

# 2004-12-13 Activities of the Mind

Wed, 7/29 1:56PM • 42:36

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

mind, practice, activity, happening, boredom, notice, noticing, arise, simple, tendency, attitudes, engaged, thoughts, people, person, simplicity, kinds, meditated, elaborate, reflects

## SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

There are many different ways of engaging in Buddhist practice and in Buddhist meditation practice. And I suspect that in every different phases of a person's life in persons practice, there's a lot of different kinds of practices which are relevant. And that it's probably best not to have a one shoe fits all kind of approach, but rather to be adaptable and flexible and to know different times different kind of approaches to how we practice. And some of the Buddhist practices can be quite elaborate. Some of them can be very simple. And what's been on my mind a lot lately is this simple side of Buddhist practice. The simplicity of it those practices which are very simple, and one of the so I want to talk about simplicity of practice keeping the practice very simple, and how powerful that can be one of the most simple instructions that I know for Buddhist practice, which also is simple and also very pleasant to hear, I think is set yourself at ease. And then notice whatever it takes you away from that. That's all. That's it. Set yourself at ease and then notice whatever takes you away from that and It doesn't mean that you when you said you have said yourself at ease that you can do a fantastic job at it. But just do a little bit, a little bit better, more a little bit more ease than you normally would have it ease with your difficulties, be at ease with whatever's happening in the moment, just some sense of ease with what's happening in the moment. And then sooner or later. Chances are that it's sooner for most people. You lose that ease, you'll slip away from it, you'll get caught by something that we know that it caught that contraction, you lose. Either you lose that ease, or you lose touch with it, because the mind has drifted off in his thoughts. And then instructions is noticed what that is that is that's taking you away from your ease, either wiped away, or just camouflage the hidden it from you because you're distracted from it. Notice what that is. There's nothing in instructions about criticise What's happening, nothing instructions about trying to do anything more about trying to get back to ease, it just has such an ease and notice would take you away from it. There's something about the noticing, which is very profound, very powerful. And also noticing is very simple. So one of the things we'll notice is when we're not noticing, so it's one thing to set us up to ease and then we notice what takes us away from it. And then we try to notice I try to get familiar with that to really see it really well. And the mind will drift off again or get caught up in something else or get more agitated or do something. Sooner or later, the mind gets into trouble. If you notice that sooner or later, the mind gets into trouble and Some people's minds are in trouble all the time preoccupied by things are very critical or harsh or, or upset about something kind of is the minds in trouble already with a certain kind of attitude that we bring an attitude of, you know, we're already in trouble and already, somehow or they're contracted or afraid or angry or annoyed or depressed or something might have a tendency of getting into trouble getting into suffering.

an even simpler instruction for meditation is the instructions. You drop the part about the ease, and just notice what's happening. Forget about establishing GIS that's already maybe too complicated. If it's hard to remember so make it even simpler and say, just notice what's going on. And if you do that, you'll notice that sooner or later you stopped noticing you stopped paying attention. And that is a very

important place to look at, start paying attention to why you're not paying attention to what's going on here. Just paying attention is very, very simple. However, the mind wants to get in trouble, or the mind wants to get into things engaged in things will often want to do many other things besides paying attention. Now if you have an elaborate meditation practice, that's very, very elaborate and involved and it can be very satisfying for the goal oriented activity of the mind can be very satisfying for the mind that feeling and wants to control things and nobody want no no no knows what it's doing. knows where it's going, you know, wants security once, you know all kinds of things. So sometimes it's various people find a lot of solace in complicated practices. Sometimes people are really put off by simple practices, practices that offer you none of that. It doesn't, it doesn't even offer you hope. It doesn't offer you anything. It just says, pay attention. Notice what's happening now. keep it really simple. How simple Can you be the value of simplicity. Part of the value of simplicity of simplicity in practice, is it can highlight very dramatically the ways in which the mind wants to make things more complicated than the things need to be is simply your practice this, the in some ways, the more radically challenging it is to the mind. Initially, it might seem great, this is easy. But after a while, you start doubting it. After a while you'll start thinking about, oh, maybe I should do something else. Maybe I need to do that. Or, I would really like this instead or, or this is boring. You know, nothing's happening. I'm just sitting here. You know what's supposed to happen next. There's a, I saw a cartoon one. So, these two Zen monks, a young one and an old one, someone who's wizard old monk has been in the monastery for 50 years or something. And the young one turns to the old one and says, What happens next?

