

2017-07-09 Reflections On Identity

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SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

Good morning and good morning everyone. Welcome to IMC.

One of the interesting areas of mindfulness is the topic or the area of identity, the identities we carry the identities that we inherit the identities that we are assigned. And it's a such a very modern issue in many ways because it's kind of gotten highlighted more and more in the modern era. And so much so that i think that i wonder sometimes whether our left or our scientific Latin name for our species is, is homosapien variety Sapiens. And whether it should be homosapien variety of different cars, that the knowing humans who know themselves so well, that they can build up identities and have identities and differentiate each other by their so called identities. It's a, I feel like it's a little bit difficult topic to talk about, partly because it's possible to cause a lot of suffering around this topic of identity, and I don't want to hurt anyone. And also, because there is a lot of suffering already around topics of identity and who we are and who we're allowed to be, and all kinds of things. The I read recently that one of the strong apparently characteristics of left wing politics, in the United States in the 1950s, had to do with labor issues. And one of those strong left weak left wing kind of topics of the last decade or so, has been identity politics, issues of particular groups and supporting them, especially groups that have been oppressed, and whose identity has been kind of forced into their lives as an issue sometimes against their will, you know, but because people who are oppressed, they sometimes have to stand up and complain, protest or stand up for themselves. And, in fact, the tutta term identity politics came out of people who were in the civil rights movement, who were standing up and people whose identities were assigned to them by, in some sense by others, or at least created into kind of, was made meaningful by other people in such a way that they were oppressed with for having that identity. And there are many, many kinds of identification identities that we carry with us, and they change over a lifetime, they change in different circumstances of our lives, and where we are, and you might be, visit your parents and your identity then becomes much more highlighted as a child of your parents, or you might visit your, your children, and you know, your identity as a parent becomes. And that can all happen in one day, if you if you're lucky enough, you know, go back and forth. And you have to negotiate, you know, when you're supposed to be a child, and when you're supposed to be a parent. And then you're then later on, you're with your partner, and you better not be either of those. So you have to figure out how you can move move between all these things. And it goes on to many more in the course of a day. And all of these can come with how we want to define ourselves, how we see ourselves how other people define ourselves, if other people see us, and it can get quite complicated, and how do we negotiate and find our way? And then it shifts over over a lifetime as well. Some some aspects of this identities. And so how do we relate to it? How do we hold it? And then we have this, you know, issue on Buddhism that Buddhism has this teaching of not self and so how does this teaching of not self fit into the idea of identity? And are we not supposed to have an identity if there's no self and and, you know, so what, how do we manage this? So I want to start with a couple of maybe a thought experiment. So first an

example. It being summer, maybe this particular summer of 2017. I had or I took a little more time than I usually do to clean my office. And some of the things that were on my desk had been there for probably 1012 years. So you know, there's a certain level of Making the order of it was called for.

