

Return to Your Center

Gil Fronsdal

December 24, 2023

Sometimes the challenge of meditating before giving a talk is that there's nothing to talk about now. So I'm thinking of the solstice which happened a few days ago and that now we're in a sense we're turning towards the time of light. And there's a saying that goes something like, "We are conceived in the dark and born out of the dark. We are born into the light and we grow in the light." So with the seasons we go into the darkness and that has its own value. And now we go out, for those of us in the northern hemisphere, we're going out into the light.

When we meditate, in our tradition, we tend to close our eyes. So it is a rhythm of a kind of going into the dark. And then we open the eyes and we're going back out into the light. And what is it that's conceived when we close our eyes to meditate? What is it that is born out of meditation that then is born into the light of our social life, our work life, our lived life? And then only that but grows in that light, in that life. And this rhythm of going into meditation and coming out is actually a very important one.

We're a retreat tradition. So we put a lot of emphasis on going off on meditation retreats. And there's a rhythm with those as well. Some people, it's a yearly rhythm. Maybe once a year they go and retreat. And it's an important part of the year is to go in there and something shifts, something changes, something is touched into, something is born that then is brought back into the world and practiced in the world or explored in the world or applied into the world. And then after a while we go back into meditation and that rhythm.

And that rhythm is something that goes back to the time of the Buddha when monastics, who were the primary practitioners back then, who do lots of practice, go on retreats, had a lifestyle where three months of the year they would do what's called the rains retreat, where they'd stay put in one place in order to practice. Practice a lot of meditation, hear teachings and things like that. And after the rains retreat, they would go out into the world and wander around northern India. And that tradition continued in a variety of Buddhist countries.

And I was told that in Korea, they have that pattern where monastics would gather for a monastery for a three month period of the rains. And the end of those three months, they all monks scatter. And then they come back the next time around. That rhythm of coming and going. When I was at the Tassajara Zen Monastery here in California, down in Los Padres National Forest, in the middle of it, in Santa Cruz Mountain, in the Big Sur Mountains, we had a similar rhythm where we would have the winter time, we would just be alone in this little valley in the middle of the wilderness with the river going through it, practicing with a small group of people and a lot of meditation, a lot of silence.

And then rather than scattering at the end of that period, during the summer from May to Labor Day in September, would be what's called guest season. And rather than going out into the world, the world would come in. And it was kind of a, partly a resort, and people would come to a monastery to resort. And as a practitioner there, I felt it was very important, that rhythm, that by the end of the winter, there was something very important about meeting all these guests and the more complicated life of the guest season, and all the social interactions that happened there, that applying what I'd learned, having it tested by what I encountered as we went through the monastery, you know, this worldly life of all these activities, and it allowed something to grow and develop.

Though by September, I was ready for the guests to go. And I was ready to drop into the silence again and return to some kind of deeper place of being. That was the kind of the place of Genesis, the place of something being conceived, something being different, kind of has a chance to be born from that really settled place. So our tradition is a retreat tradition.

But regularly, I've thought it's rather unfortunate that we call them retreats. And yesterday, I looked up the etymology and the history of this word retreat. And it means, it comes from French and then from Latin. But in French, it meant something like to pull back, to step backwards. And it was originally used as a military term for the military to retreat when there was a need for that in battle. But then at some point, it became a religious term for, in the 1700s, apparently, a religious term that meant religious people going off, pulling back from something in order to be in seclusion, to do their kind of spiritual life. And then a few decades later, it became, apparently for a while, a term used for institutions to house the mentally ill. They get to go and retreat. But still, this pulling away.

So I think it's kind of unfortunate that we call it retreats, pulling back, pulling away, like you're leaving something behind. If I could redo the English language, I would call our retreat centers return centers. Not because you're returning the damaged goods. But rather, that it's a place to return to yourself. And because what I found through meditation practice, just sitting here now, partly why I wasn't kind of ready to speak when we started, was there's a return to a place of inner psychological health. There's a return to a sense of harmony. Everything, if it goes well in meditation, it's a return, in a sense, to much closer to who I fully am than how I am if I'm out about, especially this season.

I went on the roads a few days ago, and boy, it was like crazy. The cars and the people and the lines and the stores. And actually, I enjoyed myself because these lines, because I thought, this is just as good a place to meditate as any. I'll just do standing meditation here. And if I can't do standing meditation here, then I probably can't do it anywhere. So I should be able to do it here too. So I actually enjoyed it, standing there. And I kind of looked forward to next door with the next long line.