Nothing happens next. What do you mean? I put off going to I dropped out of college gave up a lucrative career, all these great things you can do with your life and you're telling me nothing happens next. I mean, my friends, they're all doing great productive things with their lives. And nothing happens here. You know, it's an outrage for the mind that wants to have and do and attain have security. But part of the value of not doing being very simple, is it. It highlights better than almost anything else, the tendencies of the mind to want and want and desire and get an overt push away, resist all this activity of the mind. And the activity some activity of the mind is really beautiful. And some activities of the mind great creativity and great warm, loving feelings and compassion for your friends. And so all kinds of wonderful things that we had. But sometimes those are very seductive, because you can easily come to rationale of why you should be engaged in those things. It's so important. But some things are patently absurd that the mind does and you can kind of you could see it well, that you know that why am I doing that again? This is ridiculous. As someone once said, self knowledge is seldom good news.

Directly that struck a chord.

So, to have nothing going on, or have a very simple thing, just pay attention. After a while the mind gets kind of nervous. And it starts trying to, it's all habits creep in. And you get to see really well the tendency of the mind to do anything but stay simple to stay doing nothing at all. And then what you can do is start questioning that. Is that really necessary? You really need to let the mind push you around. You really need to chase all the thoughts and ideas and motivations that go on. You have to pick everything up. Is it to your best interest to pick all activities of the mind. If you start noticing what's going on when you pick up things with the mind, you probably noticed that a good percentage of the time this It hurts.

If it doesn't hurt immediately, it hurts after a while. Even people who go in fantasy land where the fantasies are really pleasant so satisfying, make this great big, you know, wonderful stories of being princesses and princes. Everything's happily ever after. This is great what the mind can do. But to live in that kind of fantasy world is very, very alienating. And it causes its own great difficulties to live there too long. So even being caught up in really pleasant things causes suffering or pain, sometimes in the long term, not an immediate presence.

And then at some point, your mind might question Why am I not doing anything? Why am I just doing this very simple thing. noticing what's happening staying in the present moment, staying in the present moment. Not To accomplish anything, write the great American novel or try to you know, just try to solve all my problems try to just stay here very simple in the president, why am I doing that? What's the value of that? One one response is boredom. You know the response is doubt. And other responses anger, all kinds of responses really hit me. Why am I doing this?

Why? What is available right now? That is separating. What is available right now, here in this room right here with you sitting here in your chair with your button chair or the floor. You know, your eyes looking at the ear Whatever you're looking or your thoughts thinking would agree Thinking What's he talking about? You know what's happening right now? That is somehow liberating, or satisfying or alive or because part of what Buddhism points to, is that right here, right now, there's a way of tuning in or settling in to something is already here this present that is liberating or of the nature of being liberated, or that is, there's many different ways in which Buddhists talk about it. But something which is one way sometimes a person is very still, or something which is at peace, some dimension of the consciousness, some dimension to the psyche, which is at peace right here. Right now

So, the mind tends to get into activity that mine has the mind has a very strong tendency to want to get into activity. Thinking about things, having, forming attitudes about things, or creating feelings and emotions. These are all activities of the mind or activities of the heart. There is a dimension of the mind and aspect of the mind, which is not an activity and that non activity aspect of the mind is always at peace with itself at ease.

So, part of what we're trying to do, where it was one of the possibilities in meditation practice is to begin questioning all the activities of the mind as something is interesting to chase after In begin letting go of getting staying involved or chasing after getting caught up in all the activities of the mind. So it's just stop being involved in thoughts here to stop thinking. Thoughts can just pass through, we stopped getting involved in the emotions and feelings arise, we start getting involved with them there's arise. impulses in attitudes and sensations and all kinds of things can arise. But there's no tendency to get involved in them or engage in them or to react against them, push them away or hold on to them, or use them to as a self reference. This, this says this says something about me. So one of the things, to take things personally, is an activity of the mind. It's not inherent in reality, that we have to take things personally Every every thought you have doesn't have to be tied to, to your self concept, or to being a self. It can just be a thought that passes through.

taking things personally is an activity of the mind. We've gotten tangled, we've got engaged what happens when we start letting go of all the activities? One of the ways to do that is to be committed to one activity, very simple one midst of all the activities, which borders are not being an activity at all that phases into kind of non non activity. And that is noticing what's happening and limiting oneself to simply noticing what is happening right now. What's happening right now. What's happening right now. Not to notice what's happening right now. And then say, that was really great. Now. I can't wait to tell my friends about this. Let me think, how am I going to Who should I call? Let me check my, you know, I talked to that person yesterday, I think after that, I'll toss to somebody else and call them up and tell him what a great now this is how I'm going to tell them about this great now that I had, when did I have it? And how many knows that I miss planning to tell them about that wonderful fraction of a now that I had five minutes ago. Or we have some one some other now which is not so nice. And then we react to it and see what That's terrible. I can't stand it. And then we get caught up in that and react to that. But to simply stay in that moment knowing, just knowing instead, the next knowing and the next knowing and

