

2013-12-08 Avoiding Sexual Misconduct

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SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

So good morning. Good morning, everyone. The one announcement I'd like to make is that we have on the counter as you go out of the front door today our annual fundraising letter. And some of you are not on a mailing list and we would like you to look at it. Fundraising letter is one of the important ways in which IMC is supported every year. So you can read the letter from Andrea Fella and myself. Please take one.

So what I'd like to do this morning is to continue on a series of talks I give once a month on Buddhist ethics. In particular, the what I'm interested in this series is the mind how mindfulness supports an ethical life or a wise life. Sometimes when ethics is considered it's in Buddhism, sometimes the bare minimum of Buddhist ethics is presented of things you shouldn't do, like the five precepts, but it was on the left as admonitions, what not to do. It's hard to see how it's a positive force on following the path of practice the path to liberation. And, but I think that if instead of looking at as rules, we look at how mindfulness practice supports living a wise life, then ethical life comes out of that in a nice way. So the, I've given two talks, one on the first two precepts, one in each of the two precepts, not to kill and not to take what's not given. And today I'd like to give a talk on avoiding sexual misconduct. And, and here in particular, we find in the Buddhist tradition what is mostly said about sexuality is what not to do. And for lay people, the precept is avoid sexual misconduct. And then there's a list of what that entails. And if you use rely on the ancient tradition, it's the literal ways in which these things are worded in a tradition. It's mostly directed towards men. And so men are men what men can do and what men cannot do. And, but then in the modern world, then people will adapt that to be more gender neutral languages, and still, but it's limited mostly to discussion of what is appropriate or inappropriate sexual partner, which is a little bit unfortunate, given what a huge part sexuality is in everyone's lives. And the Everyone's in, as they go through their life has to somehow contend with their sexuality. Even people who are asexual have to kind of somehow come to terms with that have to look at it, it comes into play. If you live in a society like ours, which is hyper sex, sexualized, we have to come to terms with the sexual messages that come from our society. If we have a partner, there has to be some harmony, or something, some understanding between the different forms of sexuality and sexual desires that different people have. And so it's something that people contend with in a variety of ways. And the Buddhist tradition is amazingly silent about that. When it's a huge part of people's lives, I would like to believe that if the Buddha was alive today, that he would be impressed that the Buddhist environment millio is very different now than it was in ancient India. that we have now a large group of lay people who are seriously pursuing the Buddhist path. Doing practices like meditation practice, which for centuries has mostly been the purview of monastics. And for most of the centuries, lay people were not involved in so much in meditation or following a path to liberation. But we're mostly involved in a path of merit making. And so often one of the primary forms of merit is giving to the monastics who are supposed to be on the

path to liberation. And, and there's a whole economy of merit, a whole practice of merit, that's emphasized often for lay people.

