

Dharmette: Shifting Perspectives

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on April 8, 2015

One of the little sayings in the Vipassana world is that mindfulness is not about seeing something new, but rather seeing in a new way. People are sometimes looking for something, as opposed to giving importance to *how* we look. So, we emphasize seeing in a new way, because sometimes the old ways of seeing – the old perspectives we use – are not going to help.

If we see the world as a battlefield, and we are looking for the solution by winning the battle, or fighting the battle better, then even if we win the war, we are still at war. We still see it through that perspective: we are just going to see more war. If we see the world as a place that is frightening, and we are trying to figure out how to deal with a frightening world, and maybe temporarily we figure out some way to be safe, the eyes still see the world as a frightening place. You still have to hide in your safe place, and you still see it in a frightening way. If you see the world as a place where the most successful, best person is the one who has the most pleasure, then you pursue pleasure and get all the pleasure you want, but that perspective is still there afterwards.

Another perspective is that of self. These ideas about who we are, who we should be, and our identity are very tricky. If we have a really fixed, strong idea of who we have to be, who we're supposed to be, or who we are – the more fixed that idea is, the more fragile and brittle we are – and the more easily we can feel threatened. If we think what we are supposed to do is to have this sense, or this idea of self, and the more it's threatened, the more we look for a solution that involves reinforcing the self.

I don't know if this is the best example, but imagine if I think I'm supposed to be the most macho guy at IMC – like that's a really important part of my identity. I mean, I grew up in America. I probably picked up a few macho values, and this is really important. Your status in the community goes up the more macho you are. I need to make sure that I'm seen that way and respected that way. But I've noticed that a few of you don't quite treat me that way, like I'm super macho. I feel hurt; I feel disoriented. But it's so important to be macho. So, I'll come dressed properly with macho clothes, and have a swagger, and I'm going to do all the things that reinforce the idea that I'm macho. But that makes me more brittle, because you guys are not going to accommodate me. So, then I feel more hurt, and try harder. As long as I think that's what I have to do – to have this kind of self, and the solution is through the perspective in being that

kind of person – then I’m swirling in *saṃsāra*. I’m swirling all around in a way that there is no escape.

There is no escape. This is the mythology of Buddhism, that you have *saṃsāra* – this endless wandering in circles. There is no escape within the circle itself. There is no escape within certain mind sets. You have to find some way to step out of them, and see in a new way. So, part of the function of meditation practice is to relax us, to calm us down enough so that our eyes don’t have a veil or a filter through which we are always seeing things. We can calm down, slow down, refresh the mind, and see in a fresh way. Sometimes we see that the problems we had weren’t problems after all. Some problems we have don’t really exist. And then we realize that if we relax, slow down, and take a break, we can see in a new way.

I think that a fair number of people who practice meditation continue to try to think their way out of their problems, or their life situations. They sit in meditation – and think, and think, and figure, and understand. If you read a lot of books on Buddhism, or listen to a lot of ideas about Buddhism – like on Audio Dharma, or if you listen too much to me – It can seem to be just ideas. “If I move these ideas around in my head, and get the right idea, get the right understanding, then it should all work out.” Then we go back, and study the scriptures and Buddhist texts more to get the ideas. And move them

around a little bit. It'll all kind of click, and it will all be fine.

The idea of thinking our way out of our problems doesn't work very well. Especially if the framework of the thinking is still in the old mode of the war, or the danger, or whatever it is that we are seeing. So how do we step out? How do we change? The obvious thing we would say in our mindfulness tradition is we rely on direct seeing, on mindfulness. But I think some people who do mindfulness practice are relying too much on mindfulness, as if: "If I just look better. I just have to see better. I just have to look and recognize. And know this is what's happening. Non-reactive awareness. Just this. Just this. Then everything would be okay."

How we see the world, how we see ourselves, how we see our problems has a lot to do with the state of mind we are in. So, if I'm in an angry state of mind, I am more likely to see the world as full of problems. If I am in a greedy state of mind, I am going to see the world as a place where I am going to get what I want. If I am in an insecure state of mind, then I will see all of the challenges and threats to my machoism – or whatever it might be, right?

Sometimes what's really helpful is to change the state we're in. And in a new state, we have a new perspective and can see in a new way. Part of the function of

meditation practice is not just to see clearly, but to actually help us change our state. To get calmer, for example – that's a change of state. Or to be more relaxed. To be more accepting. To be more loving, more compassionate. To have more compassion for the situation.

Sometimes it's useful in practice and in life to consider the state you're in. And are there some legal, easy, appropriate ways to change your state? Rather than relying only on thinking to solve your problems. Not only relying only on so-called mindfulness just to see, and see, and see what's there. What can you do to change your state? Sometimes for people who are overly busy, it might be just taking a break – taking a vacation, or going for a walk in the park to get some fresh air. Sometimes it might mean taking a nap. Sometimes it might mean doing something that is really fun and playful. Being playful is great. If you take this Buddhism, this practice too seriously, you're in trouble. Maybe some playfulness will change your state somehow.

Do you have good, appropriate ways to change your state? Being careful – without: getting attached to good states; or thinking that your practice is only good or successful if you have good states; or that you are somehow wrong if you have unhealthy states. Within reason – without being too attached, or too forceful, or expecting too much out of this – are there simple ways

to change your state so you can see your situation in a better way?

Take a yoga class. Yoga can be a great way to change your state. Some people get more traction from an hour yoga class than they do from an hour of meditation. Especially people living busy urban lives. Sometimes you need to do something strong to get out of the swirl of *papañca* – the swirl of mental perspectives we are caught in.

So, be very careful with the perspectives you live in. And be very careful that you aren't trying to solve your problems from a perspective for which there is no solution. The image in Buddhism is that if you are stuck in quicksand, and you push down with one foot, that foot will sink deeper. Then you push down with the other foot to get yourself out, and you go even deeper. Some perspectives keep you entrenched – keep you mired in the mud, going deeper and deeper.

You want to shift and change perspectives. Shift and change even the state you are in, in some simple way. Then you might be in a much better place to see what's really going on. What's really happening with you. What's important for you.

For some of you, I want to say that I hope that coming to IMC this Wednesday morning has that function for

you. Stepping away from your normal life for a couple of hours, being quiet, meditating in this kind of stillness, letting things fall and settle away perhaps. That it is kind of a place to change your perspective, or to change your state a little bit, so that when you go back, you can see from a different perspective than you could if you had just kept going in the usual mode.

Thank you.