And so I made a lot of order and the desk is pretty clear, except for things that are current few little things. And I even took time to line up the front of all the books, my bookcase, they're all kind of straight along the universe in all haphazard, there. And so you go in, and then someone happened to coincidentally the same time gave me a plant, potted plant. So I put that on the table. And so it looks kind of nice compared to how it used to. So now Now, when I go in there, I'm not going to take a piece of paper or a book and just kind of toss it on table or put it in another stack of paper, you know, put it in other stacks of paper. Because as soon as I put one little thing down, it kind of makes a big impact on the overall cleanliness and unclutteredness of the place. Whereas, two months ago, or so even a month ago, one more piece of paper, one more thing on the book on that table, and then on the floor, made no difference, you know, you know, almost right, because it just, it just kind of like was already messy. So if you clear and clean things out, sometimes it creates a very different perspective with which we see things in which we relate to things. So meditation can have this function as well. meditation can be kind of a housecleaning or office cleaning, depending how you relate to your mind. And so in this thought experiment, imagine that you can sit down, imagine that you've been really obsessed about something, you know, your favorite obsession or something, some you know, one of the big obsessions of your lifetime, and something that maybe really bothered you. And we're really kind of, you know, was kind of there a lot too stressful to have. So sorry to bring it up again. But remember, you know, you know how it was to be obsessed, and then imagine that you're able to sit down and meditate. And the course of the meditation session, the obsession quieted down, quieted down, quiet down, there's less energy in it plus force in it, it had it had didn't have you by the throat so strongly. And then lo and behold, the end of the meditation, it just kind of faded away. And your mind was quite peaceful and calm at ease. And, in fact, if you it occurred to you think this way, are there any thoughts? You would answer? No, not recognizing, of course, that that was one. Because it's quite quiet and peaceful. So there's, like, no thoughts whatsoever, peaceful and nice. And then the meditation comes to an end. And you have to curse to you have to open your eyes and start your life. And then you remember, your obsession. But at this point is not an obsession, it's just a thought, the topic. And you're kind of like, you're peaceful, and you kind of look up at it, or whatever it is. And you say, Oh, I don't have to get involved in that. I don't have to get it right now at this moment, think about that. I think I just experienced one of the more peaceful times of my life, maybe I don't have to give it up for a moment, maybe I can just stay and not rush headlong get back into my obsession. And in fact, when I noticed a thought arises, that's just a particular activity of the mind. And I'm much more than that. I'm a bigger, wider, Fuller, functioning being, then that particular thought that obsession. And then it might not occur to you. But you know, just earlier in the day, that was the way I looked looks like the way I was obsessing about this. There wasn't any room to recognize anything more about my life or life at all. My whole world is kind of gotten really small around this particular obsession. But that was an activity of the mind and action of the mind and involvement of the mind to be involved in that activity. Now I can really see it now as an activity of the mind that I have some choice over at this moment. And because I have some choice, in my peaceful state, I'm going to choose not to pick it up. I'm going to stay contented at peace. Just Breathing is enough. Just being alive is enough. That there's nothing I have to prove nothing to fix, nothing have to do at this moment. That's remarkable perspective to have. And one of the functions of meditation. For some people who can do this is to get quiet enough, peaceful enough. So we can have that perspective on what the activities are. Mind is doing what the mind is doing.

So one of the things that we can see from this kind of perspective is that when we pick up or get involved with identifications, when identify the act action of identifying, because one of the characteristics of important abstract human thinking, is to put things into categories. And to identify certain things a certain, you know, one thing or the other. If you want to drink soup, you it's good to identify what the spoon is, as opposed from the fork. So just as a useful thing to do that are there, if someone says go with the kitchen and get a spoon. Sometimes we do it with people. If we have a medical emergency, we here at IMC, we would like to identify the people who are medically trained, which we've done before here, someone a couple of times both collapsed, middle, the meditation or during a talk and I would ask we have a doctor or nurse here and people could be useful in a vacation to have. So there's a lot of useful identities that we have. And they have functions. And so you can, you know, so but if you're peaceful and quiet, you can see it as not as as something that is ordained by nature. To me, this is how it is. But we can see that the mind is involved in thinking those thoughts. And even though it might be have some truth out there, some people are medically trained, for example, it has some truth out there. The interesting question is, what is the activity in the mind with which with how we think about it, how we hold it. So if I see the spoon as a spoon, that's pretty innocent. But if one of you says it, no, that's a fork, then I'll say no, it's a spoon. No, it's a fork, we can have a war in Zen. Zen person would never fight over what they called the spoon, or the thing that you slurp the soup with. They would, they would not get involved in the argument what it is, they will just pick it up and start drinking from this thing that has those little scoop in it. So it's possible to get involved in the identification, identity densifying activity of the mind in a contracted way, in a forceful way, you know, in an assistant way and opinionated way, in an anxious way kind of get really get involved and get tight and evolved. And it's possible not to that just let it drop the happy peaceful, we can watch the difference between that. And that difference. Seeing that difference gives us a very different information about what we're involved in, then we are if we just go headlong into the concern into identity. So it's how we hold the identity, how we relate to it. That is a very important part of Buddhist practice. It doesn't solve all the identity questions that people have, it's not the final answer to it. But it creates a very different context approach for being able to address the issues, because the mind is that little bit more calm, settled more open, so that it can maybe look at it in a less and less biased way or less and less contracted way or less and less anxious way or forceful way on top of it. So to be able to come down and see. So what are some of the things that we can see. One of the things that's pretty clear is when other people put us in into an identity. So some people they see us through our role. So someone volunteered to help with the medical emergency here and there was nice, but that every time they come time see, like all these people are gravitating towards them. I have a question. And so you know, people now are starting to identify them into narrower scope and they thought that they prefer to be in a certain context. They're okay to be medical support, but they are much more than that. Or people are seeing people see us as you know, in relationship to our partner, where a husband or a wife, or people see us as a parent.