But we come here to the modern, especially the modern West, and the idea that your primary religious activity is myth making is not going to go very far. That I don't think that's so attractive to people. What is attractive is the full depth of possibility of taking mindfulness and meditation and concentration different elements of the practice and coming to terms with some of the deeper existential issues of our lives, our suffering, old age death and the possibility of becoming free, spiritually liberated. And I'm impressed by how many people there are who are walking this path quite seriously. There are I know plenty of late people, late practitioners in the West, who practice much more seriously a path of liberation than most Buddhist monastics do in Asia. It's, you know, we associate monastics as being you know, they're the ones serious about practice. But in fact, if you go to Thailand, a very small majority minority of the monks actually meditate. So it's kind of surprising, right? So if meditation is one of the primary paths to for liberation, for the deeper Practice, then the fact that a lot of people do it here, you know, it says something, something about what's happening here. So, I believe if the Buddha was alive today and saw what was going on here and how people are practicing, he would probably have a nine fold path. And the nine step would be right sexuality. And, and so, how do we and so right sexuality is not meant to be like the, you know, right in terms of, you know, some moralistic idea of right and wrong, but right and this is the word of summer for the translators, right. And usually is what it means is that which is that which is appropriate for a path of liberation. So, the question then is, can we take our sexual lives and consider that, how it, how engaging in our sexuality whether whatever form it might take, how it can be, we can engage with it so that it supports us in deepening our spiritual life as opposed to just a ignoring its relationship to our spiritual life, it tends to be a very private part of people's lives. People don't want to necessarily share it with a lot of people what's going on there, and what their personal thoughts and feelings might be. And there's a history because in Buddhism, we don't talk about it much. People kind of out of sight out of mind in terms of spiritual life, maybe it's not so spiritual. And in fact, I think that it's fair enough to say that in the history of Buddhism, that in Asia, that has been very little appreciation of sexuality as being part of a spiritual path, because sexuality is seen as being a little bit unfortunate. You know, if you're really serious, you'd be celibate monastic. And if you can't be celibate monastic, it's okay to be a sexual person. But you know, it's not quite as good, but you should at least avoid avoid sexual misconduct. And so and so it's called Like second best is kind of like the feeling you get and the ancient texts and how it's presented. And certainly there's not an active engagement with it, saying Yes, here is something that human beings do. And we can look at it and address it into as part of our path of practice. So I think in the modern world, it makes sense to talk about perhaps a ninth step and nightfall path, because sexuality is such a huge part of people's lives. And we have a different understanding of sexuality than perhaps has happened the ancient world, people who study, kind of romantic or sexual relationships in the west point out that there was a huge sea change with the troubadours and their mantic periods in their early Middle Ages, and the whole different understanding of what relationships could be arose in the West because of that. I don't know how true these analogies Are but at least they literature that survives point to a big sea change. And it's hard for us to kind of understand how much we're part of a particular current of values and culture, around relationships and sexuality that might be very different from from the ancient world. And so we approach it differently. And, and that's so in that our approach and how we are, I think it's well worth spending some time looking at sexuality and taking it seriously as part of the path of practice. If we're going to be late people somehow connecting to our sexuality.

I've talked to monastics, I've heard monastics give talks who are celebrated, who point out very strong terms, their sexual to they don't involve in the sexual activity, but their sexual beings and some of them as monastics have sexual desires, and so or they live in a sexualized, cultural world. And so they have

to also practice with that, it's very intense practice for them to practice in the context of celibacy and their desires or wishes and what's goes on. And so it's a very rich, the people who do it well say it's a very rich and meaningful way of practicing. And he supports them on the way to liberation. And I've been inspired by those monastics can be very articulate and very honest about what they're grappling with, in their celibacy as part of their path. I think that for lay people, we could do the same thing, we can be as honest and direct and grapple with it and work with it, so that it also supports us in this life, spiritual life. So, I connected to the Eightfold Path by suggesting maybe a nine fold path. So one of the interesting ways of approaching sexuality as a part of the Buddhist path is to look at it through the framework Have the Eightfold Path and to take each step of the Eightfold Path and apply it to our sexual life. And, and so we start with right view or right understanding, it's the orientation that helps us to whatever activity we're engaged in right to you is the orientation that helps us make this activity into the path and right to you. It has a number of meanings, but one of the primary simplest meanings is to avoid causing harm, to avoid causing suffering, and to look for where the freedom from the causes of suffering reside. So in looking at sexuality, one of the key then points is to avoid causing harm. That seems pretty basic. And that's one of the basic background behind Buddhist ethics and sexuality is sexual misconduct involves sexuality that causes harm. As opposed to sexuality is a particular form of sexuality. Buddhism tends not to put a strong feeling about some sexual some forms of sexuality are good and wrong. Homosexuality is good and heterosexuality is bad or some variation of that, right? There's no need to kind of make statements because the guideline is, is there being harm being caused. And that situation all depends on situation. So that's the basic approach the right view. But the next, the more broadly, it means looking at our life or sexual life, from the point of view the Four Noble Truths. Is there any suffering? Is there any grasping compulsion clinging that leads to that suffering? And is there a path away to the ending that suffering ceasing it? And I've heard Jack Kornfield asked group of people, I'll say it this way, so don't have to You say, how many here have not made a fool of themselves with their sexuality? And raise your hand? And, you know, I don't know if that's a fair question if it is, because even if they have and who's going to do raise their hand? But you know, more profoundly, I think, who hasn't been who hasn't hasn't either caused harm or been harmed through their sexual life and sexual activity. And I bet most people have some people and devastating way maybe some of you have been raped or something horrible has happened to you or been and, and so. So what to look at? Is there any suffering here for myself for the other people involved, other parties involved? And then we look At the compulsion, another word for craving or the second noble truth. And it's very interesting with sexuality, right? Because the drive sexual drive is, is a can be occasionally, right? a compulsion, a very strong, very powerful. It's been said somewhere apparently, they're quoted that the Buddha said that if there was any other human drive as strong as the sexual drive, there'd be no hope for us.

