

Developing Capacity to Be Mindful of Life

Gil Fronsdal

November 12, 2023

Keywords: dukkha, mindfulness, Māra, non-attachment, window of tolerance, Chan tradition, not-self, reactivity, Maranasati, wisdom

So to follow up a little bit on that announcement about the Threshold Choir, it's a beautiful group of people who go and sing songs to people who are dying. And so they're kind of a service they provide to different places. And so the songs are quite moving and soaring and peaceful and kind of appropriate for that time transition in life. And it's also quite nice when we don't think we're in that transition. So, I think people often come to meditation to be changed in some way. There's something going on in their life, in themselves, often in Buddhism called suffering, that something which is difficult, and they somehow see that meditation can change them, change something, so that there's not so much discomfort or difficulty or stress or suffering that they live with.

Some people come with the idea that there's a cause for suffering and so you have to get the insight to be able to see deeply in and find that cause and pluck it out and then live happily ever after. Some people have the idea that there's some kind of way of touching into some wonderful state, a wonderful state of calm or peace, a wonderful state of not-self, a wonderful state of non-duality, non-separation, there's some place to go. And then sometimes people drop into some wonderful state, and they think, I have it made. And yeah, maybe for that moment. And then life comes in and they leave the retreat center or leave the meditation center and they find that they have two flat tires in their car when they go out. And whatever that great state was, they've even forgot about it.

They try to be like, what two? I mean, I have places to go, important things to do. And I was dwelling in all this peace and calm. I have important calm to experience. I better, you know, get this fixed right away and, you know, anyway. So these states, they come and they go. And so there's another approach to what meditation can do.

Rather than changing us or changing some aspect of fixing something inside, what it does is to expand our capacity to be uncomfortable. Now we don't advertise this. Come to IMC and

learn how to be more uncomfortable than you. But in fact this is actually an important part of it. If you want the meditation to be realistic, if you want to be a practice that supports you in all the different facets of your life, And because life will change, life will have challenges. You never know what's going to come.

This is one of the wonderful or very significant teachers in the 20th century for many people here in the West, in America, was a man named Ram Dass. And he went around teaching spiritual practices and spirituality and practicing himself for decades. And then nearby here he had a stroke. I think he was in one of the local hospitals here afterwards for that. And he said that when he had a stroke he was kind of discouraged because his practice no longer worked. So what was going to support him then?

So to find something which we can rely on. And one of the things we can rely on is increasing our capacity. In modern psychology sometimes they call this increasing the window of tolerance. That we can tolerate more. And so part of what mindfulness is, is increasing that window of tolerance. So that we're less troubled, or disturbed, or stressed by what happens.

We're less overwhelmed. We're developing our capacity to hold increased degrees of challenges. So that if we get sick, if we have an accident, if some tragedy happens in our life, Not to take away the idea that it's unfortunate, not take away the idea that it's a tragedy or loss and things like that, but to not be pushed around by it or entangled with it or limited by it. But to be able to have a wide capacity, an open heart, an open mind, that has space for it, that can hold it, so we can have a chance for wisdom. We have a chance to see clearly. We have a chance to kind of relate to it in a different way.

And so part of what we're doing in meditation practice is in fact learning to be uncomfortable. Learning to be comfortable with discomfort. Now, don't go make yourself uncomfortable so you can learn this lesson. When I was a Zen monk, I noticed that if I had pain while I meditated, I could get more concentrated. And so I went to the abbot and said, I noticed this. Now, should I sit in full lotus so that I could have more pain?

And he said, no. Don't look for pain. Don't make pain. But when pain visits you, when it comes, then sit with it some. Then practice with it. But don't, you know, rely on pain for your concentration or for anything.

So don't go look to be uncomfortable when you meditate. It's actually wise to kind of make yourself as comfortable as you can when you're going to meditate within reason. Comfortable and alert. But sooner or later, you'll be uncomfortable. And for many of us, it's sooner rather than later. The body gets uncomfortable, especially if you're a new meditator.

