

Dharmette: Alone with Others

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on May 4, 2017

When I was, maybe twenty-one or twenty-two, I lived on a small dairy farm for six months. When the husband and wife farmers went on vacation for a week, they left me in charge of the farm and the cows. It was in a rural place at the end of a long road. During that week I didn't leave, and I talked to no one. One day in the distance, I saw a mail carrier walking down the hill, but that was the only person I saw. It was the first time in my life that I'd been alone for so long. It was not intentional – it wasn't like I was planning to be alone. I was just left to take care of the farm.

During those seven days, as the time passed, my senses became more acute. I became more aware. I would see things, and they would glisten. I'd see some object, and it was glistening, bright, and stood out in highlight. I thought, "This is cool." I would walk around, amazed at how beautiful things were.

I became more acutely aware of my thoughts, in a way that I'd never been before. I guess it was the only conversation happening. It wasn't like my thoughts were of any significance. I wasn't thinking deep or special

thoughts. It was more like the miracle of thinking.

I felt this intimacy with the world around me, and with myself. This experience was impactful for me; it felt very important – like a wonderful way of being in the world – this kind of intimacy, awareness, and presence. In retrospect, just being present was enough. Just being here was so rich!

After these seven days, the two farmers came home. They were friends, and it was nice to have them back. We continued our life together, but I noticed that the intimacy, the acuteness of my senses, and the wonderful feeling of being connected to myself on the inside faded away. I was involved in conversations, concerns, and social things. Things got busier and faster, and the intimacy just receded. When I saw this, I knew I had a task, which was to learn how to be alone with others. I didn't want to be a hermit – that was clear.

That I should go live alone some place wasn't the lesson. But I felt that I had to honor what had happened to me. So the task was, "How can I be alone with others?" That's the wording I used. What that meant was, "How do I pay attention to what my mind does? How do I live my life so that I don't get pulled off or swept away into: the social world, social concerns, wanting people to like me, how I look – all the ways we get caught up in social games, activities, and things to

do. How can I not get caught in that, so that I can somehow stay in that acute sensitivity – that wonderful sense of intimacy and presence that I had experienced.

In some ways, having that question was part of the momentum that got me involved in Buddhist practice. It became one of the questions I carried with me for years: not to avoid the world, or step away from the world, but to be with it with a certain kind of presence, peacefulness, or ease, so that there was that intimacy and connectedness inside and outside.

I learned a lot about this during my years of meditation practice. In meditation, I learned about what my mind does, what motivates me, and the concerns I get caught up in. But equally important was that by meditating regularly, I got a very strong, first-hand, visceral sense of what it's like to be grounded here, to be centered *here*, to be present. It was a growing sense of being here in an embodied way.

Somehow there's ballast, stability, stillness that lives inside. This grew over time, and became a powerful memory. But more often, it increasingly became a presence – something that was available here. I'd lose touch with it, but it would become easier and easier to come back to it. That sense of inner steadiness, stability, or stillness was the place from which I could be alone with others without being removed from others.

Being alone with others didn't mean I was separate. It allowed for intimacy, because it had this quality of acute sensitivity. Just being here, the senses were operating acutely, as they had been on the farm – really taking in, feeling, and experiencing whatever is happening. With others, it meant being with the person I was with – being there for them.

One of the ways that being alone with others translates for people doing meditation practice is when you find some benefit from meditation. You're a little calmer, a little bit more settled, less agitated, more peaceful, a little happier. There are all kind of benefits you might get. When you're meditating, you're not involved in the world so actively. You're not caught up in concerns or activities. You're not on the computer. You're just here. So if you'd like, one of the tasks is to consider, "How can you take home some of those benefits, such as the calm or settledness? How can you continue those benefits? How can you have them in your daily life?" These benefits in meditation can be a reference point for the possibility of continuing them in your ordinary life.

It's so easy to get pulled into the world of things, activities, and what we're doing. But what would it take? What can you stay in touch with? Is there something available here, which is growing and developing as you meditate? That benefit becomes more a felt sense that

you can tap into and have as a support. What kind of greater self-understanding are you getting about what your mind does and what your concerns are?

If you have some calm, peace, or sense of well-being, what causes you to lose touch with that, to sacrifice it, and give it up? Why do you give it up? What do you give it up for?

When you get up from your meditation, notice the benefit. It doesn't have to be very dramatic – it can just be a teeny bit. But because it's a little bit different from how you live your normal life, it gives you a reference point to ask that question – to see the difference, and to see what you do.

Over time, you'll learn more and more how to be in that good, beneficial place, and you'll see how you lose it. You'll start making wiser choices about how to stay connected, grounded and present, here – because maybe it feels richer, more valuable, or just more wonderful.

Maybe “to be alone with others” won't be your language. Perhaps your language will be: “to be calm with others, to be connected with yourself and others, to be at peace with others.” You may have your own way of saying it.

What was important for me, in being alone with others,

is that it showed me that the practice is also in the world. It isn't only about stepping away from the world. It has to be applied to the world we're living in. For me, it has been so rich, going back and forth in the interface, the oscillation, and the rhythm of practicing meditation, being alone, and practicing in daily life.

I hope your meditation practice gives you a vantage point from which to enter into your normal life, and that your normal life gives you material for your meditation practice.

Thank you.