

2018-10-07 Caring For The Earth

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SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

So today, the first Sunday of October is the first day of what's called Earth care week. The Vipassana communities in United States maybe around the world, some years ago decided to celebrate or honor this first, the first starting from the first Sunday of October the week to kind of concentrate our collective interest in caring for the planet for the earth. And so it's called Earth care week. So I thought I would give a talk on this topic. And before I do, I can it's kind of nice that kind of a coincidence that on Wednesday, we make there we had a completed installation on our roof of solar electric panels. And Wednesday, they got all hooked up and A few days later, we now get regular updates about the electrical production for this building. And probably the electrons for these lights in here are now coming from the panels on the roof. And, and so we get regular updates and it's kind of cool to read them and it tells how many how much carbon dioxide we have not pumped into the oxygen. So that's kind of nice to see and see kind of a that kind of impact. The so I think about the natural world, the non human world in similar ways to how I think of our human hearts. Our heart, not only pumps, the blood that keeps us alive, our hearts, pumps the blood that keeps the heart alive. Keeps itself alive. So in the same way, the environment we are kept alive by the natural world, and the natural world operates when and the natural world operates in a balance that keeps itself alive. If the heart is sick, we are sick. And if the environment is sick, we as individuals and as communities become ill. If we leave unconcerned with the health of our heart, the heart might not last. If we leave live unconcerned with the health of our environment, our environment as we know it, and as we depend on it won't last. The Buddha told a story, kind of a fable of a time when there was a very large fruit tree. Apparently it covered lighter no like acre or something that cannot be spread out wide. provide shade And it provided fruit to the people. And all the people had to do was go up to the tree and reach up and pull down fruit. And then there was plenty of fruit for people who live nearby. And then one day someone came and some greedy person came along and took all the fruit of the tree. And that's when the fruit the tree stopped producing fruit. So that's a nice story. Very nice. It's a nice kind of kind of allegory for our relationship to the environment, that if we take what, you know, take carefully and that might work. But if we agreed in what we take and take more than we should and more than is appropriate, then it's not sustainable and something stops producing and certainly we've had lots of examples of this down through the millennia of people who have taken too much and then the whole civilizations have been destroyed. Because they over used their environment I grew up on the coast of the part of my upbringing posted the Adriatic Sea, and beautiful, beautiful islands with bare rocks 2000 years ago, they're beautiful, beautiful Iron Islands with soil and trees. And but then they over over grew grapes on these islands and the soil washed away eventually. And, and now they're beautiful islands with very little life on them. So I think of caring for the earth. That caring for the earth is an alternative to some of the other ways that humans have related to the planet.

It's an alternative to exploiting it. Being unconcerned with the impact we have on it. It's an alternative to taking the earth for granted. And it is an alternative to being ignorant about that dynamic, interactive balancing act of natural forces that keeps the Earth's ecosystems healthy. This idea of ignorance, being ignorant of, you know what's really going on here, in terms of what sustains us as human beings and as communities, and what our impact is that's detrimental. And it's pretty easy to be ignorant and oblivious about what sustains us and what supports us in this wonderful way in which we kind of depend on the natural world. And certainly, I was growing up part of my growing up was in Los Angeles. And it was remarkable how little I understood about what sustained our lives there. What impact it had the seed of being to change that is when I went to college, and I was brushing my teeth, and communal bathroom of the dorm. And someone walked by as I was brushing the teeth, and I had the water running and, and very warmly and kindly said to me something about how you know, you might want to turn off the water, well a toothbrushes in your mouth. And then it never occurred to me that was like a strange idea. And, and I wondered if that's made me wonder about, you know, where did that water come from? I never, I never given any thought to it. And later, I learned that having grown up in when I grew up in Los Angeles, that there were there were water world wars in California, in Owens Valley, and horrible things happened in order to put in the water systems who supported Los Angeles and still there's a kind of war going on with Arizona and different states around the water that are stored in California it's very complicated. And, and huge infrastructure is put in. And at the point being, I had no clue. When I lived in Los Angeles, I had absolutely no interested it never crossed my mind, you know, just waters there and didn't just take it for granted.

