

# 2019-10-13 Practicing With Imagination

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

imagination, meditation, people, buddha, similes, imagery, present, thoughts, mind, thinking, present moment, lake, emotions, imagine, faculties, gladness, image, surfing, feel, waves

## SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdaal

For those of you out in the outer Hall there are probably four or five seats in here if you want to be closer and

No. Not. Am I wrong about that?

So are we loud enough today, probably?

So lately I've been thinking quite a bit about the role of imagination in meditation, and I want to share some of my thoughts with you. I'm certainly not an expert on this area of imagination. So some of you some people have given a lot of study and attention and practice of using it. But so maybe my thoughts would allow for a little bit preliminary there are times where I've used various imaginations to help bring the mind into the present moment. So for example, I have I like water a lot my particular background is water and, and so it's a very meaningful for me to see water be around water and and so Sometimes when I start meditating, I have the image sometimes I bring on the image of waves coming into the shore, and I'm surfing on the waves. And every time I, you know, in that the, the, my in breath and out breath are the waves that are coming, and I catch the breath when I catch the breath of catching the wave or getting up on the wave. And then on the outbreath, I'm surfing the wave. And, and then it's interesting that as I continue, if I continue using a little bit of imagery, I don't use it that very much, but sometimes I'll use it. Then it switch switches to being the just the waves washing up on the sand of the shore going in and out. And that kind of very peaceful spreading out long flat, kind of smooth and then it becomes Being in myself in the water at the edge, and the waves are kind of washing over me. And then it's me in the water, kind of maybe when I was a kid I used to love going under the water, and kind of flipping around and about five or six feet under underwater and, and looking up at the waves and, and then we kind of turn turbulence up there, the wind and waves up there. But where I was was really calm. And so I'd watch the waves kind of above kind of coming and going. So I've used these kinds of imageries for help me be present. And the reason I've done it is that the alternative what the mind will do on its own is make its own symmetries about things. And in fact, the way that much thinking is, could it be understood to be using imagination if some people think Images. So that word imagination works particularly well. we're imagining scenes and scenarios and past future fantasies in the present. And we're pulled into the imagery of that. Some people, their storyteller billion storyteller, so it's more verbal, or not so brilliant. It's brilliant, brilliant enough for you to get pulled in. And so storytellers telling, telling the story, repeating a story, variety of ways. Imagining conversations that we've had or we will have. And so we get lost in thought caught up in our thinking. It's fair enough to say I think it is a kind of imaginary world where when I called imagination or I met you know, the function imagination. I defined it by the mental construction, of, of, of reality, mental constructions of ideas are places of people and

events. That are not actually happening in the moment. So if you're having a memory of something real that happened in the past, that act of that act of memory, remembering is a is the imaginary mind is constructing something it's an imagination of the past. And how accurate is it, you know, probably isn't 100% accurate. We imagined the future a lot of anxiety that people have a said to come from imagination know the future imaginary futures which are going to be dangerous or troublesome or problematic. And some people tell themselves stories. Some people they called rumination, but a lot of us stories, ideas, conversations, imagination of what's going to come and some of it is not very specific or maybe not very detailed. It just kind of a general imagination or imagining a mood almost like dangerous coming.

