

Practicing in the Natural World

Gil Fronsdal

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Good morning. It is quite nice to be back here. And those of you who haven't been here much, I've been gone for the last maybe five weeks or something. And I was away for the month of July. So for better or for worse, I thought I would tell you what I did for my summer. And as a kind of background for this talk, maybe as a question for you to carry with you as you listen to the talk or after the talk, is around the topic that in Buddhism, it's maybe, at least in our tradition, it's less interesting to ask the question of yourself, who am I, than it is to ask the question, what is my nature?

What is natural for us here? And when you ask the question, what is natural for you, that can highlight the second question, what is not natural? And this of course raises lots of interesting philosophical questions and protests very quickly. But what is it that belongs to the natural world distinct from the social world? Distinct from the social world and the mental world we live in where we construct, we fabricate, we make up all kinds of ideas in which we live in that we don't question. We take it as if this is how things are.

But to start questioning the distinction between what is natural and what is socially constructed is a powerful way to really begin going deep into this world of seeing ourselves, knowing ourselves, and finding a way to freedom. So that's the background. And the reason for that background for this talk is that for a good part of the month of July, most of July, I lived in the wilderness. I lived outdoors. For about 10 days I was backpacking. And for two weeks I was living in a kind of a nature preserve, 1300 acre nature preserve.

And all this was in the forested mountains and foothills in northern Oregon. Northern and central and northern eastern Oregon. I'd never been there before. It's quite beautiful to be there. And for most of that time, for three weeks of that time, I was part of the faculty teaching a program called Nature Dharma Teacher Training. We took a group of about maybe originally maybe about 20 people who had already been trained to be insight meditation teachers.

And a group of about five people who had long histories of being guides, facilitators for bringing people into the natural world, into the wilderness and backpacking and things like that, and brought them together in order to train them in how to be able to offer meditation retreats, day-longs, teaching events, somehow that's embedded in the natural world. So some people are offering backpacking retreats, some people are offering what's called stationary camping retreats. You go someplace somehow and then you stay at some outdoor place and people are camping. And all the meditation is done outdoors. Sometimes the eating is done outdoors. The whole day is spent outdoors.

And so that was the focus of the three of those weeks. It was a little bit the practicum for them, taking them into the wilderness in order to practice there. And a good part of it was actually meant to be a retreat for them, rather than the pedagogy of how to do this, giving them a deep experience for doing it. Including three days in which they all did solos. And the solo practice in natural world, in nature, by yourself, away from everyone, even away from themselves, just really alone, can be extremely powerful. And in all kinds of ways.

And in fact it was. To hear them debrief afterwards at the end of this was quite something. And so that's kind of what I did. And in a few of those, at the end of it, I went backpacking with my wife up there around Mount Hood. And one of the reflections I had, for a month living outdoors and hiking outdoors, and much of the time I slept under the stars. I didn't even use a tent.

And was coming across, I think this reflection first began, coming across a very big Douglas fir. Probably considered old growth Douglas fir. And in much of these forests that we traveled in, where you're living in, there was very little old growth. They were beautiful forests, but many of them had been planted. Many of them had just kind of sprouted up after things had been cut down, and maybe been enough decades since it was cut down that it had grown up quite a bit. But they weren't old growth.

And I remember coming across this big Douglas fir, huge, tall, wide, big. And it kind of took my breath away. And kind of like I was in awe looking at this tree. And I felt like I was entering a whole different relationship to time. Because this tree must have been around for a long time. But both the timeless now and that long span of history, I felt kind of humbled in the presence of it.

I felt a little bit smaller than I usually am. And I had a very different feeling of my relationship to the cosmos, to the wider world, by being in relationship to this big tree that's been around a long time. I've traveled in places in the world, like in Japan, where you come across periodically, also places where there's been lots of forestry. You know, there's mountains in Japan

that are filled, monocropped with beautiful cedar trees, but they're there because they've been cut and grown. And it's a big part of the industry in Japan is to have cedar trees. But then you come across a cedar tree in Japan that is 800 years old.

And it isn't just you come across this tree, it's massive, massive, massive trunk, and this, you know, it's gnarled and big, and I mean, it's kind of like a power spot, or kind of like, this is special, this is like something. And the mind can go quiet, just like, wow. And in fact, in Japan, these trees have become worshipped. You see, there's a little altar in the front of it, and people put their coins there, put water there, a little bit of food there to the tree. The tree's not going to benefit from that. But maybe.