So, so that when I came to college, then after that little incident, brushing my teeth, I started taking environmental studies classes. And I was further surprised how little I knew about the unseen impact of our lives. I'd never give any any thought whatsoever to what happened when I flushed my toilet. You know, once it's gone down the toilet it's not my business, it's just gone, gone gone. I knew nothing about what happened to the trash after I put it in the garbage can. It never occurred to me, no one ever told me I should be concerned or be it think about it. So it was very easy to be oblivious and ignorant about that kind of impact the way that I was, I was raised and I knew nothing about what it took to grow the food that I ate, or about the farmers and the farmworkers who brought it to me, grew it and harvest it and all that. I had never considered never even never considered had any idea that there were limits to how much our natural resources were available to us. I just kind of assumed that everything was provided interest, you know, no thought whatsoever. And I'd never considered the impact of a million or 10 million hundred million people driving the gas guzzling cars if they're early. 70s now, it seems very strange that that would say that, but that was really a symptom of the times and location where I kind of lived here in this country. The obliviousness, but I think almost it was the kind of it was created, the system was created in this way. So some of us, the more privileged could be ignorant of, you know what it took you we just took it for granted. And we were supposed to have, you know, a prosperous life kind of without any concern. And so that's how I was when I was 18. But I in In I started pursuing a degree in environmental studies. And I was very aware that there was just a burgeoning new field in our society. And it was kind of the beginning of something maybe started some years before I got involved, but it was really a new brand new thing and And it brought a new perspective to understanding the natural world. One that I see now that my children, you know, in the last year or so have been growing up here in the schools in Redwood City. And they get a lot of this and they understand quite well, some of these aspects of what's going on in a way that when I was being raised was not part of education whatsoever. Even so, I think that our society, it's probably fair to say that, as a society as a whole, we remain pretty ignorant about so much about the impact we have and what sustains us and, and our role in this environment. And as this is supposed to be a kind of a Buddhist talk, Buddhist Earth care week talk. I figured that the paradigm, least as I consider it last night, that the other way that I have access to talking about this would be to talk a little more about my own story. In my own relationship, the

environment and how it changed over the years, because it was very much changed even more through my Buddhist practice. And in particular, the years I spent in, in the wilderness, or in the adjacent to the wilderness, living in Buddhist monasteries. And I had this wonderful benefit of living in these wilderness areas, where I spent a lot of time certainly living in the wilderness. But also, we often had days off in the monastery we'd have often no days off every five days. And I've spent days and days and days, many, many, many for years, hiking, walking in the mountains by myself in the wilderness. And I just did it because I enjoyed it. And, but in retrospect, it had a big impact on me. And then together with doing that was meditating sitting in meditation halls in the middle of the wilderness feeling kind of the you know, feeling the wilderness the natural world such an intimate and close part of my lungs breathing of my steps and walking on the on the soil on bare ground over and over again, hearing the river gushing by, you know, all the time.

It was always kind of right there, the natural world in a way that I don't feel here living in Redwood City where I see trees and lawns that are nice and can look up at the sky. But I didn't certainly didn't feel like I was living in the natural world, the non human natural world.