You know, you're uncomfortable with how much rumination your mind is making, how much you're caught up in spinning stories and ideas and plans, how much you're still carrying resentments and challenges. And so when those things are there, the idea in meditation, in mindfulness meditation, is not to see them as problems, not to see them as wrong or that you're not meditating properly. But to have the idea, okay, this too I have to learn to open up to. This too I have to make space for. How can I expand my window of tolerance so that I can allow this to be here without being caught in it, without being reactive to it? And so that's kind of an exploration.

What does it mean to give breathing room to our mind, to our hearts, to our feelings? What does it mean to make space for it? And then stay present for it. Stay with it. Without reacting to it. And the image that I love for mindfulness practice, that what we're doing is we're cupping our hands together like this.

So the two hands are making a cup kind of. And then they come underneath and hold whatever is happening for us. Whatever is happening, whatever challenge we're having, we're just holding it. And it's a little bit like ... If I'm troubled by the world and I'm kind of trying to resist it all, and the resisting of it all starts to be tiring, but I have to resist the world, right? I can't stop because the world's going to do something terrible to me.

And I'm afraid to kind of let go. And then I'm supposed to meditate. And so I'll go there and meditate and try to deal with these hands, these fingers, try to relax and all that. But nothing really works. But what does it mean to come underneath and hold it? What it means is something like discovering what's deeper and then come and hold that so it can rest.

And if the elbow can rest, then the hand can rest. But as long as the elbow is uncomfortable being like this, it's kind of trying with its hand to find an answer to something. So to begin to, one way we find our capacity to hold things is to really be present and find what it is that needs to be held in the field, in the lap of awareness. Hold it. Just let it be there. And then to be able to have more and more capacity to be uncomfortable.

I was told something disturbing this week, and I heard it, and I thought to myself, wow, this is quite something. I think, Gil, this is the time to just make space for it. I've been in situations like this before where I react, where I took it personally, where I felt like I had to do something immediately, send off emails or you know whatever. And I don't think so. I think this is the time just to let it be. Not to ignore it, but to make space for it and let it be and see what happens.

Let's just kind of hold it. And I'll address it when the right time comes, rather than rush to put

out the fire. There was no fire. It was just kind of a difficult statement someone made. And that made it so much easier to go through this, that I had the capacity and the willingness to just be uncomfortable with it, make space for it, breathe with it, not kind of react to it immediately and fully. So to increase our capacity, So I want to give you, provide an imagery that comes from the Chinese Buddhist tradition, the Chan tradition in China, that has all kinds of wonderful implications.

And hopefully use it as an example of what I'm talking about. Apparently there was like a wizard in town. Who had the ability to read people's minds. And so he was kind of, you know, kind of impressed people by his ability. And so there was a Zen student who said, Well, I don't think you can read my Zen master's mind. I can read anybody's mind.

So the Zen master was out for a walk in town one day and there was a river running through the middle of the town. And we imagined kind of the most idyllic river through an idyllic town in the springtime or something really nice, blue sky and just really nice. And there's this nice river and there's a promenade or something along the river. And in the river, there's a few sailboats that are maybe little cargo boats with sails that are gently moving back and forth across the river or down the river. It's kind of idyllic and peaceful setting. And so the Zen master is walking down this promenade and looking at the river and the boats and just out for a little walk.

And he runs into the wizard. And the wizard now stops in front of him and maybe, I don't know what wizards do, peers into his eyes or, you know, in order to read his mind. And after a short while, the wizard got very disturbed and spun around and ran away and left that town, never came back. But someone stopped him before he actually left and said, where are you going, what happened? Well, I looked into the Zen Master's mind and all I saw was the river and some sailboats sailing in it. Is that what a Zen Master's mind is like?