And they say it's the kami. And there's a wonderful term in Japan, kami. No one in Japan apparently, there's no consensus in Japan what a kami is. Maybe sometimes it's a kind of a god, a god in the natural world, the god of the tree. But maybe it's not. Maybe it's just the natural force, the living force that's alive there. That's the kami, maybe. It doesn't really matter. People want to worship it. People stop and sit and are quiet and they bow to it.

And so when I was seeing this big old-growth Douglas fir in Japan, I wondered what it was like, that area, when it was full of old-growth trees. What was it like here in the peninsula when it was filled with massive oak trees? There's a few left here and there, you can see. Some years ago there was a massive oak tree on Elmira de las Pulgas, on the corner there, that the city felt was dangerous. It was so old they felt it was going to fall or break branches and fall on cars or something, on the kids. There was a school over there.

And the neighbors protested, the kids protested, the kids made these little altars and put bracelets around the trunk of the big tree and made offerings and dolls and everything and trying to protect the tree. And finally when they realized they couldn't, they did even more kind of things to honor the tree. The kids had no idea about kami, but this was special, their relationship to this tree. But what if most of the trees here on the peninsula were still here? What if there were no homes? No fences?

What if there was just, you go from San Carlos all the way down to Mountain View, and it's a vast plain of grasslands and these huge oak trees with no fence lines? What happens to your sight and how you see? What happens to your relationship to the land? What if there's very few people there? What if there's some grizzly bears?

So in 1792, maybe one of the first English people who came to California was George Vancouver, who was an explorer. Vancouver, Canada is named after him. And I think he came and visited the San Francisco Bay Area in November of that year. He was in San Francisco and he

took a party of people on horseback and rode down the peninsula to San Jose. And as he crossed kind of the area that's the boundary between San Carlos and Redwood City, so right here where we're sitting today, he described this whole area, 20 miles going south, as like an English park with old English oak trees.

So I can imagine, being November, the grass was just getting green. And it must have been spectacular with these big trees and open plains and very few people here. The Lam Chin, the indigenous people of Redwood City, from Belmont down to, I think, maybe Atherton and around Fololi and to the Bay, people think there were only about 350 of them at the time when Vancouver came through. This was before the Spanish land grants. It happens a few years later. So what an amazing thing to imagine this peninsula here.

And where we are here, these vast plains with massive oak trees. What would it be like to be here and walk through that? What happens to your gaze, how you look across the land? What happens when you stand in front of these huge ancient trees? It would be a very different experience than you walk down the city streets in Redwood City and see all the fences one after the other and you look, gaze along one direction and it's like you can't see very far because there's fences. Maybe you see 30 feet, maybe 10 feet, maybe 5 feet.

The houses are in the way. There's no grand vistas unless you stand in the middle of the street. And you're lucky, you know, no one runs you over. You can see way down the asphalt a mile or two perhaps. You know, that's maybe nice. But maybe what you can do if you're kind of tuned in, you look up into the sky.

And in the sky you see a grand view. The sky you see the clouds and the vastness of it. And that feels kind of special, relaxing, peaceful to see. But just walking through Redwood City, maybe it's kind of peaceful right now. There's a lot of wonderful trees here. So it's kind of nice, if you like trees.

So what was it like for the Lamchin, the natives who used to live here, still here, around the Lamchins. There's one family left of the Lamchin, indigenous people of this area, and one lineage. You know, what was their relationship? What was their relationship of, you know, when the natural world was massive, was awesome, was, created so much, was a kind of a peaceful view and place and when the trees and the sky and the mountains and the waters and the grizzly bears and everything were kind of part of the territory in the land. Does it change how people feel? Does it change people's relationship to the natural world? Does it change how people relate to themselves? How they understand themselves in that?

And some of us have gone into the natural world away from the social world. Have gone in,

gone camping, backpacking, sometimes, you know, just going for a day hike in a park. And each are preserved here in the peninsula will change and shift your relationship to yourself. It's so easy living in a social urban life where all the kind of ways in which life is organized are socially constructed. What we wear, where we go, how we work, the relationship between the different people that we encounter, all belong kind of to a social world that's been constructed and invented. Fashions that we have, fashions of what kind of bodies are accepted and appreciated and not appreciated.

