

Dharmette: Finding Your Practice

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on March 16, 2011

It may be interesting for you to hear a little bit about the beginning of my own meditation practice, and what was important for me as the foundation for what followed. I started meditation when I was pretty young, maybe 19 or 20. It was a bit haltingly at first, and then when I think I was 22, as a college student, I started doing Zen meditation every day: twice a day for 40 minutes. I'd get up in the morning and sit, and before I went to bed at night I would sit. Zen was how I was introduced to meditation, which was not much of an introduction. They don't teach you much in Zen. I didn't really know much about Buddhism, and certainly not much about meditation. I didn't know about concentration or even mindfulness. I had no idea that anything was supposed to happen when you meditate – some states of deep calm or insight. I hadn't even picked up the idea that I was supposed to stop thinking.

I thought Zen meditation was the unconditional acceptance of the present moment – just accept this moment. So certainly I was aware of how much my mind wandered off, and with acceptance in it wandering off, I'd come back and be with this moment, be with this

moment, and be with this moment. In Zen, you're supported by a particular posture you hold, and I was often coming back to the breath as a stabilizing force, or a place to be here.

I had no idea that I was supposed to be any different than what I was. In many ways there was nothing dramatic to report. There weren't dramatic states of concentration, peace, joy, bliss, or some of the things that people associate meditation with. But it became very important for me. What I discovered was that in that radical, unconditional acceptance of things as they are in the moment was a sense of what I called at the time 'integrity,' and perhaps 'wholeness,' and that just being alive and here is enough. There was nothing to resist, fight, or try to obtain or get. I could feel whole or complete as I was, without having to change anything about myself. It was almost as if a container was created that would hold who I was, and everything that I was as I was, but now there was a container that held it. What comes to mind is that it was like a ping-pong ball bouncing inside a container, and earlier in my life I was the ping-pong ball bouncing off the walls. Now I've become the container, and so it was okay to bounce around. I wasn't troubled by the bouncing ball, because it was being held by something bigger.

Meditation wasn't a project, or a self-improvement thing. It wasn't trying to obtain something or become a better

person. It wasn't proving myself in the eyes of other people. It wasn't avoiding some part of me or pretending I was different than who I was. It was just whatever was here. Whatever I was was somehow accepted and held in a certain way so that I felt integrity, wholeness, completeness, or peace with it all. That sense of integrity I experienced was very important for me. At some point it dawned on me, when I was 23 or something, that my mind was the same mind whether I was sitting in meditation, or not in meditation but in daily life. And so why should I have this integrity just in meditation? Shouldn't I have this same thing in my daily life as well? Then I became very interested in how could I be that same way in my daily life. That became my exploration, and the growing edge of my practice.

As I continued my practice, that integrity and sense of just being there with what is – and the peace and freedom of that – seemed to give independence from any ideas of obtaining or getting anything. This supported me tremendously when I was introduced to Vipassana practice in Thailand and then in Burma. Especially in Burma, there was kind of a goal-oriented approach – something to obtain and get. The teacher was waiting for you to report the changes. Sometimes I was even told, “Strive, strive...” I felt very fortunate that I didn't buy into that, because I had this background of radical, unconditional acceptance of things. When I heard the instructions, I think I followed them pretty well.

They were interesting for me. But I followed the instructions of mindfulness not as a way to get anything. It was a way of practicing the unconditional acceptance better. One of the things I discovered in doing Vipassana practice was how incredibly subtle the mind is – all the small, teeny movements of nonacceptance, resistance, wanting, hating, fear, and anxiety. The mind was always moving, and not at peace with how things were at the moment. As I saw the subtlety of it, then the instructions of mindfulness – pay more careful attention – supported and helped me to see that I could be more thorough in this unconditional acceptance of the moment.

In doing that, I found that the mind settles more and more, and that some of the states of deeper concentration and insight are a byproduct, and they happen in their own time. It wasn't like I was straining to try to see or get into deep states. If they happened – great – and if they didn't happen, that wasn't exactly the point.

I know that some people who meditate make meditation too much of a project. They're trying too hard to prove themselves. Or some people feel like there is something wrong with them, and meditation is how they're going to perfect themselves, make themselves right, make themselves look right in the eyes of other people, or somehow become a worthy person. There is an

investment in meditation much more than is needed – trying to get or obtain something, or to prove one's self. Sometimes that whole approach adds to the kind of alienation or suffering that people have because we're stepping away, pulling away or resisting. We're somehow not at peace with how things actually are. For some people the route of just being at peace with how things are is a very powerful door that is important to open.

Sometimes in the Vipassana world, there is a saying that we're not trying to have a new experience, but we're trying to hold, see, or be present for our experience in a new way. That's a wonderful saying because, rather than trying to go beyond what's happening, there is some wonderful secret, key or specialness about "This is what's happening. Okay, now how can I see it and be with it in a way that is freeing? How can I be with it in a way that brings peace?" – as opposed to, "This is what's happening. Now what can I do to make it better or different, or to change it, or fix it?" For some people, it's very powerful to step back and say, "I'm not going to change anything, but how can I relate to this in such a way that I find my peace with it, whatever it might be?"

So maybe some of those words are interesting for you to consider, but then maybe not. Please also consider that there are many approaches to practice. All of them

are wonderful in their own time and place in the right person. So you have to find your own way with this. But if my example of how it was for me in my early years is helpful, that would be nice.