And how I understand this story is that he was reading the Zen master's mind in a sense, but there was nothing about the Zen master to be seen. It was just the Zen master was just there, present for the environment around him, seeing the river and the boats. And that's what was in his mind, because that's what was happening in the moment. But there wasn't any like wanting to be on the boat or you know, thinking that, you know, I should have been a captain, boat captain, rather than a Zen master, or I must have chosen the wrong job, and, or, you know, you know, I have to give a Dharma talk, and I should be thinking about the Dharma talk, and worrying about what I'm going to say, and, you know, he was just kind of walking down and taking in the moment for that. And a similar idea to this goes back to the ancient Buddhist tradition, the ancient text there. There they have, not a wizard, but they had this

idea of Māra.

Māra is the personification of everything that will tempt you to be caught in the world of the senses. So whatever, you know, sense pleasure, whatever kind of absorption in, you know, the whole world of sensual pleasure. Just imagine the ideal world would be a casino with naked dancers and every drug and alcohol possible. It's just kind of, it'd be wonderful, right? So that's Māra's world. So Māra is trying to, the last thing Māra wanted someone to get enlightened because then they're not going to go to the casino.

You know, they're going to, you're not going to get caught in that realm. And so this ancient world, this personification of temptation, when the Māra looks into the mind of someone who's awakened, they don't see anything. Because what defines someone for Māra is their attachments, is their clinging. So whatever you're caught in, That's kind of what you become in Māra's eyes. And then Māra can get you. But if you're not defined by your attachments because you have no attachments, then there's nothing that defines you.

There's nothing to hold on to. There's nothing to grab a hold of that Māra can kind of convince you to, you know, to get caught. So both of these examples are examples of minds that have great capacity because they're not getting attached to anything. They're not holding on to anything. And that's what limits the mind. That's what contracts it and makes it small.

And some of us can feel that. If you have a busy day, running around, doing lots and lots of things, and even multitasking, and just kind of doing, doing, doing, you can feel like the mind gets very small, and tight, and stressed, and it's kind of like, you know, claustrophobic in there. And the time you stop, sometimes I've noticed sometimes after doing a lot, even like sometimes cleaning my house a lot, just going to do cleaning, cleaning, cleaning, cleaning, that I finish kind of, do you ever finish? I finish kind of, and I could see my mind is still reaching out for something to do. I don't know what it is, I don't know what it's, I'm not supposed to do anything, but the mind is still looking for something, right? It's caught.

And so careful, be careful. Because Māra can read you now, can see you, knows exactly what you're about. You're that one thing, one thing. And so that's the ideal situation where you want, but you don't know what you want. Māra will come with all the temptations. And so this ability to let the mind be an open, wide field, an open space, like this river with the boats, kind of a great sky and everything, like make space for everything, make space for something, rather than fix it.

Make space for something rather than changing it. Make space for something rather than defining yourself by it. And that's one of the temptations that is Māra's personification of

ourselves, where we're tempted to define ourselves by our attachments, by our desires, by what we want, what we don't want. Our opinions about these things becomes who we are. And so rather than doing that, the imagery, the kind of alternative is this idea of make room. Make room in awareness, make room in the mind, make room in the heart.

We can hold this. And one of the reasons why this is so useful is that any room and space we can make to hold ourselves and what goes on within us translates as also a capacity to hold the suffering of the world, the difficulty around us, of our friends, our family, our communities, the world itself. And I think this is a great gift that we give, to not be, not drown in the suffering around us, not be distressed by it, not be afraid of it or angry by it, but have the capacity to open wide, to hold it all. So in a sense the suffering of the world is the sailboats on the river. Not to diminish the suffering, not to ignore it, or make it some kind of Pollyannish kind of thing, rivers on the, you know, boats on the river, but rather to be able to see it clearly, so that then we can respond appropriately, in a good way. And we see lots of things, and that's things that are very troublesome in this world, and things that hopefully we will respond to.

You know, what do you do if you witness an act of racism? Do you react to it and close down? Do you get angry? Do you get afraid? Do you say it's none of my business? I saw one right down the street here by the high school.