Trends in what kind of sexuality and genders are understood and appreciated and how we relate to them. There's so many ways, race, ethnicity, that we have ideas, and bias, and preferences, and bump up against that are challenging. And the dynamics between different genders is a very rich social world that's mostly a social construct, 90% maybe, 80%, some percent, that if you just go to a different culture, you see that the relationship people have between genders is sometimes radically different than how it is here in California. And how much of it is socially constructed? And how much of it is, do we think it's natural?

And we go into the natural world away from most, you know, social things. And it's remarkable how much of this socially constructed, the kind of spinning of the mind quiets down. The preoccupations, the concerns, the he did, she did, they did kind of become quieter. Trying to live up to standards which belong to our society, or our family, or the people we have around us quiet down. And it's remarkable to be able to step away from the social world, the social constructs, and just be able to breathe easily and have the mind become quieter.

And a little bit, or maybe a lot of it, this is what some of us experience in meditation. That meditation itself is a quieting of the socially constructed world. Because that's the quieting of the mind. The thinking mind is mostly, that's what it is. And then we discover the natural world in ourselves. And just as it is awesome to encounter an 800-year cedar tree, or to stand looking out at the majesty of Mount Hood, which I saw many times in the hiking trip, it's possible to sit quietly and view the majesty of your inner landscape.

To feel the awe of being conscious and present and peaceful that can be inside. There's a natural world inside of us that's available as well. And the capacity to go into the natural world in order to have the social world calm down is extremely powerful. It allows us to begin questioning and becoming wise about the constructed world that the mind is usually living in. We can see more clearly what is necessary and what is not necessary. Whereas if we're always living in the social world, always navigating it, that seems natural, that seems obvious, that seems universal, that seems like there's nothing else. But to step away from it is powerful.

So in Buddhism, there's been a very long tradition of practitioners, meditation practition-

ers, going into the natural world to practice. Sometimes they're called forest practitioners. Sometimes they're called wilderness practitioners. There's different names that they use for these practitioners. And in the periods of many thousands of years of Buddhist history, 2,500 years of Buddhist history, sometimes whole schools of Buddhism have been revived by the forest tradition, by the monks and the nuns who have gone into the forest to practice.

And sometimes there's been tension between the Buddhist teachers and practitioners who live in urban settings and urban monasteries and those who step away from that social world to practice deep, sometimes alone, deep in the forests. Sometimes little monasteries, forest monasteries. And sometimes that tension has been creative, useful creative tension. And sometimes it's been really essential, because as I said, sometimes Buddhism has been revived by it. In our tradition, the insight movement that we're part of here, we are clearly inherited some of the benefits that came from the forest practitioners in Thailand and in Burma in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

And to give you one dramatic kind of reference point for this is that in the 1800s in Thailand, the dominant Buddhism of the time did not believe it was possible for human beings to become enlightened anymore, to have some degree of realization. That was not possible and they weren't oriented around doing that. So a lot of the emphasis was on study and preserving the teachings, but not doing deep practice. But there were a couple of people who decided, oh no, this is not possible. It's possible. And they went into the forest, away from the urban Buddhism of the time, and went deep in the forest and practiced for years.

And came back and said, yes, it's possible to have some degree of attainment, of realization, of freedom. And the ecclesiastical authorities of the time, in the early 1900s, criticized him. No, no, it's not possible. It's not possible. What you're doing is not possible. Right up until 1950s they were being told you can't do this.

But there was two monks in particular who went and did this. And one of them was a man named Ajahn Mun. And his attainment, his realization, really made a big impact. Slowly. And among his people who had a big impact was Ajahn Chah, who went to study with him. Ajahn Chah was a teacher for Ajahn Sumedho, Ajahn Suchito, for Jack Hortfield. And this idea that it's possible to practice to the point of some kind of deep attainment came out of that. And then it became more popular. And by 1950s, there was a big shift in Thailand. A little bit earlier, decades earlier in Burma. Maybe, I don't know when exactly the shift was in Sri Lanka.

