

Dharmette: More about Clarity

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on October 10, 2012

The Buddhist word for the insight practice we do is *vipassanā*. The *passanā* part comes from the verb ‘to see,’ and one meaning of the prefix *vi* is to give emphasis. So *vipassanā* means something like “emphatic seeing.” One way *vipassanā* is translated into English is “clear seeing.” Mindfulness involves seeing clearly.

What does it mean to be clear in our seeing, to see clearly, to be clear about what’s going on? There are different meanings of the word ‘clear.’ One is to be certain or definitive that you really see and know, “This clearly is what’s going on!” As I said earlier today, there are many times when we benefit from being a little clearer about what’s going on. Even when we already know what’s going on to some degree, there’s a difference between *kind of* knowing, and being really *clear* with yourself about what’s happening. It’s like admitting it directly, or fully acknowledging it: “Now I’m clear. I’m really clear. This is what’s happening now.”

It can also mean clarity about one’s purpose. “I’m clear this is what I’m doing right now.” When I was in the

monastery in Japan, I went into the kitchen one day and asked the cook a question. He was chopping vegetables. He put down his knife, very clearly turned towards me, and answered my question. Then he very clearly turned back to his vegetables, picked up his knife, and started chopping. I asked another question. He put down the knife, looked at me, answered my question, and started chopping again. I asked a third question. He put down his knife, looked at me, and said very kindly, “I’m only going to do one thing at a time, and my task right now is to chop the vegetables. This is my purpose; this is what I’m doing here.” I got it – although I was a bit slow. He had a sense of purpose, a job to do. He may have had a time limit to get the meal ready. This was not the time for me to be talking with him, and he was clear about it.

This is being clear or definitive about one’s purpose, or domain, or what the situation is. Be clear about it, as opposed to, “Everything is okay. I’ll just work with this, and accept it as it is. And I’ll learn. When someone’s interrupting my work, I’ll just let go of what I’m supposed to do, and be with that new situation.” I think it is naive to just easily float with everything, when at certain times there is some purpose, and things need to be done a certain way.

Part of clear seeing is to have clarity about the purpose. For example, “This is what I’m doing right now. I’m

practicing mindfulness. I'm practicing meditation." It's been helpful for me, because, still to this day there are times when I sit down to meditate – perhaps because I do it regularly out of habit – I might sit down without having clarity, certainty, or purpose. I might sit down, and start thinking about what's for dinner, what I should buy, or what the menu should be. Then after a while, I remember, "Wait a minute. I'm not here to sit down and do high quality menu planning [laughter]. The reason I've sat down is to be fully present for what's here in some clear way." I remind myself to be *clear* about what I'm doing here. For me, that clarity of establishing my purpose helps me get more rooted or present.

In addition to clarity about the purpose, there's also clarity about what's actually happening. Sometimes I might be thinking about the dinner menu, and I kind of know that I'm thinking about it. I can let go and come back to my breath. But then I keep thinking about the menu, and then let go again. For me there's a qualitative difference between doing that, versus turning towards my thinking mind, sitting up straight, metaphorically standing on my own two feet, and saying clearly, "I'm thinking about food. I'm thinking about the menu. This is what's going on right now." I have real clarity seeing that this is what's happening. It's turning towards something, and fully acknowledging it.

Sometimes I kind of know someone's there. I *kind of*

know my kids want my attention when I'm cooking a meal or doing something else. They're asking for my attention, and I kind of say, "Later." Or if they're doing their homework, "Yeah, the answer to four times four is sixteen." But it's a whole different thing to stop what I'm doing – like the cook who was chopping the vegetables – turn towards them, fully acknowledge them, and say, "I'm here. I see you." I'm clear, and I tell them, "This is not the time." I'm going to speak to them fully – not casually, or kind of on the side, as if answering them is a minor thing.

Many people find it beautiful, and very meaningful when people turn towards them, and are clearly there for them. We do that for ourselves with mindfulness practice. Are we clear about what's happening? In the alchemy of the mind, something very different happens when we clearly acknowledge what's happening. "This is what's happening. I'm clear about it. My mind is out of control, and I'm full of anxiety."

When we have that sense of purpose, clarity, turning towards, and fully acknowledging what is happening, a certain inner strength and independence begin to grow. We find ballast, stability, or calm when we're not caught by what's happening. We're not involved in it, lost in it, or wandering around.

Clarity or clear seeing can also mean that the seeing

becomes clear. Our seeing is not obscured by our desires, biases, aversions, fears, judgments, or by our self-identity issues tied up in it all. Seeing starts to become clearer and clearer. We see things as they are – more directly without the filter of a lot of stuff between us and that.

Part of the purpose of relaxing and calming down in meditation is so that there are fewer and fewer filters between us and our experience. At some point, seeing itself begins to sense that our awareness is now becoming clear. In a similar way, it's like how the air becomes clear when the rain or the wind blows away the smog. It's quite something to look out and see the hills across the bay when the air is completely clean. It doesn't happen that often here in the Bay Area, but when it does, it's remarkable. In the same way, our attention can become clearer and clearer, and it's quite a remarkable thing to have that clarity.

When clarity becomes strong enough, it's like an entity in itself – a kind of force, strength, or capacity that's there. One advantage of this clarity – one of the opportunities in it – is that it can begin shifting where we think it's valuable to keep our attention, or to focus our life on. For many people, their attention, focus, and preoccupation is with their identity issues: what they're trying to do in life, what they're trying to accomplish, what they're running away from. There's all this stuff in

their life that they're caught up in. When this sense of clarity becomes stronger, it starts feeling very valuable. Maybe it's similar to the clear sky. If you don't see very far across the bay, local things become important. You're focusing on the cars, the people, and the things around you. Even though a clear sky is not a thing, you say, "Wow. This is quite something!" And then you are willing to let go of the preoccupation with things because there's this beautiful space all around.

It is the same way with the mind. There is this beautiful space or clarity in the mind – and that has value, meaning, satisfaction, and happiness in it. When the clarity becomes strong enough, it can create a dramatic shift for those who are willing to let go of preoccupations, and they can take up residence – abiding in the clarity, rather than in the stuff of life. It doesn't mean that we dismiss our concerns, but we have a very different relationship with them.

What can also shift in that clarity is the recognition that ideas, thoughts, and concerns about self are not really needed. They are not part of the clarity, but rather part of the obstructions. Even the sense of separation that there's something out there that I'm clear about, and I'm here and clearly aware of what's out there – that's just more extra stuff. There's just clarity. There doesn't have to be any subject or object, or self or not-self in it. There's just clarity, and it's a beautiful thing.

In English the word 'clear' – clear seeing – is very rich, with many connotations that speak well about aspects of this insight practice. Maybe there are more meanings of 'clear' I haven't covered. But you might think of clarity as a closely connected feature of mindfulness practice.