Someone yelled out of a car, a racial kind of terrible thing to someone walking down the sidewalk. What do we do when these kinds of things happen? Can we open our capacity, not only to hold it and be aware of it without reacting, but also even more better, is to allow the welling up of an appropriate response. That too can arise, a space for that. And when we have the capacity to be uncomfortable, that also translates to our capacity to act when it's uncomfortable to act. Oh, this is difficult.

One of the things I've learned, I feel, through this Buddhist practice is to I think the expression is counterphobic. So I've learned to, when I'm afraid of something, to turn towards it. Okay, what's this? What's this? I was with someone recently and I told her that I, this is something I've learned to do in this practice of mine, is step towards things which are uncomfortable, a little bit frightening. And so I told her we were walking, we were on a little walk together and I said, scare me.

And she used to be an actor, actress, so I guess she has some capacity to So she took it on. So she kind of suddenly kind of roared at me. I was slightly surprised how quick she reached my, how quick she did it. And strongly she did it. But sure enough, because I knew what was coming kind of, I just turned towards her and stepped closer like this. Like, you know, I got

within a foot of her or something.

And boy was she surprised. She was like, she was the one who got it sprayed. So this, you know, to be able to, to, to be willing to be so, to be uncomfortable, be willing to have capacity, allows us sometimes to do things in the world that, to help in situations that are difficult or uncomfortable. It's not a drag to develop greater tolerance for discomfort. It allows us to take care of the world much better. I can't tell you how much I learned about being uncomfortable being a parent of young children.

That's a great training. Okay, this too. One of the representative kind of high points of that kind of learning to be uncomfortable with discomfort, maybe you want to cover your ears or something, but it was when I did this thing I cupped my hands, right, like just hold, hold everything in your mindfulness like cupped hands. My son, my little son, when he was a toddler or something, maybe younger than that even, I kind of quickly put my hands in front of him like this to catch his vomit. And it was just an act of love. You know, like, of course.

If I'd said this, if I'd heard this idea before I had kids, I would have thought, yuck. I'm sure some of you did hearing it. Sorry about that. But you know, this too, this wind of tolerance to hold and make space and to be with what's here is such a powerful skill. One of the ways we learn this in this mindfulness practice is not to do it automatically. It's kind of the ideal is to have the ability to make space and be uncomfortable, to have a great capacity for whatever.

It's the ideal. But one of the principles we have in this practice is don't go directly for the ideal. Rather study what gets in the way of the ideal. So that means study how you are uncomfortable with discomfort. Study what the reactivity you have is Notice and study what you do with your body. Rather than stepping towards something, you shut down and you pull away, even with your posture.

Study how you are when things are difficult. Get to know it well. It's by understanding yourself and your reactions and all that, that wisdom and capacity grows. Because if you go directly to the ideal, I'm supposed to just kind of be now counterphobic and open up to everything. You might actually be doing yourself a disservice. You might not have the capacity and also the tendencies to be reactive are still there lodged deep inside are ready to come out.

And you can sometimes cause more harm to yourself and others if you kind of in a naive way make yourself open and available, kind of vulnerable in a sense. And you're not ready because the reactivity is there to kind of bite you, come up and rear its head or do something. So we're very interested in this practice is how do we react? How do we get caught? How

do we push away? How do we succumb to fear or succumb to beliefs or judgments about ourselves or others?

How do we limit ourselves? And as we study that, that's what we hold in the palm of mindfulness. Okay, this is how it is for me. What it's like just to, let me be with it for a while. Let me be with my reactivity rather than thinking I'm not supposed to be reactive. Let me be with my fear rather than believing I'm supposed to be afraid.

