

Q&A - Rebirth, Religion, & Compulsivity

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Involved me giving a lot of talks, and so maybe that's why I'm more interested in hearing from you than hearing from me. I know you came to hear from me, but we can do kind of the middle way. If you ask me questions, I'd love to hear any questions you have and hear a little of your concerns that you might have. And I'll do my best to respond.

So, hi, Gil. What was the best thing you learned in the month you've been away?

What's the best thing I learned in the month that I was away? How amazingly meaningful and satisfying it is to be fully involved in doing one thing, not be divided, scattered, fragmented. And that doing so is a doorway to love.

Thank you. Hi, Gil. So you've studied originally the *Sōtō Zen* practice and then the *Vipassanā* practice, and a number of us here also probably have done both of them. I practiced *Sōtō Zen* for a while, and I'm still not really clear. I think there's a lot of overlap. They're both Buddhist, but can you describe kind of what is the different philosophy of those two?

Oh, the different philosophy. What do I know about that? Or what's different at all about them? Are they really the same thing, or is there anything different?

Well, some days I'll say they're the same. Some days I'll say they're different. Sometimes I'll say there's a big overlap. Some of the more unusual ways I occasionally talk about it very personally for myself, and it goes a little bit along with your philosophy idea, maybe, is that sometimes I think of *Vipassanā* as being my practice and Zen being my religion. Though I'm not very interested in religion.

The reason for that is that some of the doctrinal or metaphysical basis for the traditional way that these are taught—that *Theravāda* Buddhism, the Buddhism that *Vipassanā* comes out of—has certain supernatural beliefs that I'm not at all interested in. Some of them are really

fundamental for the tradition. One of them is that the goal of the practice is to ultimately no longer be reborn. If that's the fundamental religious belief that really underpins it all, that doesn't interest me. Luckily for me, if I go back and study the earliest teachings of the Buddha, that doesn't seem to be the case there as well. That's an idea that grew over time.

What I like about Zen, kind of underpinning that as I came to understand it, is that it kind of represents what our place is in the universe. That we kind of are the universe. We belong in the universe. We can be in deep harmony with this world that we live in. We're not trying to get off the wheel or out of this world or radically separate ourselves. We can find a radical freedom in this world without positing any for or against, or any idea that we're not part of it or that we're part of it even.

There's a kind of wonderful freedom in the midst of this world that doesn't have to be defined, but kind of puts us in the world in a way that feels complete, whole. And so I kind of see that. So that's why I say this funny thing: my practice is *Vipassanā Theravāda*, my religion is Zen. But probably, from all external purposes, it would look like my religion is early Buddhism. I mean, that's where I spend my time, and what I speak from mostly, what inspires me the most these days.

How early Buddhism is different from Zen, maybe, is that early Buddhism is so pragmatic in nature, but so specific in being really attentive to the whole person. There is real care to pay attention to our psychological life, our emotional life, our physical life. You know, the wholeness of who we are is kind of the implication of that early tradition. Whereas in Zen, it may be implied, but there's no direction for it.

And so there's sometimes in Zen a kind of direct pointing to emptiness, direct pointing to the truth here. Just accept this moment completely for itself. But then there's no roadmap for how you would include all of yourself into that. And so, in Zen, a lot of things tend to get left out. They would never admit it, partly because they've never imagined there's more to them than just, you know, what they find for themselves, because they're told just to be present in a deep way and directly point to freedom, emptiness, or something.

I don't think I'm characterizing Zen fairly, because there's so many different forms of Zen. So one of the things I say sometimes is that sometimes a *Vipassanā* teacher and a Zen teacher might have more in common with each other than they have with other teachers in their own lineage. Because there's such a big range and variety of what is presented as Zen, what's presented as *Theravāda*, as *Vipassanā*, it's maybe not so interesting to make hard-and-fast statements like I just did. So hopefully people will forgive me.

And now the other thing to say about that, at least here in the Bay Area, where the main Zen school is *Sōtō Zen*, coming out of Suzuki Roshi's lineage, is that there's a lot of overlap. In some ways, they complement each other very well. Not a few people in the Bay Area have been very happy going back and forth between *Vipassanā* and Zen and find that, because of the complementarity, they support each other and expand out the full nature of the practice. So that's also part of the picture.

So thank you, Gil, for this opportunity to ask questions. My question is: You mentioned to the first person that queried you that being focused on one thing is wonderful, and it is. I think you said it can be, or is, a gateway into love. Can you say more about that?