But in all these places, it was the forest monastics who really went and practiced away from all this, that really showed what was possible. And why is it the forest monastics could do

this? I think partly is the support that this natural world gives us in practicing. The natural world teaches us how to distinguish between the world of social constructs and the world that's free of it. The natural world also challenges us in ways that are invaluable for Buddhist practice. Going into the wilderness by yourself, even if it's just one day, is frightening for some people. It's uncomfortable.

There are times when it's championed as a place that's really peaceful and nice, and it's inspiring to go feel the peaceful settings, the natural settings sometimes. And people can experience peace sometimes in a natural setting that's greater than any other time in their life. But there's also, it's uncomfortable in the natural world. There are mosquitoes, grizzlies. The weather is not cooperative. You go out and live in the natural world and, you know, it's not, you know, pastoral environments. There could be storms, and lightning, and thunder, and fires. Here in California, Oregon, and Washington these days, smoke.

And I was woken up at night by something chomping. It sounded like very hard, chomping teeth right close to my head. What is that? And before I could turn to look, two cute little fawns dashed by me. And one of the women who was part of the three-day solo, she was sitting, minding her own business, meditating. And she heard this crashing sound behind her. She turned around to see a big bear running by. Another one chose a place to spend her three days. She was very careful and tried to be respectful for whatever was part of the natural world. And somehow she chose a spot that was kind of the home of a herd of deer. And they kind of like checked her out in the middle of the night, they were checking out what's going on, you know, who is this person, and she wondered whether she should move, but you know.

So, you know, there's so many things. So the idea of not having the creature comforts, but to really practice with renunciation, letting go of comforts, letting go of, it has to be just as we want it to be, our preferences and all this. This is part of the gift of being in the natural world. And for these forest monastics who went into the forest back then, they had to kind of let go of so much. They had to work with their fears, work with their desires, work with their preferences, and learn how to let go very, very deeply. And why is that useful? Because if you really want to drop the world of attachments, the world of all these social constructs that we live in and are caught in, it really helps to be able to learn to let go in a deep way. To really learn how to be at ease with discomfort. To let go. To work with our fear. Go to the other side of the fear. Be in fearful places but not run away.

And I'll end this talk by saying that there's a beautiful discourse in the ancient teachings attributed to the Buddha, where a man comes to the Buddha and says, You know, basically

something like this. I notice that you and your followers sometimes go and practice in the wilderness, in the forest. It's hard to practice in the forest. It's frightening to be there. And the Buddha says, oh yes, it's hard to practice in the forest. It's frightening to go in there. Before I was enlightened, I wanted to go into the forest to practice. And I considered, yes, it's difficult in the forest. It's frightening. But I thought about myself and I said, well, if you're not ethical, you don't want to live an ethical life, then it can be frightening to go in the forest. But I've lived an ethical life, so I don't have that fear.

If I have a lot of the hindrances, a lot of desire for sensual pleasure, a lot of aversions, sloth and torpor, restlessness and doubt, and uncertainties, anxiety, it's hard to go in the forest and live there by yourself. And he said, no, but I don't have the hindrances. So he listed all these things. He did this review. So I'll go practice in the forest. And he said, I'll go practice it and I'll work with my fear that comes up, that's still left. And in fact, the Buddha, before he was enlightened, went and practiced in the forest and he was frightened. He got afraid. Isn't that a nice story? We hold up the Buddha as being like perfect and he's never going to be afraid. But he was frightened. And it's cute how he talks about it. He says, yeah, sometimes there were, you know, these footsteps around me at night and there was peacocks. He got frightened of the peacocks walking around. But he made a commitment that no matter what posture he was practicing in, when he got afraid, he would stay in that posture until he went through to the other side of the fear. And so he'd had to deal with peacocks.

In the biographies, autobiographies of these forest monastics in Thailand, some of them talked about sitting and having to confront tigers. You know, they were dangerous things. And so tigers are roaring around in the middle of the night, and they're sitting there, and tigers are roaring, and they felt really afraid. And they said, okay, I'm going to sit here and work with this fear. And the ones who survived wrote biographies. And so the Buddha went off and, you know, dealt with his fear there. And then when he worked through his fear, then this particular discourse goes on and describes how he stayed in the forest and got very concentrated and his concentration had insight and then became liberated. But then at the end of the story, he's talking to this man and he says, well, some of you might think that I go into the forest to practice now that I'm fully awakened because I'm not really fully awakened. He said, that's not the case. I go to practice in the forest for my own comfort and my own sense of ease and delight. And I do so out of compassion for future generations.