So one of the remarkable things important things that happen to me, living that life, is it as my mindfulness screw is my self preoccupation lesson. And what grew was the capacity for intimacy and gratitude. In this, in the setting I was living in, he was kind of like come out of meditation, and I encounter this natural world. And my mind would be quiet. I would not be self preoccupied in the normal idea. So that no wrong way to have an openness and a sense of kind of presence or clarity, where I'd walk out and I would see a tree I would see the birds I would see the river I would see it'd be walking. And there was a kind of a clarity or a connectedness or an intimacy that I had not been familiar with before. And to have that intimacy with the natural world over and over again, was quite a remarkable lesson in a different way of relating to the natural world different symbiosis or mutuality. They can exist And as myself preoccupation, and all the different ways in which I defined myself softened and at least temporarily kind of disappeared. It was, it was replaced with becoming part of the wider whole that in greater part of the wider hole, then I could ever be hole in myself. They're certainly important stage in human life and human healing and human Buddhist practice, where people feel whole in themselves all the fragmented ways that we have, be feel whole and it can feel quite good. But there's a greater hole that can arise when the sense of separation, the sense of firm, strong definition I'm here and the worlds out there, people out there softens as well. And there's a feeling that the hole is a hole that we're part of that we are it's not us. Me, but it's kinda like we're part of this wider hole. And so as I lived in this mud, these monasteries walked the lands in the mountains, there was a sense of a hole that I was kind of part of, except remarkably, the sense of I wasn't part of it, it was you there was just this hole that came. There was a profound shedding of me myself in mind. There was a sense of freedom that existed when in a certain way, me myself in mind wasn't the operating principle to find my way through the world. It wasn't a center of gravity of every concern I have. And it was a world that involved a rich inner life that was discovered when desires felt fell away. It was remarkable to discover what it's like to walk through the world and not be fleeced For me it was and not have my desires and my vision What I wanted and not want be at the forefront of my attention, not to have fear, social fear and all kinds of fears operate, and be in the forefront of my attention how I went through the world. And I felt very fortunate to have had those years in the monastery, to work through the desires work through the fears work through the healing I had to do and then come out the other end and feel a kind of hole or kind of freedom that was intimately connected to the natural world, the world around me.

It what are the nice things that I was that if I attributed this wholeness to myself, I broke the wholeness. You know, there was there a certain kind of self referencing movement that seemed to actually kind of put on the field that didn't quite, you know, work in a sense, over and over again, I would feel that I

disappeared in this wider world, in the sense of disappearing, just was exquisite. And most people don't want to disappear, I guess. It was exquisite. So realizing the whole was more like not dividing up the world, with my attachments and fears. So not dividing up the world. So we live in a fragmented world, when it's a world that's based on desires, aversions and fears, and those are there for good reasons. It's not like it's a their crime to have them and have important role.

But to only live through those divides up the world divides up the whole live in a monastery in the middle of the wilderness, all of reality appear to work together. We humans were part of this whole works. And I sometimes I still marvel at living up in the mountains, about this whole the whole works, the natural environment it seemed to be in. And I used to marvel at I don't think it needed us. We weren't needed in the middle of it. You know, there's all kinds of things it needed, I suppose to live in balance, but it didn't really need us. We were kind of guests in the middle of it. So the experience of freedom in those mountains gave me the desire to live on this earth lightly. I discovered that living lightly, having fewer possessions, having less of an environmental impact was it Joy, and a support for freedom. So I discovered some feeling of a freedoms and feeling of being whole. And it wasn't like I felt duty bound to live lightly. It just seemed like that was the way of being that way. It was a way of avoiding dividing up the world, losing the whole, and it was a kind of a joy and happiness that I saw it was not so much a responsibility as a natural motivation. So Buddhist practice changed me. And as I change, so did my perspective of the world. And so did my sense of how to live in this world. It was a perspective that changed what I perceived as I left the monastery and left the wilderness. When we drive out of the monastery, deep in the Los padres National Monument ash lotto spad los padres monuments south of Monterey. I would see ways in which the hole was painful is painful. Each trauma each time I drove out of the mountains, we drove by a place called China camp that had house Chinese immigrants, who over 100 years ago had built by hand, the 14 mile dirt road into the monastery, before it was a monastery. And this too, was part of the hole that I had become. What suffering and abuse what struggles had these immigrants been subjected subjected to? How would they have been taken advantage of to get so much grueling work out of them? How was I to understand that I was relying on their hard work to have access to the wilderness in the monastery. Then drive into Carmel Valley and see wealthy homes and golf courses. This too was part of the whole. How do I now include the happiness and the suffering of those living these privileged lives? I felt something of the hole was crying. Perhaps in a way these communities seem to live apart, seemingly unconcerned with the impact their lives have on the wider world. From Carmel Valley I would drive through Salinas, the lettuce capital of the US, if not the world, the hard working field workers working with unhealthy endurance in the hot sun, nowadays, some in fear that they would be arrested before they could see their children again. The vast monocrop fields being irrigated with water slowly drawing down the water table seem to disrupt the sense of wholeness I felt in the monastery and in the mountains. This too is part of the whole in recent years driving up from Salinas to the Bay Area, and passing close to Mission San Juan Bautista. One of the missions here in California that the Spanish built. I wondered about the indigenous people who still live with these lands, survivors of genocide at the hands of Spaniards and white Americans. They too, are part of the whole. How do these native people fit into the whole? What important place do they hold? Coming up to the Bay Area and seeing all the cars in the freeways and breathing all the smog that the wind patterns delivered to Fresno where children are getting asthma. This too is part of the whole Buddhist practice revealed for me a holistic vision of self and the world.