Or no hope for a spiritual life. Because, you know, there's two things as powerful to keep us kind of preoccupied. They wouldn't be our heart very hard to become free. The but luckily we have one and the spirit is lot of compulsion there. A lot of strong clinging and craving. Maybe, especially when you're younger, and, and so it becomes a ripe area for looking at the Four Noble Truths. Is there is a possibility of finding freedom from compulsion without having to abandon sexuality altogether sexual activity? That's that becomes the big question. And I think that one of the answers that Buddhism has tended to give Buddhist teachers attend to give, you can't have it both. That if you're going to really let go of compulsion and craving and desire, you have to let go of sexuality. And that is, you know, it may be maybe we can say it's an open question, Is that really true? And one of the, one of the considerations is, and one of the complications in this issue is the is the whole ambiguity around the word desire. And it's used very ambiguously. So that it's tend to tend to be understood to be to apply to all desire their particular desire that Buddhism is trying to free From his compulsive desire, or sometimes called craving or thirst, Buddhism is Buddhism is not anti desire. And the people who point this out tend to say

yes, there is the Buddha emphasized the value of having a desire for liberation. We're not supposed to jettison that only they desire which moves us toward suffering, not that desire that moves us towards freedom from suffering. But then, the same people might say that sexual desire, that's just a bad desire to have, not appreciating that there are many motivations behind the desire for sexuality. And there might be other desires besides lust, other desires, besides compulsive craving, involved in sexual expression. And perhaps the Four Noble Truths, as a guideline as a practice helps us to tease apart the different motivations that are behind our sexuality. So the right view is a very important beginning of looking at this to look honestly what goes on what motivates us what's actually happening, what are the consequences of our actions? Is there harm suffering caused is there compulsion? And then since intention and motivation and so important, the second step of the Eightfold Path is right intention. And right intention is usually described or in two forms, what's the wrong intention and right intention. And these two categories that are very interesting in terms of sexuality. what's called wrong or inappropriate intention, are intentions that are motivated by cruelty, ill will, and lust and there is we know this Some people sexuality is motivated by cruelty. Unfortunately, it's very cool what some people do to each other. Sometimes it's invoked, motivated by ill will or anger. And the anger can be in the background are part and parcel of what's going on. Inside, certainly there can be less powerful less than people will do sometimes make do things based on their lust, that they'll regret for a lifetime can be a very powerful force in people's lives, to act on the compulsion. And not to be free of lust, to be driven by lust is often not a healthy thing to do. And then the fourth motivation, that I think is very important to look at in sexuality is fear.