And the usual understanding of why he does it for future generations, he wants to be a model, an example of how to practice, and to go into the wilderness to practice. And so that was considered, for the Buddha, a very important way of practicing. Some of that might be because,

back in 2,500 years ago, they were still living in the Bronze Ages, and there were no meditation centers. There wasn't a retreat center he could sign up for. Maybe if the Buddha had lived today he would have signed up for a retreat. He would have gone to IRC or something. But back then there were no such things. And so the place to kind of really go have the circumstance, the occasion, the ability to go and be in seclusion and practice and meditation day after day in a way that really was not caught up and complicated by the social world, it took going off into the forest for a while. And he did that and then he came back. And he would go back and forth between these two worlds. And that's been the rhythm for many Buddhist practitioners down through the centuries.

The rhythm of spending time in the wilderness practicing and times being in urban settings and teaching and supporting people. And so we don't have a very rich forest tradition yet in the United States. There are some wonderful forest monastics who are starting that and kind of living that way. But the lay tradition of insight teachers that we are, that's only about 20 years old that some teachers like Susie Harrington and Mark Coleman have been beginning to experiment with teaching wilderness retreats. And so they wanted to pass this on to the next generation. So they created this teacher training program for people to do this. And they invited me to come along. I'm not quite qualified for it. I never taught things in the wilderness like they have. But they wanted me along anyway. And I felt very privileged to be part of it and to be a very important part of my practice, practicing in these wilderness settings.

I spent three years in the Los Padres National Forests with a Tosahara that was all outdoors, in the forest in Thailand. There I was in little *kudis*, little huts. And in one way or the other, natural world has been a big influence on my own practice and my own understanding of what freedom is, how freedom is possible, and what freedom is. So that's what I did for my summer. Luckily I don't have to write an essay on that. So we have a few minutes before the usual ending time. If any of you would like to ask any questions or comments or anything about this or anything at all, you're welcome to do so.

So I have a question about the logistics. Where do you go to the bathroom? Oh, so one of the guides, there's five people who are really trained to take people and keep people safe in the natural world, teach them logistics and how to put tents up and everything. She did this beautiful, like, I don't know, it probably was like 20 minute long talk about pooping in the wilderness. And everyone was like, wow, they'd never had such a thorough, complete, you know, but all the details you could imagine. And it was quite inspiring.

But the idea when you go, you know, in the wilderness that nowadays, especially in many places, you're supposed to go leave no trace. So for pooping, you're supposed to dig a hole

that's fairly deep so people have trowels with them. And you're supposed to bring your toilet paper out of the wilderness with you. So you bring the Ziploc bags and you take them with you because you're not supposed to leave anything there. And so there's a whole way of doing that and where to dig your hole and how to make your hole in a way that doesn't cause problems for later. Thank you.

I have this theory that one reason or maybe for some people the main reason that being a forest monastic is helpful toward becoming enlightened or moving toward enlightenment is that you just don't have so much stuff that you own and that's precious to you and that you worry about losing. House, all the precious things in your house, your decades long book writing projects or whatever achievements. You said to make sure you keep your trowel. But if you lose your trowel, you can probably borrow one from someone else. Anyway, not so much stuff to be attached to. What do you think?

You said, you know, the primary, I think it's an important reason. I think that to simplify the life of radical simplicity, and it's not just because of stuff, but it's also because of responsibilities and caring for the work and all kinds of things quiet down for a while. It becomes more and more simple. And I think being able to live a radically simple life, and it's sometimes easier to do it in the wilderness and elsewhere. But it also takes a lot of preparation, because how do you do for food?

And one of the people who was doing the program, who was a guide, has taken survival courses, wilderness survival courses, like in the desert, and now teaches that, so really well trained. And all she brings in, when she goes in, I think she wears some kind of clothes, but she goes in with a knife. It goes into the deserts or the mountains just with a knife. And from that, she has to figure out how to sleep and how to create conditions and find food and water and everything. And she's skilled. She's done the programs to learn this. So that's very simple. But it's also complicated. You're busy trying to figure out food.