But anyway, this frazzled kind of life that we can live. And I sometimes feel disconnected to some degree from myself, that sometimes I only realize when I sit down to meditate. And then by meditating, something begins softening and relaxing. And the fragmented quality of my life settles down. And the fragments come into harmony, get settled. And the way that the mind gets more peaceful, also it

harmonizes, it settles, it stabilizes. There's an idea of unification that's part of meditation practice. And this unification means everything comes together in a kind of unity. And when everything's in unity, then no parts are working against each other.

Partly to make a point, you can disagree, you will, but I want to kind of... Religious people make hyperbole a lot. So I can get away with it sometimes, in case you don't like what I'm about to say. But whenever you're carrying around tension in your muscles, you're in conflict with something. An interesting idea. Might not be 100% true. But it's a very interesting idea that many times I think that we're in conflict with something. And if we're living with that tension chronically, all day long, week after week, month after month, decade after decade, then we're living constantly in some kind of conflict. Something we don't want, something we're protecting ourselves from, something that we're trying to push away. Something. Some ambition we're trying to attain. And it ends up a kind of alienation from ourselves.

And to sit down and meditating and let the tension dissolve and relax, then that sense of conflict disappears. And we're not in conflict with any part of ourselves. And this wonderful possibility of breathing, being alive, settled here, with nothing, no opposition to what's happening in this psychophysical being, is a remarkable experience. And when I've touched into this in clear ways, to me it feels like this is health. This is what being healthy is like.

I have this issue, one of my little delusions, that sometimes affects me, is if I get sick. At some point I'm no longer really sick. I'm just a little bit sick. I'm getting better. And I'm still really tired or achy or something. And my delusion is, I don't want to believe I'm still sick. And I'll have these thoughts, "Gil, you're probably fooling yourself. You're probably not really sick. And maybe you're lazy or you're something." Because I can't quite tell. I can't quite believe it. But then the next day, "Oh, now I'm healthy. This is what health is. I really know."

So the same thing psychologically, spiritually. We can have a sense, "Oh, now this is health." So when we go on these so-called retreats, that's the place where we return to who we are much more. And we pull back from that, we withdraw from that, for whatever reason. We retreat from that when we go back into the world all too easily. And so there's a loss of ourselves.

And from a meditator's point of view, meditation is not an altered state of mind. It's the normal state of mind. It's the healthy state of mind. The altered state of mind is how people are walking around in everyday life. That's pretty altered, full of greed and hate and fear and anxiety. And that's what's defining the mind. And so this return.

So, we could call these return centers, the Insight Return Center. And someone says, "You say tomorrow you're going to start a new return, as opposed to a new retreat." It's a returning, a returning. And so this rhythm of this return to something deep inside, to harmony, wholeness, and all that. And that the deeper kind of possibilities of meditation that Buddhism offers come from or arise out of this kind of return to a healthy way of being. Being settled, whole, no longer living in conflict, no longer living with

this tension that we can often carry in our daily life.

And that's kind of the, that state is not the end state for Buddhist practice. But in that state of health, we can feel that there's a calling, there's an onward leading nature. There's a way in which the heart wants to continue with something profound. And that profound thing that wants to be born is all kinds of things. But what is it that wants to be born, is a wonderful question. What wants to be born? And how do we allow it to be born in us?

And that's one of the functions of meditation, is to create the room in our hearts, in our minds, in our body, to allow something to be born that wants to be born out of the darkness. When we go through serious psychological challenges, emotional challenges, really depressed, really feel betrayed, feel angry, really feel like we've lost something profound, really grief, anger, whatever, fear, all these difficulties that people struggle with.

I think there can be less struggle around it all if we appreciate that in the right conditions, in the heart of them, something wants to be born. What is that? What wants to be born? Sometimes we're so reactive, so caught up, so judgmental, so disturbed by the emotions we have. Sometimes we even receive messages from our society, you're not supposed to be this way. And that makes it harder as well.

The meditation life is a life that somehow we allow ourselves the possibility to feel the difficult emotions we have. Meditation life is a time when we give ourselves a possibility of experiencing the positive emotions that we people are having. Some people, those are hard to experience. Both of them, in their heart, there's something in there that wants to be born. That's the nature of our inner life. There is something, seeds, that want to be born.