they know and trust what arises in the knowing with time. As you do the noticing practice of mindfulness. You'll see all the different tendencies to do everything else. But to know all the things that the mind wants to do except know what's happening. The other thing is you start to learn to let go those things and not get engaged to them. The other thing that will happen over time, is we begin appreciating what it's like, just to know are you gonna appreciate it what it's like not to do anything. It's really one of the remarkable things that when the activities of the mind come to rest, what is left is deeply, deeply satisfying. So all the fear that the mind has, that it needs, you know, that it needs to kind of fulfill and do and accomplish and get it's kind of deceptive.

There is a aspect of the psyche, where it can be deeply at peace with itself without needing anything more to happen. And it's very closely related to noticing to awareness. As awareness gets stronger as a tendency to be ability to notice get stronger. It said to become like a mirror. And a mirror is something which reflects what comes in front of it, but doesn't comment or react to what's in front of it. You put a really ugly object in front of the mirror. The mirror just reflects what's there. You put a beautiful object in there just reflects what's there. You take a broken object just reflects, you know, whatever, it's there. It just reflects when the mind gets more and more peaceful. Buddha sometimes say more and more awake. It sometimes has the equality of just a mirror that just sees what's what's in front of it or what arises in it. In that same kind of a quantum this way which a mirror sees our experience. But in order to have that mirror like experience, there's has to be letting go of so much activity that we often cherish and love and hold on to and think this is really you know, this is who I am, this is what I need. This is what has to happen. My self identity, so many of my wishes and desires. So many of the assumptions, some beliefs. To really be able to be simple, with a mind is probably one of the most radically challenging things a human being can do in their life.

To simply set set yourself at ease Notice what takes you away, or simply do nothing else except to notice what's happening. Just do that. Just notice what's going on what's going on, it pulls the rope out, eventually, it'll pull the rug under, or it'll flush out some of the deepest cornerstones of what holds up our normal sense of self. And the mind can get very nervous when you get down to those cornerstone. I don't want to I don't want to stop that activity. I didn't even know that was an activity. It's not an activity. That's, you know, like bedrock. He's telling me it's an activity and just a bedrock. All activities are activities.

What about that part of the mind, but the psyche that's not an activity?

In Zen the calls sometimes call it the one who's not busy. I find it the very fascinating process of going on meditation retreats. Because there's so many different aspects of the psyche that are hard to notice. Until you do some kind of sustained spiritual practice, like what can happen on a retreat. And for example, one of the things I learned early on in my, my practice was I had all kinds of attitudes and activities, attitudes and standings about what I was doing when I was practicing meditation. And when I set when I sat and meditated 40 minutes every morning those attitudes or assumptions, those beliefs, those things I was trying to do, basically, were just fine. They didn't cause any problems. I was so agitated to begin with, that if I, you know, example, I was trying to get concentrated, but when you're as agitated as I was, it's pretty easy to get, you know, teeny bit more concentrated, you just feel like you're calming down just a teeny bit. So I thought, Oh, this is great. But then it will go on retreat. And what I found was that I was infusing my noticing practice with all these agendas, subtle agendas that weren't revealed to me in my daily sitting because it wasn't sitting long enough. When I tried sitting the whole day, for days at a time, after a while, the rough edges, the dead ends, the troublesome ways in which I was injured. A meditation practice would reveal itself. So like, if you have a, if you have a maybe like, if you have a pebble in your shoe, you could walk maybe, you know, down the block and hardly even

notice the pebbles there. But if you walk, you know, 10 miles, then the pebble release after a while, you know, feels like a boulder. So the same things, small things in the mind, which in daily life don't seem to be a big issue. Big irritant, on retreat can stand out really clearly. Oh, wow. I didn't know I was doing this. And so retreats sometimes as a way of coming of going deeper and deeper into the stillness or the silence of the mind, which is not active, learning to question some of the most deepest activities that the mind has, that we think have to be there, but actually they don't. So this whole process that I'm talking about here today is a process Have learning to let go of what is not necessary in the mind, let go of all of the unnecessary so that we can find the bounty, the happiness, the joy, the delight that comes in the, in the simplicity of the mind, the radical simplicity of the mind, complete simplicity of the mind. If you're bored, that's an activity of the mind. If you stop that activity, what happens to the boredom? boredom is not inherent in any situation at all. Boredom is a response or reaction. Your question now can let go of that? Where do you find yourself then?

