

Practice Note: Keep It Simple

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on February 2, 2011

It's useful to always remember that mindfulness practice is meant to be simple. So if it's not simple, it's probably not mindfulness. There are a variety of ways to try to keep it simple.

One is a very simple way of looking at our experience from the perspective of whether it's pleasant, unpleasant or neither pleasant nor unpleasant. Our life and experiences can be pretty complicated. There is full-blown catastrophe – our particular version of the big issues of life that come up – all the causes and conditions, and all the things we can possibly do in the whole arsenal of Buddhist practice. It gets complicated very quickly.

But if we take what we're experiencing here and now, whatever the complexity is, and distill it down to: "Is it pleasant? Is it unpleasant? Or is it neither?" sometimes if you see the simplicity of it. "Oh, it's actually very unpleasant." Then you can see how you're reacting to the unpleasant quality of this hugely complicated event. Let's ignore how complicated it is, and just stay in the simplicity of "This is unpleasant." Then, how are we

reacting to the unpleasantness? There might be a pulling away. You're attacking it, or getting involved in judgments. There are all kinds of reactions we have to the simple unpleasantness of it.

If it's pleasant, it might be complicated. You might feel some pleasant meditation experience, and it's connected to the whole complexity of all your years of reading about the Christian saints and their beatific experiences. It gets complicated very quickly. But if you just say, "It's just a pleasant experience," then, how do you relate to that pleasantness? "Oh, I start thinking about all the kinds of associations I have with it." Let's just come back and stay with the simplicity. Or, "I want more of it," and so you feel that.

If it's neither pleasant nor unpleasant – which is actually rare and more commonly assumed than it actually is – then what is the reaction to that? Sometimes people have interesting reactions when something is neither pleasant nor unpleasant. Sometimes they get confused, annoyed, or bored because it doesn't seem to relate to something important. There can be a reaction to it.

Those reactions to pleasant, unpleasant, and neither are sometimes operating in the background. We can clothe it, and add to the simplicity of that simple reaction to pleasant, unpleasant and neither with all kinds of

philosophies, attitudes, stories, and histories. We can make it much more complicated than it needs to be.

One way to make the practice simple is to stay close to the fact that things are either pleasant, unpleasant or neither, and stay with that simplicity without any bigger stories, or assigning meaning, purpose or consequence. Just see if that can help you stay more at ease, more simple and relaxed about what's happening. in a way, perhaps that is more to the heart of yourself and what's going on. The reactions we have – the pleasantness or unpleasantness – can represent something very deep inside of us that we could access.

So I hope you enjoy the morning and that enjoyment is pleasant.