In different settings, people will relate to us in different ways. When my son was going to all these little legs, things are going to the signature school, elementary school and stuff. It was clearly who I was in the eyes of the other parents, I was a parent. And you know, my whole role was to be a parent. And if they wanted to know about me, they were wanting to know, but parenting is like parent, you know, that's how they saw me kind of makes kind of sense. That's what we shared at that time. Sometimes, people see us through painful identification, they identify us in painful ways. Maybe once upon a time, we, you know, got irritated with someone or they saw us or with them. And now every time we see them, we feel this cautious around, they're cautious around, they step back, and they don't want to relate to us. Sometimes, there's a lot of prejudice and bias in our society. And so people are putting categories is a dangerous person, or somehow person that shouldn't be here, all kinds of things. And people can feel we can feel that sometimes that, you know, that we put in these categories, and it's very painful that

other people identify us the other way people define us. And that can be seen. We can also see sometimes how people do it to themselves. And sometimes you know, that, we want to just shake some people like, you know, drop it, because they have such strong ways of being self deprecating, or self critical. Like, I'm bad, I'm wrong. Somehow, I'm unworthy. And it's very, very powerful, that people identify themselves this way. These are abstract ideas that the mind produces, the mind creates. And what happens when we can able to see the creation, the formation of thoughts, ideas, concepts like this, as opposed to the thoughts of unworthy the thoughts that I'm wrong, or something are not seen as being something created. But seeing as just this is true, this has given the mind things to it without us realizing clearly this is a thought, just a thought. And so because when we see how other people do this, sometimes it's a forms of arrogance and conceit. I deserve things, I'm special people should treat me this way. And people walk into a room and it's clear that they want they feel like they're in control. And, you know, and so then, you know, that's who they think they are. So sometimes you can see other people do it, people see how people treat us that way. What's hardest, I think, for many people, is how we do it to ourselves. And the how we we form our own, we do the own identification process. We have ideas of what we what we need to do, what we should be, what we deserve, our own worthiness, who we are in relation to other people. There's a lot of comparative thoughts. I hope people don't notice me, some people are expert at hiding. When I was younger, I noticed that I played these social games, where I was trying to inform people or get people to identify me see me, and the way that I want to define myself, not who I was, but rather who I wanted them to see me as. And that's gonna that takes, you know, social gymnastics through, you know, that to probably was very unsuccessful. So sadistic, you know, you know, the, what identities do we have? And some of them are appropriate to have. Some of them are clearly empowering is helpful for people to have and to realize, wow, I can do this. Like when you know, story, I've tell often of how I was told in seventh grade by an art teacher that I have had no artistic ability. And no, I didn't care at that time, it had no issue was no no psychological or personal issue, whether I was did or didn't have artistic ability. So it was it didn't create any distress for me. But the teacher must be was no. So I just kind of added that to the set of identities that I carried with me. I'm a person who has no artistic ability. Thank you.

And then at some point, in college, I started doing art. And that was great. And to recognize, Oh, nice, I can do this. And so there was some identify identifying myself with a certain ability and that ability then I still had took art classes and had a good time. But then in order to take further art classes in college, I had to be an art major And then I decided that I was gonna I was an artist. And that was the end of art. So there was some ways it was empowering the other ways, I took it on too strongly as a way I had to define myself be seen by others to prove myself. And that to do, if I hadn't been doing art for those reasons, those were not the reasons I could do it for anymore. So I put it down. And so we have these identities that we travel our life with, and they change over time, in different professions, different jobs, different relationships, different situations, they can change and move. Some people find it very comforting to be around people who are similar, because they're free of the oppression for you the challenges for you the tensions that can exist, when different identity identities and different kind of identifications are bumped up against each other, especially if they're judgmental of each other or critical of each other, or there's an inside and outside group. Some people find it safer to be around people who are not like them. Because if we're always around people who are similar, then sometimes we don't see clearly what we're doing. We don't see the mindset, we don't see the identifications that we have the self definitions we have. And so then that can be a little bit unsafe, because there's kind of a group thing that goes on. So when do when it's a good to be around diverse people. Winston, when is it nice to be around similar people who identify the same way? You know, it's kind of morphs and changes as oscillates. You know, there's a, I think a healthy life is one that moves fluidly between different roles, different identities, different things that go on. The Buddha, was clearly opposed to the idea that people are born into certain identities in his time, but rather that people are identified. And he