And generally, like for example, when people did a solo trip of three days in the wilderness, it was pretty simple, but there were other people who had prepared food for them. And so they packed up prepared food and food that could last for three days and had that with them so they didn't have to cook really. And actually they weren't allowed to bring anything to cook with because of the fire danger. And so it was all prepared. So that made it a lot easier. Monastics often live close enough to, they have to live, because they can't, monastics, Buddhist monastics can't keep food overnight. So every day they have to get new food to eat. So they usually live close enough to a village where they can go and do alms and receive the food for the day. And so generally the forest monastics, forest life is supported. So that

allows this different kind of simplicity. But we have to appreciate that it is supported. So there's a wide network that supports and allows this to happen.

And so some of the people in the training program are IMC teachers. And so I see that in the future, we'll probably be offering more. We've already offered some, but we'll offer more of these nature retreats, maybe even solo retreats, opportunities in nature. And my goal is to, at some point, be able to offer a month-long retreat in the natural world where people can do solos and be well supported by teachers. But it takes a lot of background support and upfront support to make that possible. So it's not as simple as just getting rid of all your stuff and going out in the forest. Yeah, yeah, it's not just that simple. Living a life of simplicity, to organize that can be complicated. So I don't want to just glorify simplicity without appreciating that we have this wider world to take care of too. And it's very well understood in Buddhism that the forest monastics have to stay in relationship to society because their food, depending on it, their clothes depend on it, their well-being, their medicine they get. So I think it's important not to create this hard divide between the natural world and the urban world, but to see them in relationship to each other in a healthy way. Thank you.

So I'm a backpacker also and I have always felt and experienced that the process of getting ready for a backpack is as important as the backpacking itself. Because you really do have this, you know, you have a backpack and a limited amount of things, so what do you take in that process of deciding the values of what is more important and what do you leave behind is a really, it's, I don't rush through it. It's a really, just that taking time with that really brings insight and a new way of looking at your possessions when you take time to figure out what to take and what not and what to leave behind. Fantastic. I love that point. It's very important.

And as a little bit of an example of this, so I did go backpacking with my wife at the end. And for four days we were backpacking. But she was just warming up because when we finished after four days, we were going to end up on the Columbia River. We were hiking in Oregon towards the Columbia River. And then the next day, she was going to walk the Pacific Crest Trail from, she's doing it right now, from the Columbia River from the Oregon border to Canada. So she's what's called a through hiker. So she showed up and she said, Gil, we were in the, I picked her up at the airport in Portland and we stopped at a parking lot somewhere, industrial parking lot someplace. Gil, show me what you have in your backpack, what you're taking with you backpacking with me. And so everything goes out, not this, not this, you don't need this, you don't need this. I thought I did a really good job keeping it really simple. But if you're through hiker, the idea is to go super light. And so I was glad she went through it because it lightened

up even more. But then there was the things I didn't let go of. Why am I carrying this? For example, I brought a Kindle with me. Because I thought, you know, we're both sitting around, it's nice to read a little bit or something, and she didn't force me to get rid of the Kindle. She might not have seen it. And then, you know, but I didn't look at the Kindle at all. It's like, why am I carrying... Kindle's heavy. And so it's not only what you didn't bring, but it's also contending with what you do bring. And yes.

Another interesting thing was that I, and that with my wife, somehow, because in this thing in the parking lot, moving my things, you don't take this, that, that, and I had my, I used contact lens for my right eye, and so I had more contact lenses than I needed, so, no. And so in the process of separating that out, I didn't bring any contact lenses with me. And I didn't know that until we started the trail. So that was interesting to be able to spend the four days with a certain degree of blurry vision as well. And that was just part of the learning, part of the contending with difficulties and what's going on. And I kind of appreciated that challenge. It was kind of nice to be free of that. So I hope that was nice to hear that.

I think that I'm inspired by this idea of having a lineage or having a part of our insight meditation world have a connection, a richer connection to the natural world. And we'll be doing that, I hope, over this next few years because some of you know now we're developing a relationship with Hidden Villa, which is a nature preserve in Los Altos Hills. They would like us to come there and practice there and teach there. And that gives us lots of opportunities to do practicing in the natural world and nature without having to give up our Kindle. Or such things. Because you go there for the day or for retreats or something. So easy. So, thank you.