Well, when we're divided from ourselves, when we're fragmented, when we're preoccupied with too many things—or even preoccupied with one thing, which is different than being fully involved, present with all our being—preoccupation is usually a very narrow kind of bandwidth that we're using for our life. The wholeness of who we are, the deeper aspects of our heart, don't have a chance to be expressed or to be touched. This way of entering fully into our life with all of who we are allows for the full range of who we are to come forth. Certain things, like love, come forward in the best possible way when the whole system works together in harmony.

And so maybe love is the expression of the inner harmony more than anything else, when it's complete or full or something, or most beautiful or most satisfying. And so why this was part of this last month was that the teachings and the practice there were a practice of diving deeply into the fullness of many different aspects of who we are. Our embodied existence, our heartfelt existence, the existence, the presence of our deep mind within, that is very different than the surface mind that people live with. And to settle some of the ways that we're divided, some of the ways we're preoccupied, that actually keeps us disconnected from ourselves.

And not a few people feel like they're very connected to themselves when they're only connected to their ideas of things or their attachments to things, because their attachments are the most important thing they have. So they want to—I'm really connected to my desire to win the California lottery. That's what life is about. But that's a very narrow part of our life, if that's what we think is who we really are.

So to be able to sit on retreat and let so many of the things in the surface mind quiet and settle, to discover all the ways that we are fragmented, all the ways that we're not touching into ourselves, and places that are wounded or held in check or held afraid, and to have those settle and be able to open up to hold them all in the wholeness of things, we discover there's

a whole different way that our system works when it all has a chance to work together. Then I think we discover not just love, but all kinds of aspects of love, some of the best qualities of our heart. And so the idea of a harmony or an integration or unification of all we are is part of the benefits of a deep form of freedom that comes from really just doing one thing at a time. And then later you can do more than one.

But to spend some time in your life to really discover this—just do one thing. Just what you're doing now, here now, is so profound. So what I was teaching was a month-long retreat, an insight retreat, at our retreat center. And a few people are here who were there. At least, I guess, at least two people I see. Three. Any more?

And sometimes I say that for people who are really serious about this insight practice, like it's close to their religion maybe, or it is their religion, or something—it's really at the center of what's really important for them—that once in a lifetime, you should do a month-long retreat. It's that valuable for this. It's like the Muslims, once in a lifetime, go to Mecca, and that trip might take a whole month for some people. And so, for *Vipassanā* practitioners, to do once in a lifetime.

Hi. So, about the *Theravāda* idea that the goal of practice—

Talk slower for me, please.

Yes, sir. Basically, to end existence.

Let me see if I can help. I'm getting weak in hearing, so I need help. Let me see if this helps me.

Sorry about that.

No, you don't apologize.

Anyway, about the *Theravāda* idea that the goal of practice is basically to end existence: Am I understanding correctly that this was not part of the Buddha's original teaching, but a later addition? Because in studying the *suttas*, that idea is everywhere, isn't it?

Thank you. That was a great question. Yes, it's all over the *suttas*. So this is where we enter into the world of controversy and interpretation and deep, deep scholarship that's needed for this. But it's hard for anybody who's really dipped deeply into the research into these *suttas* to believe that they all come from the Buddha, all those teachings.

They were composed over many, many, probably hundreds of years. You can kind of see some of the historical layers. And what it looks like is that some of the emphasis on belief in rebirth, this idea of getting off the wheel, even though it's there a lot, seems to belong to this

growth. It was something that began very weakly at some point and then grew and became predominant at some point.

And so you can't just go and read the *suttas* and naively believe that everything in there is from the Buddha. In fact, it might be just a very few things we can have any confidence come from the Buddha, because the tradition—what happened in it—wasn't just Buddhism, but Indian religion in general was brilliant at composing new scriptures, adding scriptures, amending scriptures, editing them, adding more things into their scriptures. It was very fluid in a way we can't believe in our written culture, where once you're in a book, you can't change anything. It's like, then you know what it is.

If Buddhism was transmitted for centuries and centuries as an oral culture, people memorized things, and that was really fluid and changeable quite a bit. And so just to go back and read the *suttas* and believe that's what's there— But, to be fair to your question, orthodox *Theravādin* Buddhism has that view, and that's a religious view that they have. It's good to respect people's religions. So I don't want to say that that's a wrong thing to do.

And it's partly a response to the tremendous amount of suffering that people live in. Some people have unmitigated suffering, that it's hard for them to imagine, if they believe in rebirth already—and many people believe in rebirth; it's not like a unique thing to Buddhism—that it's worthwhile to be born again. I mean, even in this country, in our era, there are people who are born into war zones that are unmitigated. Imagine being born into the Sudan, and if it doesn't change there, like it hasn't changed for a long time, and grow up in that, and that's all you know. Why would you want to be reborn again? And if you believe in rebirth, then why would you want that?