said, by the actions they do, how they live their lives. So if someone is a farmer, if I'm someone farms, then they're a farmer, if someone rules than their king, if someone is manual labor back, then they were manual labor. So that you were defined by by the actions you did do. And that allowed for fluidity, people can then move between different identities. I've known people who've had particular sexual orientation, that that was their identity. And then they found surprised that it changed later in life. And so some of them find that awkward to make that shift. Sometimes it was awkward for their friends and family. But you know, what can we be fluid to rather than holding people in something to really allow people the freedom to live their lives the way that it wants to be lived this time? And to, in a sense, if we want to identify people, identify them by the activity, that what they're doing the actions or what they're doing, how they're living their lives, as opposed to fixed identity. And that's, I think, what I think how they Buddha approach this idea whether that's accurate or helpful or not, I don't know. But, but the idea is that we can start when we sit and meditate, we can start seeing the how this how the activity of the mind of identifying works, independent of what is our identity, there's also identifying the process of identification, and can we see and watch that operate? So the thought experiment I gave earlier was this imaginary idea of being able to completely clear your mind in a peaceful that vantage point, if you're able to do that, then allows you to see how it identifications get reintroduced. So it's like in my office, I can watch the process by which I've carelessly reintroduce a mess. Because it's so clear and clean. I could watch it happen so that I can maybe choose what not today I'm not gonna just throw things down my office. But sometimes in meditation are more often than having a clear mind. It's we learn the other direction.

As as the mind begins to see clearly what's going on is the mind begins to quiet down. Then we see where we're caught up, what what preoccupations we have, where they are thinking goes, so that we can't come anymore. And lo and behold, if we kind of use this lens to look at our experience We'll see that partly what fuels our preoccupation or agitation, a busy mind. Our issues of identification, however we identify with, not always, but it can, sooner or later, we'll come across them in different ways. For some, and as many of you know, all the different ways can be there. Because anything that we're preoccupied with or concerned with or holding on to, will be revealed, until we've let go of it to be able to get more peaceful. So one, one interesting example of where people identify. in meditation, some people identify with one needing to be in control, I have to control this. And if you were trying to control your life and control your experience, it might work for a little while when you meditate. But sooner or later, that sense of identifying with the person who's in control just gets in the way, that becomes the limiting factor of becoming more peaceful and more settled. Or it might be identifying with someone who has to be successful. I've known a lot of people who suffered, I've been trying to be successful in meditation, because they wanted to, when they come out of meditation, be able to tell their friends, I'm a good meditator. I just went on a week long retreat, where I kind of, you know, I better have something to show for it, you know, because that's supposed to come back and be something. And so and so there's an identity issues come up around it, because we need to prove ourselves or be someone in relationship to our friends and people. Or we could not be it. I remember there was a man who was I guess, I won't say their religion, but he was a some religion, Western religion. He said that he could not go back to his community to tell them, he'd been on a Buddhist retreat. It was too threatening, or people would be upset to see him in that way. I know that I've been on retreat. And then if I probably with every possible thing, you could identify, I think, just lots of things, that maybe not everything, but I mean, I've, you know, I've left retreat thinking, Oh, no, I'm happy. I'm a happy person. And surprised at how, you know, then that didn't last long. But that was my identity for a little while. Or then leaving, you know, meditation and feeling Oh, and some heaviness and sadness. And I guess this is it, I'm a sad person, you know, and then that, you know, but then something happens. And that goes away. And it's been a remarkable over this lifetime, how many things that I've identified with, in the form of, this is the way I'm always going to be? This is it. So I don't know, but some of you, but I've been one of those people who

have succumbed to the delusion of permanence. This is it, this is who I am. And then life changes my life over time changes.

One of the interesting things in my life, I don't even ask people so much about how it works for them. But I have the impression that my self image is usually not up to date. That, you know, I'm still operating on an older self image, you know, that I finally figured out who I am kind of in, but then I change, but I don't change, you know, I change faster than I can keep up with it. And so, you know, then there's little attention, I could feel the awkwardness of being in the world. And people see me differently than how I see myself. And I have to kind of figure out how to navigate that with that.