That is only possible when there are no attachments. When we cling to anything, reject anything or anyone from our hearts and don't seek to understand what the what of the hole we don't yet know. We are creating division. And we are in the sense breaking the hole to grow into this hole. And to stay close to this hole that comes with freedom comes with a freedom saturated mindfulness. It helps to keep to care for the whole earth carry week is a reminder that a crucially important part of the whole is the earth

itself. our natural environment, what some people call the non human world. This earth is our home. It is our global heart. are one large posting global ecosystem. It is our mother from which become. If we care for it, it will be the mother for all the humans in our other life forms that will appear on this planet long after we are dead. If you want to stay close to the spiritual freedom, a Buddhist practice if you want to stay close to the hole if you want to protect the happiness of non attachment, please care for our home planet. For our global heart for our mother, learn how to live lightly by finding joy by finding joy and freedom. In doing so, decrease your environmental impact. Do your carbon analysis and find ways to reduce your carbon footprint. Learn what you learn how what you By maybe hurting people far away, so find some way to mitigate this impact. Many people would like to decrease the negative environmental impact of their lifestyle. I don't believe as a society we'll be successful unless we can find joy and personal benefits in doing so. This means doing the work of discovering how to live likely on this earth and caring for the welfare of others. as something that nourish us benefits are good hearts and contributes to society. We are happy to be part of because I don't think it works so well to obligate people and do things out of a sense of duty. I think it kind of takes a little bit of the life out of us that kind of heaviness unless the sense of obligation comes from our good hearts motivation. Worse, like we course I want to do this. And I believe that to really sink deeply into this practice of freedom that Buddhism is about this practice of really waking up our awareness and attention and having an awareness that wants to go out and be present for this world, that it is possible to discover a tremendous amount of joy in living likely, tremendous amount of joy, and not being driven by consumption needs and wants and endless things and things that we do. A joy that comes from caring for the earth, a joy that comes from caring for the world around us to spend time doing that. It's a delight. It's what kind of, you know, if the heart wants to sing, that's the way it sings. Once we kind of really do this work of discovering how to settle into our good hearts, relax and open to this hole that we are but it does take interest Care. and caring is a great, wonderful thing to be able to care. Spend more time caring, you'll be a lot happier. Spend more times caring about the things you don't know, the things that you consume that things where you're, when you're finished with it, where things go, the impact you have that's invisible. It's part of the whole, it's part of you. And to ignore it, is to break the hole. But to be interest, try to learn that and extend out further helps heal the hole or support the whole care for the hall.

So we have this one week in the past in the world, to give some conscious thought, reflection on caring for the earth, Earth care week, and this is the beginning of the week. And those of you who feel part of this wider global community of people in Interested in mindfulness you might want to share and this Reflection for the week and this least this week, maybe I give some more thought to your environmental impact your relationship, the environment, the natural world. Maybe spend a little bit more time connecting to the natural world, that Tobin more than, you know, an urban lawn and, and see how it can nourish you and support you see how it can be a teacher for you. That will teach you non attachment and freedom. So earthcare week. So, those are my thoughts on this topic. And if you'd like to make any comments or questions or testimonials, that would be great.