And so, you know, I think there was a time in history when there was much more suffering than some of us have now, because the medicines we have now are astounding. The social welfare systems we have now are quite dramatically different. As poor as they might be, it's better than not having them at all. So it's understandable that people would have this, because that's where the hope is. That's where the possibility of freedom is.

But if I go back and read the earliest texts—and you can read my book, *The Buddha Before Buddhism*; the introduction for that explains it—that book is a translation of some of the earliest, what many scholars believe are the earliest teachings from Buddhism. And there, there seems to be explicitly disinterest in any concern or involvement with birth and rebirth. This idea of rebirth is kind of an unnecessary belief for the purposes of freedom. And someone who is free has no interest in this topic. So I'm more based in that tradition than the later *Theravāda* orthodoxy.

Is that a fair enough answer to your question, or do you want to ask in a more personal way why this is important for you?

Thank you. That's very interesting. I heard you really well with a son.

Yes, thank you.

Because this idea that the world is not worth coming back to never resonated with me either. But I hear it a lot from the *Theravāda* side.

Yeah. It's not just the *Theravāda* side. There are other schools of Buddhism that also have tremendous emphasis on this. So much so, there was a famous debate that was published in *Tricycle* magazine thirty years ago or so between a Tibetan teacher named Robert Thurman and a kind of *Theravādin* teacher, kind of Zen teacher, *Theravādin* teacher called Stephen Batchelor, around this topic. Robert Thurman had a classic view that you can't be a Buddhist unless you believe in rebirth, and Stephen Batchelor felt that that's not true. And who gets to decide?

I have an answer to that, if you want.

Yes.

Oh. It was last week. Diana spoke about the third arrow, the compulsion to do something about an experience.

Slow down for Mike. Let me see if I—I kind of need help these days.

I can slow down and talk louder too.

Yes. Okay.

You were talking about how amazing it felt to not feel fragmented, to be one place at one time, and I'm wondering if you can speak to that. I've done meditation retreats, so I know of what you speak. I'm a mom, a working mom with two young kids, a puppy, aging parents, and I often find myself stuck in a loop of anxiety and irritation about feeling so spread thin. My life—I do my very, very best to have practices that keep me feeling steady, like coming here, meditating each day, being outdoors in nature, supportive people, being really careful with, I don't know, taking push notifications off my phone. You know, I try to just be really thoughtful.

But I am very spread thin, and so I'd love to hear your thoughts on how to—it seems like a funny question because I feel like that's what this is all about—how to have some steadiness and peace of mind when the chapter of your life is all over the place. How to navigate that?

Yeah, it's a big question, but yeah. Well, I had raised two children and had a very full life, and had some of that as well. And some of it, I think—I don't know about you. I don't know you well enough, so I apologize if what I'm saying is not relevant. But I think a lot of us in this society here have too many opportunities, have too much we can do, and too many websites to visit, too many expectations of what a good life is.

If we have to do all these experiences, all these different things, I think that a really deep reflection, contemplation about what is it in our life, realistically, can we change? I think sometimes behavioral change is more in order than trying to do everything and somehow figure out how to make it work. So that's one thing to think carefully about.

The other is that, yes, sometimes with all these things, there's no choice but to do it. And then one question is: What do you need to accept in order to find your peace with it, or what do you need to let go of in order to find peace with it? And it might be what you have to let go of, in some paradoxical way, is your idea that you can live your life now as if you were on retreat. That that's the standard that you need to measure yourself by.

And you might actually—so rather than coming back to some high standard like that, you lower the bar. Maybe, given the life I have right now, I have to accept that it's going to be stressful and busy, and I'm not going to get enough sleep or something. And it's better to accept that and find some way to work with that than try to override it or find another way or live with the idea that it shouldn't be this way. So what do you have to accept? What do you have to let go of in order to make this work for you?

And, I mean, one of the things I had to let go of a little bit when I was a parent of kids was that I knew my mind could be much calmer than it was. And so it felt appropriate to let go of that as a—you know. To let go and live with a quality of mind that wasn't the best quality of mind that I knew was possible, but felt like it was given love, given fullness in my life, and the choices I made and choices I had for how to live this life. Having a mind that was more activated, less settled, was part of the deal. So I had to find my peace with that.

So, you want to ask again, or do you want to respond to that?

No, that's spot on.

Oh, really?

Yes, that's exactly.

Good luck.

