

Dharmette: What Am I Leaving Out?

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsda1 on February 15, 2012

One of the simplest definitions for mindfulness practice is paying attention to the present moment with a non-reactive awareness, non-judgmental awareness. Pay attention and just notice what's happening in the present moment. But this definition is a little too simplistic. Sometimes people focus only on what's most compelling in the present moment, or focus only on their breath in the present moment. But it's important to be aware that the mind is a selection machine. The mind selects out of the environment what it wants to focus on, what it wants to pay attention to. This can be really obvious. When I'm at home with my older son, he sometimes watches TV programs on the computer. When it's time for dinner, I'll call out his name [laughs]. I don't know how much he's absorbed in the TV show, or how much he's choosing not to notice that I am calling out his name, but in that selection process he's focused on something else.

The mind is always selecting out of the environment what it wants to focus on. Some people give priority to certain things. So the fact that something is compelling in the moment has partly to do with the choices the

mind is making. You might be sitting in meditation and your knee is hurting. The instruction is to pay attention to the most predominant experience, so you bring your attention to the knee hurting, innocently thinking, “Well, that’s the strongest experience in the moment.” But the reason it’s predominant is because there’s fear around physical pain, or aversion to pain. Pain has a lot of meaning, and so, at the first hint of pain, the mind will select that pain much more readily than it would select something pleasant or enjoyable.

Someone else may place a lot of meaning and value on something pleasant and enjoyable, and so their mind goes there and selects that out of the environment more readily than the pain. Often a selection process is going on.

In most human beings there seems to be a preference [laughs] for selecting suffering or a preference for selecting what is not working very well – not everyone, not all the time. An interesting question for people who do mindfulness practice is to ask from time to time, “What am I leaving out? What am I not noticing, given that there’s always some selection process going on. I can’t be aware of everything that goes on in every moment. What important things have I left out?”

Spend a little time periodically looking around, and asking, “What else is there here? If I don’t literally follow

the instructions about how I'm supposed to stay with the breath, or if I don't just stay with the usual things I'm aware of, then what else is going on here that maybe I haven't noticed?"

Here is an example. I am really focused in meditation, spending a lot of time focusing on the body, staying with the breath, experiencing the breathing. After a while, if I feel I've been focusing for a long time on the physical aspect of breathing, I'll come out a little, step back out from that state, and ask myself if there is some emotion or feeling tone or mental attitude that I haven't noticed because I'm so involved with the breathing? I may find nothing particularly interesting, but sometimes I'll notice that there is something else that is useful to take into account.

If I spend a lot of time focused on my emotions, then after a while I might ask, "What's going on in the body as I do this? What's going on in the mind?"

I may spend a lot of time focusing on hearing sounds. I don't know what that drilling was. Hearing drilling, and just being focused on the drilling, involved with just hearing the sound of the drilling, I am not noticing my aversion to the drilling. So, you step back and ask, "What else is going on here?"

The question of what else is going on is sometimes a

useful question. You don't want to be neurotically pursuing all the things you can't possibly know; but just from time to time ask if there is anything else that you haven't included. What are you leaving out of the experience? What is left out can be a little more evaluative. I mean that sometimes what is left out is what is working well, what's going well. Since some people have a very strong tendency to choose what's not working well, what the problems are. So sometimes it's useful to come out of that and ask what is going well. What blessings are here? What wonderful is happening now? Something wonderful is always happening. Can you look around and see what is beneficial, what is good? What is the goodness here in this experience right now?

It could be as simple as the fact that you're breathing relatively easily [laughs]. People have trouble breathing, and right now you're breathing relatively easily. You might be in a funk being here at IMC, dealing with your life issues and problems, or kind of depressed and upset. But you're in a pretty safe environment. You can sit with a group twenty people or so. And you can sit with your eyes closed, not worried about anybody asking you anything, or pouncing on you, or stealing your wallet. These are all basically good people who like to meditate. It's pretty wonderful to be with a group of people like this. Can you pull yourself out of your funk and see that there is something good going on?

Then, if you spend all your time focused on what's great, occasionally it's good to ask what else you are leaving out? Maybe it's not all great. Maybe there is some suffering. Maybe you're carrying some tension or stress, or maybe there are some challenges going on. Occasionally you find people who overemphasize the positive, with blinders on.

The goal is eventually to be able to be balanced, to take it all in in an easy, uninhibited way, so that we are informed by the full spectrum of what's happening in the present moment, both what's going well and what's not going well, equally. In taking in the full spectrum, we can begin to have some equanimity about it, some peace, some ability to hold it all.

I'll end this talk by encouraging you all to look around from time to time and see what else is going on that you haven't noticed, that you haven't paid enough attention to. Then, with a little particular emphasis, look around from time to time and see what is going well. See how that is for you.