And when we're in this state of help, when we really learn to settle and not be in conflict with things, including not being conflict with the difficult emotions, and create the space to allow something in the darkness to come forth. We don't know what is being conceived in the darkness. If we think we have to know everything, we're maybe shortchanging ourselves. Part of the settleness of meditation is to allow ourselves not to know. To really feel ourselves deeply and not know, because you can't know what's happening in the darkness within. And even if it's like the dark night of the soul kind of time, things are really challenging.

Something wants to be born. What is it that wants to be born? If you don't make space for that possibility, it might never be born. So to see meditation as a time to really trust being here present, there's a possibility of inner help that comes from just letting go and settling and getting focused, arriving and being here in the present moment in a full, intimate, kind of committed way. It allows for a whole other possibilities that cannot happen if we stay distracted.

And so, a little bit, you know, to challenge you, it's when you're distracted that you've withdrawn, that you've retreated, because you think you've lost the battle, maybe. It's coming back and sitting here,

returning here, that our life can come to a kind of fulfillment that can't come when we're distracted, caught up, intense.

So we're at this kind of junction of the year that it's gotten, become darker and darker, until Thursday when it was the darkest day of the year for the Northern Hemisphere. And who knows what that has been for you. Maybe it's like the rhythm of sleeping. Most people sleep at night and then they wake during the day. Who knows what was going, settling and quieting down. And who knows what was happening as the days got darker and darker for you. Maybe it was a very important time to slow down, important time to do less, less to be outdoors and do a lot of things.

And now we turn towards the light. And now is a time to be particularly receptive. What wants to be born out of that? So with the solstice on Thursday, in a week or so there's the New Year, I'd like to propose that we have this wonderful liminal time to be careful with ourselves during this period. Because at New Year's, there's a custom of making a resolution for the year. But most people, I think, are not really making the resolutions very well. It's wishful thinking.

What I propose for you is that you use this next week to ask yourself, what is it that wants to be born in you? What is it that wants to sprout? What is it that wants to come out into life? If you sit quietly, if you go for walks quietly, if you avoid being too busy during the season and spend some time being kind of connected to yourself, feeling yourself, sensing, maybe meditate a little extra.

And maybe coming out of meditation, maybe you can ask your question, what is it that wants to be born in me? What is it that this time of the year, as daylight gets longer and longer and symbolizes this way in which something gets born into the light and grows in the light? What is it that wants to be born in you?

If you get no answer, it's fantastic that you spend time with that sensitivity to feel for it or sense it. So don't worry, don't feel bad. You don't know what's going on. You don't know what's gestating in there. So don't worry about that. But if you come with something that you feel, oh, that's what wants to be born, that's when you make the resolution. Resolve for that. Resolve to feed that, let that grow and develop in you. Care for what wants to sprout.

And maybe it's something directly related to meditation, directly related to a life of mindfulness and compassion. Maybe it's something directly related to a life of service, caring for the people around you. Because that's what wants to be born. Or maybe it's so many possibilities. Maybe it's a life of honesty. Maybe it's a life that's not being driven by fear or driven by desires or anger, ill will. Maybe it's a life that for the next 10-11 months does the inner work that would prepare all of us for the elections. Don't let yourself be surprised. Prepare for the best, best that you have. The world, no matter what happens, the world needs the best we have to offer, always. Let that grow and develop in the light.

So what is it that wants to be born? So those are my thoughts. And now I welcome you if anyone you have any comments or questions. So in the back, Martha, in the corner. Hi, I just wanted to point out

that the winter newsletter, there's a copy when you go out the door, has an article, an excellent article by Kim Allen, in fact on resolutions since it is the beginning of the year. You might find it interesting.

Nice, the newsletter has an article and it makes making resolves. How do you think about setbacks in life? So often we visualize goals or we set resolutions and maybe it's health related and then you fall ill or you want to run and then you get injured. How are you using your practice to, I guess, respond to these moments?

Okay, so, I mean, one of the two ways that I want to mention, three, many, so many ways. But one way is that the healing from these kinds of things works better if there's no tension, if there's profound rest. And not just the rest of getting enough sleep, but even deeper, deeper rest. And so when I've been sick, I just, I will rest. I'll go to bed and not just lay there. Sometimes I lay there, my eyes closed, and kind of meditate and relax and just try to get as deep rest as I can. And support, aid that rest, because then things seem to heal better.