So to be simple, so as simple practice is sometimes the most powerful. And one of things I like about simple practices is that they, they kind of resonate with the simplicity of being which the practice points to in the first place.

So I encourage you, maybe if all of you have to try for a while, doing less than your practice, do as little as possible, except notice what's going on. And see if you can discover how little you can get a little. I was gonna say how little you can get away with and so those are my thoughts for today. We have some time if you have any comments or questions, please,

sitting here and getting

more and more furious listening to in science they say, you know, science or math, mathematics. The simple theory is the most general theory and is the most elegant theory and many years of practice to figure out how to use the Occam's razor, to your hypothesis.

And similarly, I think the practice

that you're such Just as simple was his just an incredibly difficult, just incredibly mind bogglingly difficult. At least I found that to be because as you mentioned, unless you are have the luxury of going on long retreats even your noticing is so full of judgment you're sort of prepping yourself to notice certain things and almost making them change as such. It's quickly that noticing becomes wanting the wanting because attachment and is oops attachment comeback. The reason

I was not furious is

I felt

you sort of belittle the other practices. So you know, you can do all these other practices that are

engage your mind And the mind likes and

but

some of these practices for, say visualization practices from Tibetan, which is not something we do but I found just incredibly wonderful and sort of the other side of the same coin is here you're trying to look at

all that changes, and all that's busy and then figured out, take out what's busy and then what you're left is what's not busy. But it is so hard sometimes not all the time. But sometimes it's good to look at the other side and visualizing what other visualizations are done is imagine that you are the Buddha. And the mind has certain amount of imagination or what that is even my mind just brings just that piece. It's just brings that piece and you notice what's not peace. So that's not the puja and this is the Buddha and that's not a Buddha.

I couldn't live Just as practice and vicious

suffering unless I went to a retreat, and then there was enough silence and enough peace and enough support around me, and the daily life,

this is just this horrible some.

So why not take a little bit of wine or to use some of the other practices what's wrong with

I started off the talk by saying that there's a time and place for every all the different practices in Buddhism. And I think the one to one shoe fits that model is not a very healthy way of thinking about Buddhist practice. So I think there's definitely a time and a place for visualization for all kinds of things. And it's really beautiful and delightful to practice other things. Other other other more elaborate practices our you know, our, you know, sometimes beautiful expressions of human capacity, natural human capacity, and And human development, I celebrate all kinds of things which are much more elaborate than simple the simple practice of pointing to today. So you know it all in its own time. And some people find it very helpful to do something radically simple, the beginning of their practice. And some people find something you want to wait, you know, 30 4050 years before they get around to doing it. But sooner or later, there's a there's a time and place for all of them. And it's always a bit dangerous to teach anything. Because, you know, because every individual person needs to be respected from where they are. They're developing what's useful for them. And so I apologize that any of you furious here, the I know that when I started my Buddhist practices in student that's the only practice I could do was the simple practice of Zen is kind of similar to what I talked about talked about today. And you know, I probably You know, that will be the kind of instructions I give. Now, when I do the introductory course. I couldn't have practiced like that, in my first years of practice, because there's too elaborate, there's too complicated. And, and, you know, Zen was just right for me. And then later, I was ready to hear vipassana instructions and found that was really useful for me and really helpful and very profound.

But I think it's valuable to know about this side of practice that I'm pointing to today. So that so that if you do pick up other practices, more elaborate practices, you can do it in a wiser way. And to understand and to do it for the right reasons, rather than to do it because, you know, you're holding on to security or the right practice or, you know, some complex thing that offers a lot of hope. And, you know, there's a lot of a lot of funny ways. I'm not critical of any practices, but I'm certainly critical of the way some people can do practice certain practices. And so to get a sense of different possible ways of practicing sometimes can help us kind of be clear. Help us be clear why we're doing what we're doing and how we're engaging if we can make it more useful for us rather than something that perpetuates our old habits in our old neurosis. And then the beginning of what you said, speak the what would happen to you if you assumed that what I was talking about was really easy. Take it for 24 hours assume it's really easy and jump in.

Could you speak more about boredom? boredom.