So what I'm trying to say here is a mind that gets a extracted is often a mind that's imagining something one way or the other. And why this is a useful this word imagination here, rather than referring to this distracted thought is that we just call it distracted thought. It's actually a very narrow perfect mindfulness spell. Breathe rates. So the problem with the calling get, you know, just distracted thought. It's actually doesn't represent the fullness of the function of what's going on fullness and sense of all the different human faculties that are coming into play around those thoughts. So for example, if we are thinking about the future, maybe it's a nice thought, maybe it's a happy anticipation for something. And so coming along with that might be an image of the nice thing. That's going to happen a birthday party with balloons, maybe you have an image of. And so it's not just thoughts about this party birthday party, it's kind of comes along with imagery. And then imagery maybe that you're making up has some some personal meaning it's associated with things that are your own birthday parties, you went to other things you've done. And so there's a the mind that associates things comes into play there in the background. Also with imagery, imagining something even telling your story. It's not often it's not emotional free. There might be emotions connected to it. And so birthday parties Oh, that's just a lot of happy screaming kids around and how nice it'll be I don't get to be around kids so much anymore, and that'll be great, you know, and so I'm feeling kind of light and happy about this thing I've I've imagined and it might not have much basis in truth it might be that I'm just my mind is kind of going off a little Tangent, but I'm going to a party but you know, filling in, there might be motivations that come into play as I, as I'm thinking about this party things I want and things I don't want. It's not just neutral picture of a party, I'm going to, I have concerns about it, about who I'm going to sit next to at the party and have the right cake. I don't like frosting. And so, you know, I hope they don't have frosting again. And, and so like, you know, and maybe I should bring my own cake without frosting. And so, and so there's, you know, these thoughts, ideas, desires, what I don't like, it's a whole little complex of things that I'm trying to paint. It's not just a series of kind of words in the mind or neutral pictures in the mind. Our emotional life comes into play. Our motivational life comes into play in our physiological life comes into play, I think, because as we as I'm imagining going to this party, I'm imagining myself walking through space. So imagine that you have sitting there how I am, proprioception, imaginary proprioception comes into play in all these kinds of things come into play. So when we're distracted, there's a lot of things that are kind of corraling and kind of kind of attracting or, or glue that's pulling your mind into it. And so there might be a lot of hope and imagination, or all kinds of things that are tied into what we're thinking about. So what I'm trying to say is there's a lot of imagination, of different kinds, imaginary emotions that come up that are related that'd be constructed around that image. imaginary desires around it, imaginary people to talk to and experiences and all kinds of things come into play. And it's a very rich environment. being distracted. It's not like a simple, simple thing. If those kind of distracted thought, And imagination are getting the upper hand in meditation. And you've tried to be mindful that you try to let go and come back and they get the upper hand.

So then you can, I apologize, I shouldn't use this language may fight fire with fire, you use the very thing that is you're being pulled into, to support you to bring you corral the mind into the present

moment. So when I use these imagery of the waves and surfing, I'm kind of utilizing my imagination, to point my attention, not into the imagery, but I use the imagery as kind of a background that points me back into my breath to connect with my breath. And so it's to me it's kind of engaging those images of surfing or the water on the sand going up and down. And so I find it much more interesting my mind what's more interesting get more involved than just simply Gil, focus on your breathing in your ear now top down, which I love doing but sometimes it's a little bit dry. And so if I'm easily distracted, then I'll bring in and create a rich environment that comes with my imagination that my my emotional connection to water comes into play my imagery of water and I love you to me it's so calming to see, imagine even imagine flat surfaces of water and, and there's so much joy involved in surfing and so all these kinds of emotions come into play. And, and wanting to be there or to feel it. It kind of becomes a little bit playfulness and a little game and all that begins to corral the mind. You stay in the breath, be with a breath, be with a breath. And as I as I get focused on that, things calm down. And as it comes down in my case, then the imagination changes according At some point, I'm not surfing the breath, the waves that's too exciting. It's just more much more calming to have to imagine they're going up and down the sand or even more calming to be underwater and just kind of looking up at the surface. Now, when I was, there's plenty of people who believe, which I did as well, that if you're doing mindfulness meditation, you're not allowed to do this. Mindfulness Meditation is about seeing things as they are. Just without concepts without the other ideas without imagination. Imagination is actually the, you know, the depth of mindfulness. You know, that, you know, if you have imagination, then you're often lost in an abstract world, a conceptual world. And you have to let go of all that let go and just be with the raw facts, just the event, just the data that's coming in without any added things. That's actually true. at a particular stage of meditation, sometimes these teachings we get are an instructions we get in practice are stage specific. There are different stages of concentration stages of mindfulness that people go through. And instructions that appropriate from one stage might not be appropriate for other stages. So the suggestion I'm making here is that if the mind, if the if the distracted mind is in control of you, you just keep getting pulled into those imaginations has nothing to do with here. Now. Not only that, but you see, it's not really useful for you, it may even be harmful for you. A lot of people's mental challenges of all kinds have a fair amount to do with what their mind is imagining. And, and so it's the world as for many people, it's not a very useful world to be in However imagination also makes the world much richer place to be. And, and makes a kind of more valuable and more, kind of more more comes into play when we're kind of in the imagination doing things.