So this is a bit off topic. We talk in Buddhism a lot about stories in a somewhat negative way but the stories in our heads and how they can interfere they were just pie me stories and that that interfere that we tell ourselves that our justifications rationalizations we get lost in them right but you've just told the story about yourself to lots of stories here I tell the story. Yeah, yeah. About the tree the ancient tree.

That's right. And I have you're telling your story about how you awakened to something. So I'm Can you straighten me out about the different kinds of stories and when stories are held Feeling useful and when they are not?

Well, it helps if you have something that's a great question and helps if you have some idea of what is helpful and what is not helpful what you're looking for. So from a Buddhist point of view, there's a number of things. But one was it, does it help you become freer? Does it? Or does it? puts you more in bondage? Does it help you to wake up? Or does it put you to sleep? So one of the remarkable things that we can discover for ourselves is, and it's, you know, is we can get preoccupied and concerned with something we're thinking about. And, you know, maybe once upon a time, you were in a conversation with someone, and you realize after a while, you didn't know what they were saying, because you were kind of thinking something important. So So, you know, or, or you knew someone like maybe you knew someone did that. And, and so you know, it's possible to get so preoccupied in our thoughts. That we lose touch with the world around us. That's a fascinating time to stop and look and be mindful. And to feel that distance to feel that ups that obscuration. And then it's other times where it's possible to have a story have ideas and thoughts and feel how it really is part of the flow of being connected, it really opens up their connection to the world, a greater intimacy comes. And you feel that rather than feeling distance is greater clarity or connection or a feeling that touches the heart. So that's how you know the difference in these different kinds of stories. You have to see what the impact is in you, when you're saying them. It's not the stories themselves, per se, but an impact. And if you value being present and awake to what's here, what stories help with that and what stories take it away.

Thank you, that helps.

And so this is so I the example I gave of this, looking at your attention and how Attention kind of gets it feels a distance from the world or from others or obscured is something that you could know, hopefully a reference point you can give people who practice mindfulness, because there's this heightened attention to this, these kinds of impacts on us.

Good morning, I wanted to thank you for the talk that you just gave. I work as a high school teacher and started teaching environmental science two years ago. And it has completely changed my life. And I can relate to the awareness piece of how much simple habit was ingrained with severe impact on the environment. And it's actually been a really beautiful practice in mindfulness, to pay attention to on a moment to moment basis what I'm doing if I'm going to the supermarket, and I'm using plastic to put my produce in which I'm just going to set aside when I get home To, you know how much water I use when I take a shower or when I wash my hands. And I feel that bringing this awareness into my day to day life actually has enhanced my mindfulness practice to being more present moment to moment. And so I absolutely see the intersection between that and also the Buddhist practices. And so

the motivation then to be more careful, comes from more than just obligation.

Absolutely. Great.

Nice. Thank you.

Um, so I went to U Mass Amherst in the late 70s, engineering school, and professors taught us that you could make electricity from the sun, and I was actually really blown away by that. And so I almost didn't believe it truthfully. So I spent many years in high tech and finally, about 12 years ago, I left high tech and went into the solar industry. So started off by doing residential and small commercial and now I'm doing really large fields like you know, five acres to 500 acres of solar so pretty amazing and a lot of that came from you know, your talks actually about you know, right vocation and doing something that felt good for my heart. So we made that transition. And I'm really glad to see that you did this.

One of the nice things about it was many things that nice things about what we put in the ceiling but on the roof, but it was put together by done by an A nonprofit that mostly uses volunteers, kind of like Habitat for Humanity and read alternatives. What is it alternative

is a GRID Alternatives the company that did it?

No, no, no, we need batteries for that, right?

No. There's a group that has uses volunteers to do solar projects that

Yeah, the call grid name.

Yeah, I don't think

it's name No. Sun, Sun, Sun. Sun works.

