Dharmette: Inner Transformation

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on January 10, 2018

As many of you know, mindfulness practice has entered into our culture in a big way. There're many people who teach mindfulness in settings where it's called "secular mindfulness" – without the Buddhism part. This is a wonderful thing. I think that one of the wonderful teachings in this secular mindfulness world, which is also taught in Buddhism, is learning how to be present for the experience that we have in the moment, just to be present for here and now. Whatever circumstances we're in, we try to bring mindfulness and presence to it. Hopefully that mindfulness and presence has a quality of non-reactivity, where we don't bring a lot of reactive emotions – being for or against something, or angry, blaming, holding on, clinging, or preferring. We don't bring a lot of associations, beliefs, and ideas from the past with us – like a tidal wave bringing whatever is happening on top of us, and get into complicated relationships with it. But just, "Oh, this is what's happening now." Often our lives become a lot simpler. One of the hallmarks of mindfulness is the emphasis on being in the present moment, and how to bring that into our lives.

However, Buddhist practice includes much more than mindfulness. There're many things that Buddhism brings along besides this present moment awareness. But what I'd like to emphasize today is that Buddhism also emphasizes transformation in our psyche. The heart or mind can somehow be transformed, so that it's not just a matter of bringing mindfulness to situations. It's also about changing ourselves into a different kind of person. We become different people in the different situations we find ourselves in.

A poignant example of this sometimes occurs towards the end of life. A Buddhist teacher, who's a friend of mine, was friends with the president of the American Psychological Association or the American Psychotherapy Association. I don't know exactly what it's called. It's a big, important organization, and her good friend had been the president. He was retired and getting elderly. My friend and her husband were invited over to have dinner with this man whom they had known for many years. They knocked on his door. He opened the door – swung it wide open – and said to them, "I don't have a clue who you are, but you're very welcome in my house. Please come in." He was getting Alzheimer's or dementia. They had known each other for years and years, but he didn't remember them. Nevertheless, his disposition was one of friendliness, openness, and acceptance. And he said, "Come into my house." So, they did, and they all had dinner.

I don’t want to imply that this is always the case, but the impression I’ve gotten from talking with different people is that when people start having something like dementia or Alzheimer’s, sometimes the surface functioning or coping mechanisms of the mind begin to fall away. And they no longer have the energy for their usual coping mechanisms. And some of the person’s deeper dispositions begin to stand out more clearly. Some people have a wonderful compensatory surface mind, where they keep a lot of their deep inner angers, sorrows, or issues at bay. This is their way of coping with and understanding how to be in the world. When that coping mechanism falls away, then they are left with their deep issues in some way. And often they don’t have the wherewithal to practice with their issues or work through them. When the mind is declining, they’re just left with their deeper disposition.

For people who have worked through some of their deeper issues, and have settled, healed, or become free of them, then when their mind declines, they’re not left with these difficulty issues like grief or anger. These people are left with something deeper that’s more like, “Welcome into my house. I don’t know who you are, but it’s so nice to see you.” This is a very different disposition of how to be.

I don’t want to generalize too much from this. But I’m trying to use this idea to make the point that Buddhism focuses on inner transformation. On the one hand, part of that inner transformation is in fact letting go of, or bringing to an end to certain dispositions that are not so healthy. One of the key dispositions that Buddhism focuses on ending is hostility. Another deep disposition that Buddhism talks about uprooting is all the variations of greed or lust. The third disposition that Buddhism emphasizes bringing an end to is delusion. When those can somehow come to an end, there is an inner shift in practice.

So, it’s not just a matter of knowing how to bring stronger and stronger mindfulness to our situation. There’s also an inner shift that’s required. On the one hand, I said that with that inner shift, some things come to an end. On the other hand, certain things then have a chance to shine. When there’s a lot of greed, lust, hate, or hostility, there’s very little room for generosity. There’s very little room for love. When there’s a lot of delusion, there is not a lot of room for wisdom.

For many people, as these unhealthy dispositions begin to fall away, then their positive virtues, attributes, and dispositions have a chance to grow and develop. These positive qualities arise not only because there’s space for them, but also when we emphasize and encourage them in practice. Then they can become not just

qualities that we do. Sometimes doing is not very deep. Instead, we become these dispositions in a deeper way. We strengthen these dispositions in how we are. We become not someone who does generosity, but someone who is a generous person. Not someone who does kindness, but someone who has become a kind person.

What we're looking for in Buddhism is not just non-reactive mindfulness in the moment, but rather what it would take to have some deep inner shift – so that we can enter the world from a different disposition, which is more enduring, valuable, and important. Who knows when our mindfulness is not going to be strong enough to handle a situation we're in?

I've known people who have gone into situations where their mindfulness wasn't available to them. They had practiced for years and years, and somehow their situation was too difficult. They had an illness for example, or were facing surgery, or mental decline. Their practice was not available in the usual ways. They became distressed because their practice was what had kept them safe, kept them going, or somehow kept things at bay. Suddenly they were left without the strength of their practice, but they hadn't really changed deeply inside.

Both mindfulness and transformation are important aspects of Buddhism. First is the tremendous importance of nonreactive mindfulness. And the practice of mindfulness itself is not independent of the transformation. It's actually one of the important ways that allows that transformation to happen. But Buddhism also emphasizes a lot of other things. It's not just waiting for the accident of personal transformation. It's not wishful thinking – that if I just do this mindfulness long enough, then something will happen. Rather, it's also being interested in this whole area of our inner life and inner dispositions – of how we are. We consider what are the healthy, appropriate ways of supporting this transformation from unwholesome to wholesome dispositions. Classically, in Buddhism, there is a whole combination of different practices represented by the Eightfold Path, which addresses all of who we are, and is not limited to just the part that has to do with mindfulness.

It's important to orient yourself towards using mindfulness – not just to be present in life moment by moment, like when you see a sunset. "How nice it is to be fully present for the sunset. Isn't this great and wonderful. I can be here now. And then go home and eat my lunch. Oh, be mindful of my lunch. It's so good, and I can taste these flavors of food. The food is so good! This mindfulness is fantastic. I just love it because

the flavors explode in my mouth. Now I know what Buddha must have meant by the power of mindfulness."

The point is not just to have greater flavors as we eat. Some people are oriented towards mindfulness in order to have that kind of pleasure in life. But in this practice, there is a preference for an orientation to become more sensitive – to use mindfulness to support the quality of our inner life.

- What are our dispositions?
- What are our mental or emotional tendencies?
- What is this emotional life?
- What are the motivations that drive us?
- How to become more aware and mindful of them, and then to be the caretakers of that?
- How to be the gardeners in the garden of our heart – and then to start working on it – figuring out healthy, appropriate ways to shift how we are in this deeper way.

Classically in Buddhism practice, one of the central points is not to have an experience of enlightenment, but rather to be a person who is transformed in such a way that they're seen as being enlightened. It's the personal transformation that's important, not the so-called "Now I've attained the highest thing, and I can check that off on my resume." But, rather your resume can say, "I was that way, and now I'm this kind of person."

Your inner life and disposition are something to be deeply cared for, connected to, and valued. I believe that everyone's inner life, or heart if we may call it that, is precious, valuable, well worth caring for, and paying attention to. It's a treasure that you have in there. No one else can be the gardener of your heart for you. May the weeds turn into… I'm trying to avoid saying flowers. It seems a little too sentimental. But, may the weeds turn into non-weeds.