I went for a hike today and the hills up here. And, and the part of the joy. The light of there was a lot of the hike had to do with my imagination. I just like doing it I like the physicality of I like how much it puts me in the present moment to be in the hills and just being there. But in fact, there's a certain kind of delight in knowing that, that the grogginess of this morning is going to be lifted as I walk, a little bit of delight, knowing that I'll have a little bit more good energy for a few hours after I finished my hike, and that kind of, you know, memory which has an imagination of how it was waking up, and this projection into the future, how I'm going to be which was reasonable enough to do it, you know, it's imaginary world that's adding some of the richness and value and appreciation of actually doing the walk itself. Doing the walk, I've been walked those hills for a long time. And so in the background of me is just delightful. That's been so many other times. And so that's not it, not like actively remembering all that and blind to what's going on now lost in those past imagery, past memories, but it's kind of their kind of wefting in the background like atmosphere. there that's kind of making that whole walk more rich and more valuable, more delightful. So in the very walk itself, imagination is coming in, I would say in an innocent and valuable, useful way. That's making it kind of adds to the richness of the experience. Some imagination is very creative and creates all kinds of new ideas and expressions. Turns out that the Buddha used his imagination. A lot. In his teaching, I imagine he used it a lot in his own mind for himself. But he was very creative. in coming up with stories. He was a brilliant storyteller. He was a

brilliant creator of metaphors and similes. He was a poet. He had rhetorical ability, that, you know, it is not so obvious when you read these, the way the English is translated. But he was brilliant in his artistry and his creativity and creating imagery for people. And, and so he was involved in using his imagination for teaching purposes. But in return, he's what's happening is that he's providing imagery that if we can learn, learn some of these imagery that he's using for meditation that can live in us, kind of like an imagination that could actually teach us about meditation. Help us with it. channeling or corralling the mind into the present moment, and guiding it deeper deeper into the meditation itself. So using imagination, rather than being used by it and not using imagination just for the sake of pleasure. I've known people on retreat who've come in Tell me Oh, you know, for the last three hours, I just been fantasizing about something. Because yesterday was a hard day, and I deserved the break, to do something and have a pleasant kind of fantasy about something. And maybe that was useful, that was healing for them and got them center. They needed three hours to have a sexual fantasy so they can finally be in the here and maybe, but I think that, you know, it's not just for a sec. So to use meditation, use imagination, for the purposes of waking up purposes of really being here for experience, we, it has to serve that purpose. So how do we use our imagination to really encourage us to be present here. So it's kind of like pointers, rather than something that takes us away from here. It puts us more and more here and puts us here, in a good way. It's okay to have some sense that what we're trying to do here is to calm down. What we're trying to do here is to cultivate a sense of well being in the present moment. If you have too much expectation and striving for that, and too much involved in that kind of goal, you could miss the present moment. But if you're served or cert using all these things, to serve you to really try to be here. Then it's you know, you're using the all your faculties, the richness of all your intelligence to kind of come and really settle in and be here. Rather than leaving some of your faculties and some of your intelligences at the door when you sit down to meditate. Some people meditate as if they're just supposed to. The only thing there have to do, I've done this way. I mean,