And then to let go of tension that we have, to let go of the tensions of it being different. There's often protests in the mind and anger at how we are. I know people who have had injuries that seemed like horrific injuries, really changed their life, the rest of their life. You know, maybe inflate or something. And I don't want to belittle the challenges of that and how difficult it is. But there are some people who, after many years, will say it was the best thing that happened to them. Because they had to really, the more they were challenged, the more they were upset, the more that they had to give up.

When you're practicing, the more you realize that represents something very deep inside. Deep attachment, deep holding on, deep expectations, deep sense of identity that we have. And so this practice allows us to really go in there and question, where am I still holding on? Because why am I so disappointed or discouraged? And go in there and find what that is and let go of it.

And then, whatever the injury has been, which maybe was a permanent injury, is not seen as a problem, but more as an asset. Because it gave a certain kind of inner freedom that wouldn't have happened otherwise. And so that's some of the ways meditation can help.

Was that satisfying enough? Yeah?

May I ask, why are you asking?

Mike. I ask because I think of, you know, setbacks, whether they're injuries or, you know, failures in your life as, you know, moments that can shake your sense of self and, you know, stray you from your progress or your goals or, you know, whatever the things in life are that get you out of bed every day.

And I think in each religious practice, it's important to kind of identify how your faith structure, you know, helps you respond to those, whether it's, you know, familial death or, you know, something like that, that just really is something that's difficult.

Great. Thank you. That's very nice.

So, maybe if we understand how we can use these things, not as a setback, but as something that allows something beneficial to happen, then maybe it's a set forward.

Hi, Gil.

Gil, I had a question as you were asking, you know, what is waiting to be born? You know, meditation at least has helped me understand a bit more of my own suffering, but I feel it has also, particularly this time of the year, also made me a little more attuned to the suffering of others in your family and other places.

But there is sort of this mix of helplessness that you feel when people aren't quite being able to help themselves, but you also really only can go so far.

How do you, you know, how do you deal with that sense of wanting to be of service, but not quite knowing exactly what may be able to help, particularly when these are situations of psychological and mental help?

Well, the simple answer that hopefully respects the complexity and the fullness of your life and all that, is that there's probably more than just wanting to help them. The wanting has extra baggage.

And so, if you look at your desire to help someone or support someone or companion someone in their difficulties, what is that extra that you're bringing? And that's one of the things, if you ask that question and then really get quiet and really look and feel, what are all the motivations that are behind you and the needs and the desires? And the way to, one of the ways to find answers to these questions that I think can be very helpful and practical, is to feel your way, literally, physically, to where the tension and the stress is around this issue. And that sometimes can reveal, once you find the stress levels, you can kind of sometimes then start feeling the emotions behind it. And you realize it's not just compassion, but there's also some kind of fear.

And once you recognize the fear, then, oh, there's more here than just wanting to be compassionate.

Thanks, Gil.

Gil, the example you gave of when you were still sick, but you thought that it would be time for you to be healed. Does that happen because we're not in touch with ourselves? Or is it because it doesn't match our goals anymore to be sick? And how can we help that? How can we see that more clearly?

I think it helps to look at what the beliefs you have around it. And also a little bit, maybe it helps to understand your personality, your disposition towards things. And a number of things that affects me, so I don't know what goes for you. One is, I really enjoy doing things. It's just, you know, I am a doer kind of person. So I enjoy it. And so I'm just ready to do something. Okay, I'm ready.

But you're sick. No. Yes. No, it can't be true.

So that's part of it. Sometimes it has to do with the sense of responsibility. Responsibility is probably my Achilles heel. And so I have to do something. I have to respond to that email. No, you're sick. No,

but something like that.

What can help? Seeing that. That really helps the most, is to see the tricks of the mind, how it works. Otherwise, if you don't see what the mind is doing in terms of the tricks, the beliefs, the attitudes, the fears, then what we're trying to do is trying to override it. And that often creates even more tension.

Hi, thank you for your talk.

So I have a kind of a deep health condition or challenge. And then I have my meditation. And in my mind, they've actually never met. It's like never occurred to me at all. Well, how could your meditation practice address or help?

So which begs the question, then, is there a particular way that when I meditate, do I think of it as addressing the health challenge? Or do I just kind of keep going and not...

Is there some specific thing that I do to make them meet?

This is a great question, Beverly. We appreciate it a lot.

