

Dharmette: Collectedness and Expansion

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on April 3, 2013

An important concepts in Buddhist meditation is unification: gathering together, or collectedness. Sometimes it is associated with ‘one-pointedness,’ meaning that everything is pointing in the same direction, pointing together. Sometimes the language of one-pointedness can mean that one part of us is pointing in one direction, but all of the other parts are pointing somewhere else. The Buddhist word for one-pointedness – *ekaggatā* – literally means “a single direction.” It is the idea that we have one purpose, one intention around which we gather ourselves.

Often, people who find it hard to be collected are divided within themselves. Some people are at war with themselves. There is internal struggle, and for some, it is quite strong.

There are parts of ourselves we don’t like. We think we should be one way – or another way. We struggle between our good and bad sides. There may be inherited ideas from family, society, or religion around

our good and bad sides. If we have some bad ideas or thoughts, we certainly should not have them. We shouldn't show them to anyone. We are doomed if we have them. Other sides are good. Some people are afraid of their goodness. Some people think they're only supposed to be good – so they are at war with themselves.

For some people, the war inside – this fight between the two sides – is very explicit. Unfortunately, in this internal struggle between a good and a bad side, no one wins. As long as we are divided, we can't win, because the two sides will always be opposed.

The image I like to suggest for people who have this sort of tension is to have the two sides hold hands – to see and respect each other, hand in hand. Rather than saying we have to stop fighting, or stop being different, we can see how we can work together. We hold hands, see each other, and respect each other. Each side is there because of causes and conditions – it isn't inherent. Given these causes and conditions, we have to care for these different sides of ourselves, and find a way to have the two sides respect each other. We find some unity by not fighting anymore, not struggling between different sides of ourselves.

Part of the idea of unification, or collectedness, has to do with opening up the field of our heart, the field of

awareness, so that all is held within that field. Rather than sitting out on one side of the court or the boxing arena, and looking at the other side, you keep expanding the attention outward, so that you can hold all of it in awareness. Rather than deciding which is the good or bad part, expand the attention so that it is broader and bigger, and somehow can hold it all. Perhaps you can expand your attention by imagining that you are standing on a hill across the valley looking at yourself. In that way, you create enough space and openness, so that all the different parts of you can be held in a more harmonious, collected way. There is space for it all. To have an expansive mind of open awareness is a very important idea in Buddhist meditation.

These two approaches can come together and be connected – being collected or unified, and having expansive awareness. This points to attention opening up awareness – having a presence of mind (mindfulness) that is bigger than the tight, claustrophobic focus that things have to be a certain way. If we get caught in that vise of contracted attention, then we just relax and open. The idea of opening and relaxing – of making space – allows for this collectedness to happen by itself.

We don't have to be in charge of bringing all the parts together. It's more like we are in charge of opening up

and making space. And a lot of that is dependent on not being so involved in thinking. We don't want to be at war with our thinking. But we also don't want to negotiate only through the filter of our thinking. Thinking is often where the divide, the separation, begins. We want to broaden the field of attention, so that thinking isn't the only game in town. It isn't the way we see and understand what's happening. We are not caught in the meanings of thinking, or the concerns of thoughts. We open up in a wider sense.

This is one of the reasons why Buddhism puts a lot of emphasis on being in the present moment. Thinking is often what keeps us out of the present moment. If we can open the attention into the present moment to be *inclusive*, then thinking can be part of that inclusive picture. If the attention is open and wide enough, then it is easier not to be seduced by the thoughts, as if that is how we are going to figure out and negotiate our life.

There may be different things going on at the same time: the sense of relaxed openness to what is here – not divided, not at war with what is here. And then there can be war. But there is a wider opening, which holds it all. It doesn't choose between the good and bad sides, but holds it all in a bigger context.

Not negotiating things through our thoughts is so important. You can't necessarily stop your thinking, but

don't invest yourself in thinking as being the solution. This allows for more space – a wider context for all the ways in which we are divided and scattered. All the ways in which the mind is fleetingly jumping around to different thoughts and concerns and feelings – it all requires work or energy. In a certain way, as we learn to relax and open in meditation – in open collectedness – we allow it all to be there. It's also a way of to learn how not to invest so much of our energy in all the activities that divide us.

I like the image of five different marbles in a big bowl, constantly spinning around and bouncing off each other. Maybe they are re-energized, because the kid playing with them keeps them going. But if we just get out of the way, and stop activating or re-energizing the marbles, or adding to their momentum, they will settle. And eventually, they will stop and come to rest at the bottom of the bowl. We have all of these disparate things going on, but if we can just hold them in meditative awareness – open, broad, wide – in this big bowl of awareness, and not thinking so much, we begin to make space for them. Then, slowly, slowly, everything will start settling down. All of your marbles will eventually come to rest in the bottom of your heart. And your heart will be at rest in itself – this is collectedness.

In the Pali dictionary, the etymology of one term for this unification means “to weave into one.” To weave

ourselves into one. Isn't that nice for collectedness?

May these ideas give you something to consider the next time you sit down to meditate.