I think there can be a lot of fear, anxiety around the whole, our whole relationship sexuality, partners, what's done, how it's done, when how to respond. When not to respond, and, and there are people who respond sexually out of fear they'd rather not. There are people who fear for losing their partner wanting security, wanting recognition, a lot of things that people want in a relationship more than pleasure, more than, you know, relational intimacy. And so to look at the intentions and motivations behind sexual expression, or sexuality, or even behind celibacy, or being asexual is a very productive thing, what's motivating us? So, in terms of wrong intention, is there cruelty is there anger, is there fear or is there lust and if there is, then the mindful approach would be to look more deeply not to cut it off. Not to say this is wrong or bad in a moralistic way, but rather probe explore what's going on. Here, rest into it in order to kind of unpack it and let it unfold and let it dissolve and resolve itself. And this is a very important part of the mindfulness tradition is you enter into what's going on, in order to resolve dissolve, evolve with it, as opposed to just cut it off and say, I'm not going to do this. So all these kind of so called wrong or inappropriate motivations, unhelpful motivations for sexuality. We don't feel that we need to feel ashamed of them. But we do have to practice with them, in practice, go into them and really understand their depths. And then there's so called right intention, appropriate intention if you're following a path to liberation. And interestingly, they kind of look like the opposite of the, of the wrong intentions. And these are so the opposite of cruelty is compassion. So is there compassion as part of our sexual lives and sexual expression? The opposite of ill will is loving kindness. Is there loving kindness as part of it? Is there but the opposite of lust is renunciation, letting go? So that's frightening. Especially, you know, and sexuality, what I mean, I was going along fine with this talk until Gil suggested you know, you know, now I have to become a monastic, so much for that. But the, but rather than seeing it, you know, renouncing sexuality, maybe it has to do with learning the ability to let go, because without having a deep capacity for letting go and letting go in a way that's not repression. denial but letting go, that's freeing and healthy, then maybe we can find a way to have healthy, healthy sexual lives. Because if there's compulsion involved, we're not free with let be let go take it or leave it but let go and be open to something else. So is and then I don't know what the opposite of fear would be. Maybe confidence or maybe a strong sense of self confidence or strong sense of self worth, where we are looking to towards others who are self worth, for our companionship, for security, all the kind of

other things kind of complicated things that we bring along with us in our interpersonal relationships or sexual relationships. And then the next step of the Eightfold Path is right speech. And the first one of those is not to lie. Probably probably that's one of the most important ones is sexuality. Because usually when there's sexual misconduct, usually people usually don't want to broadcast that. They usually that becomes more secret than private. And but if we live a life that's not secret around sexuality, we're willing to talk to the people involved people you know, or we only do things sexually, that we're willing to tell our friends willing to tell people we respect what we can tell our partner. That becomes a wonderful corrective, wonderful protection, wonderful way of clarifying and helping our sexuality be in the forefront of our mindfulness.

So we really be honest, we can look at it. The call for honesty is essential. If sexuality is gonna become part of our path, and how often are we honest, even married couples might be sexual with each other. There's not sometimes there's not a lot of honesty but what's going on and But what motivates it and what's what people are thinking. So the call for honesty is to make it part of the path. The next is a right to action. And right action in this form is usually defined in three ways. It's not to cause harm, not to take what's not given. Now, that's an interesting one around sexuality. I think that there are cultures where men feel like they have a right to their sexual life with their wives. And she has no say about it. And I don't think we live in a culture like out here, but that's what's so blatant. But there are some times in both directions in all directions. Sometimes one couple who feels certain right or, you know, feels like and so it push it push, there's aggression as part of sexuality, which is not taking what is not given. And then no sexual misconduct is a third. So that's been covered by all this and Anyway, the next is, is right livelihood. So I don't know exactly how we're supposed to fold that into this, look at sexuality, but you know, it probably applies. You can think about it. And then the, the sixth step of the Eightfold Path is right. Action. Right? And right here, right effort. And this is a complicated kind of way, it's usually formulated, but it basically means avoid a make effort to avoid causing harm, and making the kind of effort that helps you become free. Avoid the efforts that are unskillful and do those things which cultivates skillfulness. But those things which are skillful, interestingly enough, are sometimes they're fun. By interstates of being states of being like, like the seven factors of awakening, cultivate mindfulness, cultivate a strong sense of investigation, cultivate joy, cultivate tranquility, cultivate wisdom and cultivating equanimity. So in terms of sexuality, do these things like mindfulness, investigation, effort, joy, concentration, tranquility, equanimity, can they have a role in it? What would it look like if there was a we were established in a strong state of calm or a strong state of inner joy? That wasn't dependent on pleasure, then maybe there's less need for sexuality to be about pleasure. And it can be about something else. And I think that in terms of a spiritual path, if it's only a matter of pleasure that we're looking for intersexual lives, that we probably not going to find much spiritual freedom there. So if we find something else, other qualities, peace, joy, tranquility, equanimity, perhaps there's, you know, then it's easier to fold it into a spiritual life. The next is mindfulness. Next factor the full path. And that seems pretty basic, a lot of mindfulness, mindfulness of our motivation, mindfulness, serve our beliefs, mindfulness of our emotions, the whole gamut of them. I believe that sexual, our sexuality, our sexual expression, sexual lives, is one of the most complicated psychological things human beings do. And sexual expression is one of the most complicated forms of communication that human beings do. And it involves a tremendous amount of conditioning and beliefs in psychology and feelings and emotions. And, you know, it's not a simple thing. It's seldom just a matter of pursuing pleasure, the very basic aspect of it. And so to be mindful is to begin unpacking all the complexity that goes into it. A complex complexity as some people would rather not look at, because it just, you know, just make something so complicated, that can be done so simply. And so but to look at it, you know, really unpack it, then it can become part of a spiritual life. And then the fourth that last, the eighth step of a thought path is concentration.