Well, boredom is an activity of the mind. So it's not a boredom is not as I said. It's not inherent in any situation, it's something the mind adds to the situation. And the tendency with boredom must assume that the situation is boring. But the situations are never boring. It has to do with the evaluation and the attitude and the thing that the mind does to the situation. So it's an addition to addition. And there's various theories about or various reasons why Warden might arise. One reason is that boredom is a

subtle,

maybe a form of aversion or resistance, that I don't want this, I don't want to pay attention to this. I don't want this to happen. So we have some judgment about something. We've been pushing it away. Boredom is also a symptom of in sometimes, of keeping things at a distance kind of follows a little bit on the first one, I don't want to get too close. You know, I'll just call things at a distance. So you're bored of holding a distance because somehow frightening or threatening to get really intimate, really close to what the experiences. And so one of the things to do with aversion to boredom is to look at sort of see how its functioning, how it functions to keep us apart from what's going on. Another aspect of boredom is that boredom sometimes arise arises when we don't feel that whatever is happening or the person we're talking to whatever has any relationship to our egotistical self. When it's when it's supports our egotistical self. You know, someone someone praises us, great, you know, wake up then thank you what's really, Buddhist wakefulness is great, I was awake for that. So you know, various kind of energizes people, but the opposite also can energize people. When you feel criticized by someone or put down, you can get really aroused and awake. Got a bit of a situation or person is neither inflating or deflating to our ego. It hasn't then situation the person just boring. Yeah, people get bored with that because it serves no purpose. So there's kind of the greedy side or the egotistical kind of wanting to make things happen or fix things or build up a sense of self. Sometimes, when it's not nothing, certainly something doesn't serve it. responses. Let's push us away. I don't need to deal with this. I don't want to be involved with this. Let's go talk to someone else is more interesting, because I get something from that person. So there's some of the different aspects of boredom that I can think of responses that interesting.

Sometimes boredom arises because we're more interested in their own thoughts, then we are in someone else. Yes.

for yourself

Yes, I think of as the absolute very

boring activity itself the absence of an activity, right?

Yeah. I just have a very regular meditation

practice.

Yeah. So when one of the ways to approaches is is to study it to notice it get to know it really well. And notice all the different facets of it. Notice what it feels like physically. Notice what it feels like mentally notice what we know what part of your body seems to get energized. When boredom, notice what goes on in the mind or the heart. Notice the beliefs and the thoughts that are connected to it. Just notice the whole ecology around it, and study it, you know, maybe take a few weeks and study it when it arises. And there's a lot of value in getting to know something really well. So generally, I discourage people

from letting go of things too quickly. Just kind of hang in there with something for a while too, you know it really well. And then when you let go of it, you might let go of itself when you know it well. But then if you do let go of it, you let go of it wisely because you really understood it. So that's I would encourage you to do that. And sometimes studying something sometimes we study not directly it, but rather some of the other things going on. So if you haven't meditated for a year and a half, then you sit down here and you get bored, it might be that you have such strong habits of how your mind has been operating over the last days or weeks or the last year and a half. That those those there's so much momentum. And it's hard to shift gears from that momentum. And so that tension of you know, the old the momentum is still there. And, and something else seems kind of plain or boring or doesn't really speak to that momentum where the mind has been going. And so it takes a while sometimes to shift gears and be able to let go or unwind some of the momentum that's built up. Yes. I'm sorry, we could use

you. You talked about reflecting like a mirror and not getting caught up in what you're seeing. So I was wondering, could you use your dreams that you have as another tool of serving as a reflection of or as an Noticing of where you are as well?

Oh, yeah, I think so. I I'm not someone who knows a lot about dreams. But there are times when dreams very clearly seem to reflect something going on in your life.

Some

something that needs addressing and looking at one of the ways we could work with dreams in our particular Vipassana tradition, when we use the practice with it, is wake up from a very strong dream. And rather than going into the content of the dream and analyzing it, sit up in your bed, and tune into what the feeling is that's connected to the dream and then sit with the feeling, go into the feeling and meditated and that feeling will probably take you someplace significant work around your work through something that was next to you here.

Where, well, I just wanted to say

a thought that I have in connection Of what she said about boredom. When you try to come back into meditation after having having not done while,

I found during periods and, you know, every now and then I'll have a period of time where I failed to make time and meditate, I

I feel I'm too busy that I'm traveling or just I have so much to do that I, I let it go. And if I go too long without that, it's very hard to get back in. And then when I try, at first, it seems boring. Because I've kind of lost the neck doing it. And, and you have to have to give it some time. It's, I think it is hard to get back in if you if you have a period where you don't do it. You can just

pop back in. Yes, I think very much. So Well, it's nine o'clock, a little after nine, we continue anymore, more of you will get bored.

So

so I hope it's been useful. And for those of you been furious today, I hope that that fury has been useful to to have it happen. And if it hasn't is not useful, then I apologize. And please leave whatever you've heard here. Leave it here when you leave. Don't take it with you. Thank you