And so, you know, I don't feel like I know you well enough to answer you specifically. So if this misses you, don't take it too personally.

So it's possible that you have to distinguish between two challenges. There's the health challenge, which is the literal things you have to actually do. Do the research, talk to the doctors, do the exercises, physical, whatever it might be. The things you should do. And, but in the Dharma, those wouldn't be called challenges. Those are just things to do.

In the Dharma, we call challenges psychological challenges around them. The frustration, the anger, the... Many. So, so that how to bring mindfulness to that is to recognize what those psychological challenges are. Maybe get a, write them down. Just really make a list of all that. Just kind of get a sense of the ecology of the psychological things going on when you call it, you're challenged.

The anger, the frustration, the impatience, the hopelessness. Make the list. And then choose one and spend some time under, looking, looking, looking at the ecology of that particular challenge.

What are the beliefs? What are the emotions? What are the body sensations, body stresses, tensions that come along? What are the emotions? What are the mind states? What are the stories? Kind of begin, kind of unraveling all the pieces of that ecological system around that one thing, like impatience.

And then, and then, and the more you could unravel and see the different pieces of the ecosystem, it might be easier for you to then sit in the middle of it and breathe. And this is where the meditation comes into play. In meditation, stop thinking about all this. That's what you do other times.

Meditation, now you can better identify it and sit in the middle of the complex and just breathe with it and see what happens.

Does that make some sense?

Yes, thank you.

Hello.

Hi Gil. I have a question about, so sometimes, I need to do something. Like, it's, let's say this is I work, I must do something. But I'm not sure what is the right thing to do. And by the right thing to do is usually, like in a moral sense of the word. Is what, is what, can you turn?

Moral.

Moral. What's the moral thing to do with work?

Yes.

Oh, this is a good, I love it when people have this question. I don't love the challenge of knowing how to answer the question. So, and sometimes it's really hard. I think left and right and back and forth. And I'm not sure what's the right thing to do.

How can this practice help in that sense?

Hmm.

Well, one of the things is when we, if we can return to some deep sense of feeling connected deeply to ourselves and feel at harmony with ourselves so that we're not operating on fear or, or on anger or confusion or delusions, a lot of kind of spinning stories. We get below the story level. Then in a moral sense, we can be more in touch with the ethical, deep, deep ethical sensitivity and sensibility that we're capable of.

And then you might be easier to understand what to do. It may be easy to understand what you have to do, even though it's not popular. Or understand what you have to do, even though it might mean losing your job. Or, you know, you know, giving up your job.

But if we are too anxious about this, and even if we know that this is a moral issue, but we're so anxious about trying to figure it out, that we're spinning out the story, spinning around the mind, we might not be in the best state of mind to really address it.

So one of the things our practice can do is to have this return to some deeper sensibility, who we are. That's one.

The other thing is that this practice, mindfulness, has a lot to do with understanding what our relationship is to any challenge we have. And so there might be, there also there might be fear in relationship to it, or desire in relationship to it, or a lot of selfing in relationship to it. What do people think of me, for example?

And so to clarify that, how we're relating to the challenge might simplify our ability to understand what the real issues are that have to be solved. That's something else.

Another thing that practice can do is that mindfulness of speaking and mindfulness of listening, if we practice it, can help us slowly learn maybe how to have honest communication. Figure out how to speak honestly without challenging other people, but letting other people know that you're challenged.

You know, I have this ethical issue around this, and can we talk about it? And I feel like I'm left alone to make this ethical decision, but it's going to affect the company we're in. Is there some place I can go where we can kind of brainstorm, where go back and forth and find out, and I can get some clarity around this?

And I don't know where you work, there's any possibility of that. Or if a colleague, you can go for a lunch walk during a lunch break and have this kind of conversation.

So this idea of using the practice in conversation, so that we can have clear, more honest conversations about the very thing.

I like to believe that mindfulness, that honesty is mindfulness out loud. So that we're learning how to not just keep it to ourselves, but learning to process it in relationship to other people as well.

So those are some ideas.

So last one was next to you. Okay, great. Okay, so maybe given this very special time of the year, turning into the light, and we're all kind of doing that together here in person, if you would like to turn to a few people next to you and say hello, and see what they want to do with this growing light as we get bored into it.

And introduce yourself. But look around so that you kind of say hello to at least two other people, so no one's left alone. Okay.