And concentration is kind of synonymous with calm. But more importantly, it's synonymous with a state of profound well being a profound sense of integration. You'd be a sense of being unified are composed or whole is the goal of concentration practice. This seems to be would be really invaluable if we want to be involved in sexuality because if we feel a knothole if we feel broken or if you feel afraid or feel, you know, somehow in psychological pain, then we come to our sexual sexuality with all kinds of needs, based on that feeling broken or feeling not home. But if we feel whole, if we feel a sense of stable sense of well being that concentration practice gives, then I would say that we come forward into our sexual relationships with a very different motivation, very different presence, very different way of being. Because then we're not looking for sexuality as as the thing that's going to make us feel better. We already feel well, and if you already feel well, then it frees up sexuality to be able to sexual expression To come more from some of the more healthy or appropriate motivations if you're on a path of practice, which brings us back to the right intention. So, we can look at is that is there some compassion and loving kindness in the relationship? Which means partly, do we see the person the full person there? And is there care for the well being of the person that were involved in? Or is it only caring for your own pleasure, you know, what it is for you. So, I think that if these steps have a full path, are seriously applied to this part of our lives, then our sexuality sexual life conduct becomes very meaningful part of the path of practice. I think it also within it separates out helps us to separate out desires which involve something like lust from desires which involve Perhaps expressions of affection, expressions of caring, expressions of love, and the idea that sexuality sexual sexuality is a form of communicating love, as opposed to a way of getting pleasure, fulfilling sexual desire. I've never seen in any Buddhist text. And maybe that's because we live in a post Romantic period or something where romance period where we have other ideas of what's possible in relationships. But unless we are able to distinguish between these different kinds of motivations for sexual activity, then I don't think we can really find a path to freedom. And we can free ourselves from a little bit the burden of the Buddhist tradition, which didn't really have a lot of understanding or maybe almost no understanding about how sexual our sexual lives could actually be an active and beneficial part of our spiritual life. Makes sense. So what do you think of that? It was it was simpler before. So she can use the mic please. So everyone can hear it that way.

Something something I remember a therapist told me is that sex is a gift to your partner. And that should be looked at that way. So that's beautiful things. Have it's been there our whole life or please a gift to our partner, we can give ourselves so many ways.

So as you were speaking, I So sexual energy, powerful. It does other things besides be involved in relationships with people. It drives, artists, for instance, to create things. It's involved in their creation.

There are objects that are very sexual, like cars and motorcycles. Wow. I've been missing out. Probably not.