Oh, one thing I I saw

was

I always thought that these windmills were just kind of for show. I didn't you know, I thought that they were I thought they were kind of like a, something that people were trying to do. Then I saw show they showed us windmill, they said every time it goes around once, it produces enough energy to power a house for a whole day. And this thing is just going around and around and around. This must really work. So I just thought that I thought they would kind of okay, they thought you made like flour from them or something, you know. But they used to,

yeah, they used to, but yeah, there's these massive fields of windmills now in different places and off the coast of Denmark and England. And I think now for the New England also coast. They're building them and lots of electricity produced

My husband and I have had a compost pile for over 50 years. And it was particularly on bad days. I could think the earthworms are doing good things.

Nice.

Yeah. Probably doing good things long after we're gone.

I'd like to share some thoughts as a biologist.

I've taught introductory bio for many years and one of the favorite parts for me is teaching about plants and how they are essentially the original solar cells and how beautifully designed they are and how efficient they are in grabbing solar energy and converting it into carbohydrates. So, plants are an important obviously an important part of our ecosystem and we should appreciate them each time we look at one I took

I was in college I took a botany class and Big Blackboard and they had they're doing the, I guess the oxygen carbon dioxide cycle something I just lose big diag, big chalk diagrams in the board and you

know how this works and all that and, and you know, the short story is that the plants take in co2 and they pump out oxygen as a byproduct. And then and so that's where we we breathe this oxygen from the plants. So we were doing all this I was kind of absorbed in this study in this class. So that little bit being absorbed kind of explains a little bit what happened to me next. But I walked out into the courtyard where there are these big California Oaks. And I was I froze in my my spot and just looked at one of these oak trees. And it was an Aw, and what welled up inside of me was this idea that I could do without an arm without the kidney and all kinds of things I can do without, but I can't do without those trees making oxygen. So where do I begin? Where do I end? Where does the tree begin? Where's a tree and where does you know I began and I felt like wow and I just my mind was kind of stunned at the at how it deeply interrelated My life was with those trees and you know how dependent Our lives are and how important they are. It was kind of a sacred moment for me standing there and post bucking the class reverie

I'd like to go back to the compost piles.

I tried that. And I I drew a lot of varmints into unwelcome guests into my backyard. And so I decided to stop that. And then I remembered what my grandmother did. I used to love going to her garden with her and it was really close to her house and all she did was she took every day she dropped she took all the leftovers from her cooking etc. And, and she took it to the garden, dug a hole and put all this stuff in. And I thought I'm gonna do my grandmother taught me and that's what I do and it's so wonderful. And aside from the fact that I get, I reuse all of the stuff from my cooking and so on.

I also get surprises. I've got potatoes grown

that I didn't plant

and so I've got

potatoes growing. I can't there's so many little things that that that all these surprises so it makes my garden So, such an experience. I go out there every day and just look and see what's going on today. And I have a beautiful garden and I've got a lot of tomatoes right now and they're so wonderful and so nice. This delightful

surprise. That's nice. So then I'll end with a little boardroom. This reminds me of it. In Los Altos. There's a wonderful place called hidden villa. And many schools will bring their kids there and it's a little bit of a farm, they have a garden and it's kind of on the edge of the coastal wilderness, kind of and, and it was one of the first places people started it, where it had a very strong motivation for social justice. Back in the 1940s or 50s. When they started this part of it, they brought inner city kids from all over the Bay Area, who normally you don't have access to this kind of life in order to share the life with them and show it to them. hepcat if summer camps for inner city kids there, they started early on. And so we used to do retreats there. And silent retreats. And then on weekday days, a certain point in the mid morning, the school buses would arrive, just very close by to where we did our meditation. And we would hear the kids getting a gift being given a tour of the gardens and all that and they would be so happily yelling and screaming and, and they would all get called culminate with all the kids together, yelling something like thank you soil.

So I, the idea of sharing. Our lovely connection to the earth with others is a wonderful thing. So Thank you for sharing your compost story and I hope we all can share ourselves and support and bring joy to others in this wonderful connection we have to the world into ourselves to each other. Thank you