning point. And at some point, when that turning point goes far enough, it's kind of like the ball begins to roll downhill by itself. And at some point, it's just so nice not to claim Yes, of course, you wouldn't not want to claim of course, you want to no longer have this kind of grasping or drivenness or with our ideas and our thoughts about the future and who I am and how to prove myself and apologize for myself and, and you know, make myself safe. And you know, all these things were kind of caught in the grip, of course, you don't want to because it's so much nicer to have this relaxed, cozy at home mind, that is not kind of caught in anything or driven in anything just being here in a simple way. So the Buddha talked about seeing the arising of seeing the perceptual arising and passing of things, as one of the best places to learn the process of becoming disenchanted, not being mesmerized by ideas and

concepts. And then as we no longer are mesmerized, and there starts being a fading away of the drive to cling it to hold on. And then as that fades away, then there's a comes a time when there's a qualitative experience of what the Buddha called cessation. And the cessation is the experience that, that what we were clinging to is no longer there, at least temporarily. And the experience of having something to be clung to something we are preoccupied with. And then we're no longer preoccupied with is a very important thing, to take the time to experience to realize to feel to attend to, it's all too easy to have. It happens in ordinary life, that people aren't meditators to have something we're preoccupied with. And it feels kind of oppressive and difficult to be preoccupied by it. And then for some reason, maybe we just got distracted. And we didn't and so we weren't no longer preoccupied. And then it's, and then you know, we don't even notice we're no longer concerned with that, or maybe little bit notice, but we have other things to worry about. So might as well go on to the next thing. You know, and next desire, next one thing, whatever. And, but it's really useful take time to really feel what it's like, when some preoccupation you had is no longer grabbed you by the throat or grabbed you and you know, you're caught up in it. What does that feel like? Where is their sense of ease their sense of openness, sense of spaciousness, sense of quiet sense of relaxation, calm? Is there a sense of, you know, what, what is it like for you physically, mentally, the reason to spend time doing that is that, to let that register in the memory, register in the mind begins to retrain the unconscious or the subconscious. It begins teaching the mind that this is desirable, this is a good place to go. This is valuable. And it begins to slowly shift what we think is valuable. Because when you're involved in clinging, something grasping or thinking, preoccupied by things, worrying about things, some part of you thinks it's valuable and important to do that. If someone asked you, you probably say, No, it's not so important, but but something inside of you thinks it is because you're doing it. And so what we're trying to partly doing is retraining that subconscious part of the mind and showing it it's safe, it's nice, it's trustable, it's valuable, to not cling to let go to quiet down. And so that experience of cessation, take time to feel it even the ordinary easy things in daily life. The cop car was behind you driving, and then the cop cars speeds up around you and off down the freeway, at the cessation of caution cessation or worry.

Take it in, that's nice. You know, rather than look at the next car that comes to say, that's a nice car, I think I want that. You know, then you lost opportunity to be nourished by that experience. So Ah, no cops. No control. And so arising and passing. So maybe it's useful for you to keep Keep in mind that those of you interested in mindfulness meditation, that what we're doing and mindfulness meditation is learning to be mindful of the present moment. So just remember that it has to do with the present moment, nothing else. And then as we relax into the present moment, we're moving in the direction of coming to the perceptual moment, to stay with the moments of perception, what we actually hear, see, taste, touch, smell, in the moment, think in the moment, just to right here, so that in there, it's not what the content of what you perceive. That's that important. But it's the process of things arising and passing, which is ultimately going to be most liberating. And this is a huge lesson that is hard to learn. Because many of us are very concerned with the content of what we think, rather than the process of the of the content doesn't matter so much. If we can rest there in that quiet place, we just see the rising and passing, we see the flow of the river coming over the river. And if you can just stay with that flow, then this process of disenchantment, fading away and cessation, has a chance to operate for you. If you stay by the edge of the river, and you get really mesmerized by the river, and you take a bucket and take out a bucket full of water and walk around and say I got the river. Look at me, I have the river. You can't have it, I have it. There's not going to be any disenchantment, fading away, sensation and freedom from that. But just stay there and stay will stay in your River. Just a moment here, moment here. So those are my thoughts for today. They offer that at the beginning of the year, because of how important the teachings of impermanence are for the Buddha. And for this whole Buddhist enterprise that we're focusing on here at IMC. So you might want to consider your relationship to change to impermanence. And this perceptual moment that we're focusing on here, mindfulness. So we have a

couple of minutes, maybe there's a question or two, you want to ask, please, if you can use the mic there.

So I am actually I'm currently filling up an application for, for a certification process and in a field, in my field, and my work, and it's kind of one of the highest level of certification in what I do. And I can see, I was really excited about it, and, and then the idea of actually getting certified in this field. And from the teaching side, what I've learned is, I also noticed that I was postponing my happiness that I'll be happy when I get this. So anyway, I was kind of not so good. I was not having the moment to moment experience of happiness. So I gathered that I wasn't that happy doing my dissertation. It just, it was just part of the deal. Okay, you don't have to be happy all the time. Go ahead.

So I think the part that I that I have a clarity is the fact that I'm, I'm postponing my happiness, happiness until I get something so which is not worth it. I can still do it. But but still be happy without that.

So but you also talked about what is the word dispassion? I think

there's an abstention isn't that enchantment. And I'm thinking, it's the idea of really getting certified also drives me to actually do it. It's a pretty kind of long process. It's tedious. It's almost like writing a book. So I, I'm kind of little confused on the, like, does it actually nullify the whole goal, goal orientedness of life? Or how does it How does it work? With I guess, with goal orientedness?

Well, you know, I can't speak for you and what this what you're involved in, whether it's appropriate for you or what your partner what we do is you look at our motivations why we're doing it, and if you know for exam, not saying you're doing this, but for example, the only reason to get certified is to so you can become fabulously wealthy. And then then you're really kind of make it in your life because you have a big house that will really make it nice, you know No, I don't know if that's really going to do it. But if, like, for example, in my situation, I, you know, I went to graduate school to get a doctorate in Buddhist studies. And I was very clear that the quality of my mind and the quality of my happiness would be less, while I did a doctoral work that had been in the monasteries are my types of practice. And I knew that and, but it felt to me worthwhile to do it, because the learning that I was going to get, and the discipline I developed and the variety of qualities that came from that work, I thought would help me be a better teacher helped me support more people helped me think more clearly. And I thought that was going to be really useful in the long term. And so I was willing to put up with a certain degree of discomfort that because of the goal that I had, but if I thought that getting a PhD in Buddhist studies was gonna make me, you know, technically wealthy or, or, you know, that make me you know, stand out among, you know, high status person, I came to Stanford, and I realized, once I got there, I learned very quickly that the lowest status department in Stanford was a religious studies.

It still is, you know, and, you know, and when I quit playing, my son was playing baseball here at Redwood City and you know, hang out, watch these three hour games, little league games and stay with the parents in the stands, you know, and, you know, what do you know, what did you study at Stanford, I studied Buddhist studies, have a PhD in Buddhist studies. My status did not go up. Mostly the conversations came to an end. So So, you know, you have to look at your motivation and what you're doing and, and, and sometimes it does require certain tasks that we want to do do require a sacrifice of some kind and is it a worthwhile sacrifice is something you have to decide for yourself? And is are you accomplishing you think you're gonna accomplish something which is important and valuable? And is this worth the sacrifice? No. Okay, so maybe that's enough.