you know, the only thing I was allowed to do was sit up straight. Keep coming back to the breath, keeping with the breath, cucumber, you know, and that's it. Sometimes that's served me very well. And I wouldn't want to knock the value of that. But it's also okay times when it's needed to bring all of ourselves into the meditation and unifying it. So it's all there for the same purpose. And I would like to argue, me who doesn't know much about imagination, that one of the roles or potentials of our capacity for imagination, is to unify all the different faculties that we have. There's something about stories injury code pictures that, as I've already kind of said, has tentacles or has channels or connections to all the different parts of who we are all different faculties. And so that if we simply use you know, prose is much more boring than much less evocative than poetry. If it just if it's just an intellectual thoughts going on, it's kind of just kind of going to the train of thoughts thinking about things. It's much less kind of multifaceted than having an image of the same thing. A picture's worth 10,000 words they say. And so, as we have an image with imaginations using imagery, or we have a little bit of a story like a simple story, like surfing on the on the waves then our emotions are involved. are certainly our powers of imagination, imagination are involved, or thinking might be involved our capacity to evaluate our capacity, a capacity a little bit to have some planning and some sense of purpose come into play there. The surfing thing has has my physical sense a body, my sense of my body, kind of little teeny ever so slightly participates in this kind of a felt sense in the body of actually what it's like to surf. And so all these things come into play. And the suggestion I have is that, in an act of imagination gathers together all these things, to unify them or activate them. Because in when it when it's done in the service of meditation, meditation which helping meditation to do the same thing, because one of the functions of good meditation is in fact to unify Are our faculties unify. So everything we're doing is unified, involved in the same thing at the same time for the same purpose. If we're sitting here, and the mind is thinking about the future, your body and mind are in two different places. The idea is to unify the body mind and have the mind be involved in the present moment as well. If you're in the present moment, and your

mind is in fact, in the present moment, thinking about what you'd like to have for lunch, thinking about Yes, you'd like to get concentrated. Thinking about did I pay my taxes this year? You know, and thinking all these different thoughts, the mind is actually fragmented and jumping around, but to have the thinking itself, focus on the meditation practice, nothing more than the meditation practice everything if the emotions were feeling or not other leftover mood, from all the challenges of the week, and all the different kinds of things Little slights and desires and wishes and does and happiness as we had over the last week are all kind of, you know, kind of swimming around together and kind of in a mixed up kind of way emotionally, the, how we feel emotion is all arising out of the, the meditation practice. meditation can be extremely emotional in a particular way. And so to have our capacity for emotionality also be harnessed or gathered together unified for the purpose of meditation. So as we meditate that is to become whole, unified. So the proposal I have is that we can use our act our imagination, to help with that unifying gathering together process.

But it has to be for this purpose of a meditation. So it has to be done very carefully, so that it doesn't take us away. It actually helps us to be more and more here. So the Buddha did this. And so I want to share some of these imageries that the Buddha provided people, and whether he, he didn't actually say, actually have this imagery as you meditate. But by teaching us over and over again, he's kind of planting these images in people's minds. So at the right time, they come up for people, and they have that kind of wefting there in the background, the atmosphere almost, that's supporting them, to to be present. I suspect also these images that the Buddha was teaching also are planted in the subconscious. So they also operate there even without us actively bringing them up. And so part of the reason to, you know, read these ancient texts of the Buddha and it can be, this can be done other ways as to is to internalize the imagery that he uses for meditation. So it also is there to kind of support you and guide you as Go through different stages of imagery. And the more I've kind of studied and been part in practice with these images of the Buddha uses, the more brilliant I think it is. Maybe my evaluation is biased. But I just think it's amazing how well he captures in similes, for example, what can happen in meditation and different stages of meditation. So I'll give you a few examples. The Buddha talked about a lot about the hindrances There are five. The literal meaning for the word is not hindrances. It's a five coverings. The five things that cover our wisdom defying a cover our ability to be present in a clear way, cover our interfere, cover with our ability to really, really be here in a stable focused way. So this is that desires for sensual pleasures which human beings can specialize in thoughts, ideas imaginations of ill will. The traditional English translation for the next one is sloth and torpor which is we don't use that word very often those words very often but I lettered lethargy and and being deflated and then restlessness and remorse regret and then the last is doubt. So, these these five are very strong forces that keep us caught up in distraction. And even if a lot of other neurosis is are settled, these are considered basic common human ways of thinking processes that we have that keeps us distracted and caught up and they go for the Buddha is for us. To overcome those interests and to quiet them down enough, so we don't have they're not interfering with our ability to be really present really be here. So he has similes for that he uses for these five. He doesn't explicitly connect these five similes with each of those five. But these five similes are presented as a kind of for all of them. And maybe because different people, different similes kind of worked for them. being caught up in this in the hindrances, he said, is like being in debt, you have a huge debt that you're trying to pay off. Somehow, if you're caught in the hindrances, you're kind of struggling with a debt somehow. And the purpose of one of the purposes of these similes you'll see in a moment. The second is that being caught up in these hindrances is like having an illness. being caught by these hindrances is like being in prison being caught in these in these hindrances is like being a crossing with all your savings and all your possessions crossing a dangerous desert where there are hoodlums and, you know pirates who are ready to, you know, and all kinds of dangers. And then there's one more. So the prison that anyway, I don't remember the fifth one at the moment. So they're these kind of imagery that he gives. So for