I think a lot of it is the comparison. Having kids later, I had a lot of years to do my things in my

way. And I think the comparison of knowing how I have felt compared to how I am operating currently—I just, I think there is an acceptance piece. But also, I like the behavioral changes of, when something goes, some things go. So I appreciate the question a lot. Thank you.

Thank you. So I think Martha is kind of in charge, because she's tracking the hands, which go up first. So thank you, Martha.

Good morning, everyone. Good morning, Gil. It was very interesting to hear what you said about Buddhism and how, as an oral religion, it has evolved significantly through time. I think my partner and I, we've been looking at the same process for Christianity, given that that was the religion we were born into. And one thing we were discussing was how do we deal with friends and family who still subscribe to that religion and believe certain things are a sin, but then it's like indelibly us, right?

And trying to connect the dots between that and the arrows and love and all that: What would you advise for us to do if there's just a fundamental difference in belief with the people that we care about and love? Is it like writing a whole letter just to tell them what we feel and how we go through life? Or, if it's really an impasse, is it a full detachment from the relationship, or is it some other form of, like, I'll just accept what this is, even though it's hurtful? We're just in that space right now and trying to get some advice on how to go through that.

Yeah. So I think it's very difficult for me, for anybody, to offer you accurate advice because it's so contextual and so different, all the family and friend dynamics and how it all fits together. So I'll probably miss you a little bit with saying some words, but I'll try. And one is that, for my orientation of Buddhism, Buddhist practice, there's nothing that we need from others, but we love them for how they are.

So that's a high standard, not so easy to come to. But the idea is that we're working on ourselves in this practice to find a way to be at peace in this world with how things are, without a need for even being a Buddhist, without a need to let people know that we're Buddhists. You know, we're representing not Buddhism. We're representing an inner peace, inner freedom, inner love, a capacity to meet the world without any attachments. And so it would just show up that way.

If other people expect us to be like them, we can be honest and say, “Well, thank you. I hear you care about me, and you care about so much for me that this is really important for you. And in some ways, I wish I could accommodate your desire and your need, and I don't want you to suffer because of me. But the way things have turned out for me, this doesn't quite work for me anymore. It just doesn't work for me.”

But not to criticize them or say they're wrong. Just love them and accept them and understand. Maybe offer some understanding that they're caring for you in their way. And then at some point, you have to invisibly shrug your shoulders and say, "Well, I did the best I could, and I guess we're going to live now with this tension, and I'll just love them and live with the tension. I know how to live with tension. I know how to live with things. I know how to live with discomfort through this practice."

And I'll just learn to not add. I'm not going to make it worse, never make the situation worse, even if it means holding your tongue. And so I think that would be my best guess at an answer from a Buddhist point of view: We don't come with any needs for ourselves. That's not easy, and how to do that wisely is part of the art. But we don't have any needs from them. We try to understand them and appreciate them and let them be who they are.

Thank you.

So, Martha, who is a different person here. There was a man out there with his mask on. Was he still there? He was trying to ask.

No.

Okay. Thanks.

I initially had no intention of asking the question, but someone asked a question about people with different religions, people that subscribe to different religions, and how to deal with them. And I felt like I need to ask this question: What if the person who's subscribing to the religion is yourself, and you've been brought up with a different religion, and that so often keeps just coming back up? And then you've kind of gotten into meditation and Buddhism and being all of those, and there is kind of an internal conflict.

I have recently made a list of all the gods, per se, that I have ever worshipped in my life. And I actually put Buddha and Buddhism and stuff, kind of like religions that I've— And it's a list of forty, and it's extensive. And I know all of these at points in time come up and surface, and then they go away. They have each of them served a perfect purpose in my life at a certain phase.

But now I feel like I'm floating, and I want to choose one and stick with one because fragmentation is not great.

Yeah, fragmentation. Your hands going up like this, fragmentation. Yeah. So I would take all forty of those fingers and respect yourself for that interest. That's quite something. It means that something in your—this is a really important part of your life and core. And I would say

that you have this over a lifetime, that you've had so many deities that you've had some personal connection to and value in. It represents something deep inside of you.

But go and trace back all of them. Where is the common root for them all in you? What is it—the interest, the emotionality, the motivation, the sense of what life is, who you are? Where does it all arise out of? What's the fundamental place inside that gives birth to this interest and this orientation? And there's where you'll find your answer.

Thank you.

Okay. Wow. I appreciate it very much to hear the questions, your concerns, and I value a lot that people come here and that people come to IMC to meditate and to hear the teachings. How much of you, all of you, is coming here? And all of you is what we want to meet and support and help you find a way in this difficult life. So I hope that it was okay for you that we did the Q and A today. I'll be back next week, and maybe I'll give a talk. Thank you.