Now, Gil is counterphobic. I'm supposed to be counterphobic. No, you're supposed to be phobic, in the sense of, you know, be it and hold it until you learn something, until something shifts in you, something relaxes, or something you start understanding what's further deeper down, like the elbow, is that what really needs to be relaxed? Or you're still, or you simply develop the capacity, wow, I am really afraid right now, but this is a new world I'm living in. Usually when I'm afraid, I'm running around like a chicken without its head. But look, I'm just sitting here calmly meditating, and I have all this fear coursing through my body, and I had no idea it was possible to sit calmly and have so much fear at the same time.

The two can coexist. Maybe now I'm ready. Next time I'm afraid to not get caught by the fear, but rather make space for it. And I'll end with this story that I've told a few times now, of a person who was in a retreat, many retreats with me, and had a very, very difficult time. A lot of suffering, a lot of like, not, you know, was challenging. And I had the thought that maybe a Dharma teacher should never have.

When someone's sincerely practicing and trying and keeps coming back, even though it's challenging, I had the thought, maybe I should tell this person to stop practicing. But I didn't. And then six months later, the person came to me and said, remember that retreat where I had such a hard time? I said, yes, I sure did. And I didn't tell him what I was thinking. And then he said, well that was such an important retreat for me because after that I had a lot of challenges in my life and I was prepared.

I knew how to be, I knew how to be with challenges. So I didn't see that coming. I just thought the person was challenged and it was like hitting his head against the wall over and over again. But in fact he was learning how to be with such difficulty in a way that he could be with it when it really arose for him in his life. He had the capacity to not have it not be there but to make space for it and hold it. So Part of what we're doing here in this practice is expanding our capacity to hold discomfort.

I would hope that we never think that there's an end to that process. Because if we do, then it's too easy to believe I have to react here. I have to be angry, I have to somehow attack or

blame or do something. But okay, let's open, let's open. And then let's see what wisdom arises in that capacity, in that openness. The last thing I want is this kind of great capacity to be open, to be available, to be uncomfortable, to mean that we don't respond to the world.

That is not what we're looking for here. But the idea is to respond from that place so that it's more effective. It's maybe giving the world the gift of space for people to be who they are. So they can see and they can relax and they can soften. But if we react in response to other people's reactivity, maybe it just becomes worse and worse. It doesn't help anyone.

One of the great gifts we can give the world and others is to be a safe person for them. This is what the Buddha said. He said, make yourself safe for others. Isn't that great? So those are my thoughts today. And so we do have this, we have 15 minutes before the end. Maybe if some of you would like to ask, maybe we'll take about five minutes for questions if anybody would like to ask anything or any testimonials you have about developing greater capacity.

Gil, I'm curious about how you handled that situation nearby when someone yelled a slur. You know, I didn't do anything, which sounds pretty bad, but I was inside the high school. And there was a big fence. And so I heard this terrible thing being said. And I didn't see who they were talking to. I was like, wow, what was that?

And the car drove off. And so I kind of kept walking along the high school until I could see who it was that it was. I wanted to know who it was, because I thought that was important to know. What was this about? But so maybe in retrospect I could have gone and found the person that the yelling was done to and done something supportive or something. I don't know what I could have done.

But because of the distance and the big fence and all that, I didn't do anything. But it really had a big impact on me. And like right here in our neighborhood, just like there was this, I was a little bit stunned last week too, I read about the police officer in San Jose who was laid off because of his racist texts. It feels like this is right in our neighborhood. So this is something we have to kind of care about. Yes.

Gil, I have a question, somewhat weird question, but nonetheless it's a genuine question. So my dad has been diagnosed with metastatic prostate cancer like a week and a half ago. So it's been difficult. So as you know, I've taken chaplaincy course. And I've been to two Maranasati retreats even before that. So I had an opportunity to relate to this part of life. That normally people don't give themselves an opportunity to.

So my particular challenge right now is when I'm talking, for instance, to my husband about what's happening to my dad, is that in that discourse I also include, you know, his five-year

survival rate is 33%, but it's being taken by my husband that I'm being pessimistic. It's being pessimistic. Or overly negative, but I'm not. There is just certain big data that points that that's the case. And this is one of the things that are happening in one of my reactions. So right now I'm stuck in the polarity with my husband that he's like, oh yeah, let's be optimistic, you're too pessimistic.