some people, maybe they can kind of kind of sense Oh yeah, I know that now that now that I've heard it, I do feel like I'm in prison by these distractions. These imaginations. I keep thinking over and over, I can't get out of it.

Or I do feel Oh, the fifth one is being a slave. As if he says a slave who is has no independent life at all. completely dependent and taking quarters from other people and cannot go anywhere they please. So kind of graphic. So in some of these hindrances, you know, I don't know which ones maybe can feel sometimes, like I'm caught, I'm not the master of my own life. This strong ill will I have is keeps taking over, keeps taking over. And wherever I go, it's with me, so I'm not really free. And so they're kind of strong imagery. And so maybe it kind of gets people's attention and says, well, wow, I don't want to do this. I thought it was okay to fantasize. But I don't want to live this kind of way. It's, that's what it is. So it is a kind of imagery that maybe has certain impact. But the bigger impact the Buddha was hoping to have with this imagery was to suggest to people that the artery evoke in people, the goodness that comes when we're free of these five states were free of illness free of debt free of slavery free of prison and free you have made it across the desert to safety wow you know I've been in prison for 50 years wow this is good by lay him out or you know being sick I've been chronically sick for four years and I'm finally well enough to go out Wow This feels good. Or you know this I've been struggling with my school debt for 20 years. Finally it's over. Now I got to think about retirement. But you know, finally it's over and haha this thing has been lifted. So feeling of being lifted or being free of fresh air of, of having energy. And so that the emotion the Buddha was actually trying to inculcate in people is an emotion of gladness. Certain kinds of delight and gladness that it isn't just a matter of coming into the present moment. And finally the mind settles down and is here. The Buddha felt it was appropriate and encouraged it that a person felt a certain delight and happiness. Oh wow, I'm finally here. This is good. Now, wait, the way that my mind works with instructions we're used to is I just kind of follow the instructions kind of like literally on the switch supposed to do. So if, if I'm told you to be present with the breathing, and I have the hindrances I'll struggle to get over them. And eventually a mind gets you know, the hindrances go or abate. And then I used to just kind of, you know, what I wouldn't want to they're gone. I wouldn't pay any attention to the fact that they're gone, because I'm gone to the next thing. Being on my breath is always the next thing. However, the Buddha seems to encourage us to wait a minute, slow down. Don't just go on to the next thing. appreciate what just happened. Appreciate that you're no longer caught up in your distractions and feel the goodness of that. Be glad about that. Now if the Buddhist painting this picture, there's imagination imagine a picture of prison and sickness and death and all these things. And you can kind of feel the goodness that gladness the light of no longer having that. Then when you no longer have the distractions, maybe the sense of gladness, feels more richer and involves more involves our imagination involves the emotions and purpose and all kinds of things. And it helps gather our attention, not only in the present moment, but in the gladness the happiness of being here. The idea for the Buddha is to have that gladness at the light as a support for wanting to be present. Wow. So it's kind of like a little cheerleader on the side. Oh yeah. Now that I'm here, it feels good. And let me use this goodness, remind myself of this goodness, hold this goodness kind of on the edges of my peripheral awareness to be encouraged me to stay here, be present. Continue with it. Don't just go on to the next fantasy about something. Just stay use this now support you. As the meditation deepens further. The this gladness begins to morph into joy.