The way people dress themselves anyway, so that there's a whole range of things and I, I guess my question is, how does all of that fit in to life? I think I applies directly. I think your point is well taken. We live in a sexualized culture, a lot of things are sexualized, there's erotic energy. And you know, it's interesting that the term for no, avoiding sexual misconduct literally is doesn't really not limited to sexuality. It's literally avoiding a misconduct of the senses. So sex, sexual misconduct, then so that could be, you know, don't have misconduct without the food you eat, you know, or so. So, I think it's going to what I said can all apply to any situation at all. So if you're dressed in a sexual way, because you like being sexual, and just feel good, maybe you're celebrate the event, but use like dressing and sexual suggestive ways. It's beautiful, it's erotic, it's joyful and nice and you celebrate that part of your life. I can imagine that could be For some people, but to look at the use days full path as a schema to look really what's going on here. Is there any suffering, craving compulsion as part of that? What's the

intention behind it? You know, if you're really mindful of all this look at more carefully, more deeply into the phenomena, what's actually happening. So I think that I don't want to limit my discussion about sexuality, to actual sexual activity. It applies in so many different areas of our lives. And also, there's plenty of people who are asexual as a matter of choice, so I'm not out of choice. And, but even if people are asexual, being asexual is a way of being sexual. And, and there's lots of things to explore there as well. If you want to make it part of the path. And so to explore it, you know, you don't have to be having a partner to explore this space. Have one slide. Is there a woman who wants to speak or just the just the men?

I just wanted to say that in I've been coming here for more than a decade. And in one of the early guests, you had a guest one evening and a female. And she said, you know, whenever you hear a Dharma talk, and the word chocolate comes up, it's code for sex.

Just want to say thank you for taking the wrapper off.

And then in the 10 years,

just nice to it's actually nice. It's nice to be in in a relaxed presence with what's been going on. So I just want to use my thanks and actual relief. Oh, going away. Yes, that we respect this important topic.

Great. Thank you. And I don't think I've talked about chocolate, mixed chocolate. So one more person all the way in the outer Hall and then we'll stop

recording right livelihood. I would as not profiting from sex or sexuality. Why? Well, specifically sex trade, or, you know, imprisoning women or kidnapping them and oh, yeah,

exactly. It goes without saying yes.

But perhaps even if you think about our commerce, it's based on selling sexuality. And that that, I think has led to a lot of problems in our society. I

agree. I agree. tremendous problem. And to me, it breaks my heart to know what goes on in the house sex trade thing. world. And, and there is, you know, an interesting conversation to be had exploration about whether selling one's body for sexual favors, is that unethical in and of itself? Or is that a person's right to be able to do that then is it you know, is there a dignified way of doing it? And the time of the Buddha, the recorded sons who seem to have had very value and dignified roles in the society of their time. And in fact, one of the last people to make a big donation to the Buddha in terms of a land for a monastery before he died, was a cortisone named Polly. And they would have had a conversation with her he went to her house forever for meal. You know, it was you know, and I think that She was kind of maybe no. expecting to get paid for whatever services she was providing. So is it is it absolute? That it's wrong livelihood to to do sexuality for money? Or not? I'm not I don't want to answer the question, but I want to raise it. But probably given how much suffering there is in our life, we should probably err on that. Say, yeah, we shouldn't do that. You want to say something more since you brought it up? I think it's important point.

I was thinking also about the fact that we, we sell products by selling sex.

Yeah, that's terrible.

And that drives more desire, exactly what consumer desire.

Yeah, and competitive. And these, these poor children who grew up with all that they're getting this message of that sexuality is what it's all about. They have to present themselves this way in order to get their way in life. I think we shouldn't use sexuality to sell things. So I said we'd stopped after one more so that it's time so we have our tea today. So if you are new especially, please know that you're very welcome to stay and hang out the set out in the other Hall there. And people here are friendly. So, you know, if you're new, you can just turn to someone near you and say hello and they're happy to say hello and introduce themselves to you. Okay, thank you.