But I'm not, and I understand that we as Buddhists with great amount of respect, we are a weird bunch in how we relate to things, like I get that. So I don't know just what to do about that, because it adds extra level of misunderstanding. Extra what? Extra level of misunderstanding. Because it's not optimistic versus pessimistic. Like I'm not being pessimistic, but by acknowledging that this is a realistic prognosis, I'm really not.

So my question is how to handle familiar relationships when our Buddhist discourse is being misunderstood. Well, I don't know what to say. But it's fascinating. I'm getting poor hearing, right? I don't have my hearing aids in. So I heard almost everything you said, but I misunderstood one word. When there was some degree of misunderstanding, you said, the first time you said it, I thought you were saying a higher degree of me. Me, misunderstanding. No, no, you didn't say that. But there's too much me here. And I thought maybe that's a clue. And since you did the chaplaincy training, maybe your job is to be everyone's chaplain.

Oh, I know that that's... I know it's not a novel thought, like totally, because I'm like, okay, my husband cannot take care of me, maybe I can take care of my husband. Like, I totally get that. But, sure, I mean, because it's my dad, it's not my husband, that's fine. But so you want someone to take care of you? No, no, no, no. I don't want the fictional problem to be there. Because the fictional problem that it's not really there, that it is in my husband's mind, that he's optimistic and I'm pessimistic. I'm not pessimistic. I'm just acknowledging different realities around my dad's cancer and like I don't feel the need to recoil at grim prognosis. But that does not mean that I'm being pessimistic. So I just like to like...

So the question is why do you care so much what your husband believes? Ah, I care so much about my husband's beliefs. Well, first of all, because I love my husband very, very dearly. He's a phenomenal being. But aside from that, the times when my dad is diagnosed and he will start treatment soon is a time of great stress for the entire family for obvious reasons. So because there is this important misunderstanding, it creates conflict and it creates difficulty talking about my dad's cancer that is affecting everybody in the family.

So if your husband is accurate with his assessment of you, then you have one issue. If he's not accurate with what you're saying, then one possibility is to... is to agree to disagree. Another possibility is to say, I'm neither pessimistic or optimistic. I'm just trying to take it take into

account all the possibilities so we can be ready for whatever happens. And if that's, if you think that's pessimistic, then let's just agree to disagree.

I think that's what we end up doing, but I was just, you know, because I respect your opinion so highly, and I know you have so much experience, I was just like wondering if there is a particular angle that we are missing, because what we end up doing is... Well, since you have so much respect for me, then I'll kind of err on the side of my preference. And that is, Taking care of yourself and how you are is so important for this and have a capacity to relax and accept yourself as you are in all this. And by doing that, also maybe your husband needs some care as well. Sometimes when people want to be too optimistic around something like this, it means that they're afraid. And so you know I'm better than most people, so it might not be the case, but you know...

No, it is the case. So then as the family chaplain... And in a family you have to be a stealth chaplain because you don't want to kind of show up and I'm great okay sit down I'm going to be your chaplain. You want to just you know what's his fear? What kind of reassurance does he need? What kind of presence does he need? And if he gets that then maybe it's easier for him to accept and understand your position. Thanks so much. I hope that was okay. Would you like to come and talk to me afterwards?

Because what I'd like to do, because there's a tea time today, I would love it if you would, all of you, you don't have to if you don't want to, but just turn to someone near you, maybe one or two people near you, look around so no one's left alone, and just say hello. And if this idea of kind of increasing your capacity is evocative of something for you, interesting for you, what would it evoke? And then just, it doesn't have to be more than a couple of minutes, but also since we have tea and everyone's invited, it actually kind of breaks the ice a little bit so you get to meet someone. It's kind of nice. So please.