And he has kind of really kind of a joy and happiness about really being present. If there might be some serotonin, endorphins or something that come into play when the mind He's really able to stay concentrated and kind of be in the smooth kind of groove of just kind of staying present. But, but whatever reason is, there tends to be born from the inside, a feeling of well being, to learn to recognize those feelings of well being of lightness, of ease of calm, recognize them, and to value them. So they encourage us to Yes, stay here, stay here. This is good. This is good is part of the art of meditation. If

you just ignore the good feelings that arise, because you're supposed to be dutiful follow instruction, just be with the breath. You're missing some of the good support that can support you to be here. Stay present stay present. So at some point as this goodness could feelings arise, enjoy arises, the Buddha gives us brilliant simile. And that is Imagine that there's a mountain lake with clear beautiful water and there are no streams feeding into the lake. And there is no rain replenishing the Ricki Lake. The replenishment of the lake comes from an underwater spring, at the center of the lake. In which, there it there flows upward, this the word like a fountain like a water fountain underwater. This is flowing up and spreading out throughout the whole lake, filling the lake with new fresh water, refreshing water. That's the assembly. That's the Buddha's imagination. For sitting really being stable, sitting here being really present in the moment. The mind is not distracted. The mind feels really engaged and present in this kind of field, or the pool of the lake kind of soft, relaxed, comfortable. And there's welling up from inside, a kind of energy, a kind of feeling of well being of refreshment, that begin spreading through the body. Some people will feel in different parts of their body. Some people, for me, it's much more than the torso. Some people feel something wonderful in their face, around their lips, different places, and this kind of feeling of kind of pleasure begins to bubble up, begins to flow. And when it's really strong, it really feels like it's kind of like welling up from the inside and spreading out everywhere. And it's not being supported by anything outside means that there are no sensual Or sense data coming in from the outside that's supporting you in that well being. It isn't that you're, you know, you know, watching something really beautiful or tasting something or listening to music or you're not getting any input from the outside, all the well being is arising and flowing from the inside out. So he provides this image. And so people who meditate and really kind of memorize this image, which in the ancient world, if you were a monastic, you would have, you know, there was no books to read. So the way that you had a library was you memorize what was taught. And the Buddha taught the same thing over and over again so that you can people really memorize it. So he taught this simile over and over again, and people who sat down to meditate the monastics at least, they could recite this wonderful story. If you've memorized something, it lives in your imagination. It lives in your psyche. in a very different way, if you read it once you try to remember it. So I can imagine that when they met it sat down to meditate. At some point, little Inklings little hints of goodness of calm, the pleasure, Joy would begin to bubble up from the inside. And they'd say, Oh, this is what the Buddha was talking about. I feel it now. And that would encourage them to focus on that. To encourage it, it would encourage me encouraging for them to just stay more present. Let's even be more here. That's really relax and open up here. Do you really hear and as I do, that, the flow gets stronger, which supports us to be more present and flow becomes stronger.

And so this imagination of this mountain lake is not take distracting us from the present moment. It's one that's encouraging us even more here. Even more here. So the Buddha had actually a lot of these imageries that he used for meditation. The proposal I have is that in Buddhism, there's a role for our imagination for helping the purposes of what Buddhist meditation is about. And if Buddhist minute meditations about being present directly, without concepts in it without the imagination, just with how things are as they are in the moment to get there. We can use our imagination. And we use our imagination until it's no longer useful, and then we let it go. What do you think of that? So, I hope that this is something you might find a little bit interesting to try out to experiment with. If you can Very lightweight, kind of mild, lightweight, just enough, just enough. See if you could start kind of using some little pieces of imagination that's not a complicated story or scenario, something very, very simple. And see if you can bring that to in when you're meditating. That would help you to actually to be to do better what you're trying to do meditation to be present with every what you're trying to whatever you're being present for. And, and then see if you couldn't, you know, kind of keep using it until you feel so stable in the present moment that you don't have to use the imagination anymore. You can just stay there with things as they are. So, that was my talk. Now, what I imagine is going to happen that would be really nice. Is before the tea If you would turn to two or one or two people near you, groups of two or three,

and, and maybe share with your partner there some way in your life, that your imagination has been helpful for you. You have any positive association with your capacity for imagination, and you did not, don't tell the whole story. Just a couple of sentences just to kind of, you know, introduce yourselves. Thank you.