So sometimes in meditation, we learn about how we identify and how this operates and how we relate to them identities in the process of quieting down and getting calmer, because we see that we're not getting any calmer and starting out and seeing what the attachments are the concerns, the emotions, that whatever's going on, all the things we add on top of the particular idea of an identity. So for example, you know, currently a male and I don't hold on to the idea in a tight way that I have to be a male, and that I will be a male. There's enough I've been around enough people in my life families and friends and people who have genders have shifted over their lifetime. And so, you know, could happen to me, I guess. So, you know, you know, so I have this identity Being a male, hopefully, I would like to hold it likely not to hold on to something has to be a certain way. Maybe they'll discover new categories. And over time or whatever, you know, so I'll look likely, or I could watch my idea of being a male, that is a mag magnetic for all kinds of cultural ideas. In the societies I grew up with what it means to be a male and what how to act and be and be responsible or be all kinds of things, you can fill in the blanks, of what you know, what it means to be a male. And some of this stuff is, is becomes, you know, sometimes invisible, the identities, the entities we have, I suspect that people like myself, who being white belonging, that belong open more to the white, more dominant culture in the United States, that it's a little bit invisible, the identity abuse, the identities we carry, and are very invisible, sometimes and very invisible, to see how other people sometimes treat us or identify us, or sometimes refer to us, or sometimes, because we're white male, or something. And I think of it like, you know, no one has an accent, in the place where they grew up, because everyone's speaking normally there. And, in but in fact, everyone else in other locales, so you want that accent, you know, from your, your, from there. So sometimes, you know, we grew up a certain way, and things seem just seemed normal, we don't see it. But in fact, there's a tremendous interplay of it, then identities and identifying that we do for ourselves and for others. And for some people, it's really oppressive to live in this world where the identities have plays such a big role, and other people who are privileged, like the white male, especially, you know, it's like, we don't have an accent. So it's hard to see, you know, how that works, and how that operates. Unless we look at it more carefully and deeply. So meditation, I think, is a very valuable tool to help us on, not necessarily figure out what is our identity, or what identities are useful to carry and to have, or how identities work. Though I say, let me say differently. Meditate, what the one of the most important things I think meditation can do around the whole issue of identity, is help us to see the activity in the mind, the action in the mind, of identifying the identification process of thoughts and initiation. And as we see it as a thought and idea, then we can start seeing how we relate to it. Do we hold it tightly to hold it loosely? Do we believe it automatically? Do we have the illusion of permanence? This is how it is? Do we? Do we somehow relate to it in such a way or hold in such a way that we hurt ourselves? Do we hold it to hurt others? There's a process of identification stop with ourselves? Or do we in our minds also create identities or other people? Are they accurate? Are they somehow accurate in some way? And how do we hold those? How do we relate to those? I think that, you know, we are homosapien identification, Ficus I know something I can't speak like, you know, there, we are constantly classifying and categorizing people into certain ways of being something of it could be called an identity.

And I think we have to learn how to live with that wisely. And live with it wisely. I think it really helps to see how the mind is involved in the process of identifying, identifying and how the heart or the or emotional life or psychological life holds it relates to it believes it doesn't believe it. Anything you step back far enough to see it clearly as thoughts and ideas. We can discover freedom in the midst of it. And it's possible to discover through meditation, for example, a state of quality of a peaceful mind a settled heart that we don't have to sacrifice that we don't have to give up. When we pick up when we operate with the identities that are appropriate to operate with. Because we don't have to relate to a tightly or forcefully or defensively or whatever. And even those times, where we we need to be forceful with our identities or we need to stand up for it. Or say stop or, or, you know, fight for civil rights for our identities. The hope is, I think, I think the hope is that for people who have meditated and know something about a peaceful inner mind and how the mind operates and functions, that we can find a way to be forcefully engaged in society around the identity issues that our society needs to address, without it be our involvement, forcing us or getting us to lose our settled calm, presence that includes so much more of who we are than any particular entity. We are vast. And when a person who is in the early Buddhist tradition, a person who was fully enlightened, was sometimes called a person who had a great self Avast self. To this kind of vastness were so much more than any one way and to find that peacefulness and that openness, and then that freedom and fluidity to work through these identity issues is one of the great tasks of spiritual life. So with that, I want to thank you. Hopefully, I didn't cause any harm, bringing up this. I think it's difficult topic to bring up, talk about, but I do I apologize. Thank you.