Dharmette: Something about Nothing

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on March 25, 2012

In terms of a Dharma talk today I was thinking about what to say, and reflecting on how I felt. Sometimes I feel that it's a little bit odd, this role being a meditation teacher. In meditation when I sit, my mind often gets kind of empty, and I don't have much to say. Why should you say anything? But then as a teacher, you're expected to say something. So, how do I do that? I could try to say something about nothing, and try to explain how nothing is significant and important. I'll start with a few stories.

In the early '60s, Suzuki Roshi, a Zen teacher who came from Japan, was teaching at the Japanese temple in Japan town. And at a neighboring Buddhist temple, a Japanese Pure Land temple, there was a young Japanese minister named Reverend Ogui, who had just come from Japan and spoke almost no English. And he started coming and sitting Zen meditation with Suzuki Roshi. This is very unusual, because in Japan, there are different sects of Buddhism that are quite segregated from each other. Reverend Ogui came, and did zazen, and hung out with Suzuki Roshi for a few years. And at

some point, Suzuki Roshi asked Reverend Ogui to give a Dharma talk at the Zen Center. And Reverend Ogui said, “No I can’t. My English is not good enough.” The next time Reverend Ogui came to the Zen Center to hear a Dharma talk from Suzuki Roshi, this is the Dharma talk he heard: “Today is today. Today is not tomorrow. Tomorrow is not today. Today is not yesterday. Yesterday is not today. Today is today.” It was a Dharma talk for which you needed five English words, and Reverend Ogui got the message [laughs]. He told me the story many years later.

It might seem like a silly story, but there is something profound about, “Today is today.” How often are we today? How often are we caught up in the future or the past, and never question what is the future, and what is the past? We can give tremendous amount of authority to the future and the past. Some people live mostly in the future. Some people live mostly in the past – ‘live’ in the sense of where their mind is. And what is it? There’s the future that you’re planning for. How often does it occur? I know I’ve have a lot of futures that never happened. And those futures that never happened – what were they when I was thinking them? Kind of a virtual reality. And so to be here – now – today.

Trudy Goodman – who is a Vipassanā teacher in Los Angeles – told me this story. She went to a convention of Buddhist teachers, leaders, priests, monks. I think

she said it was in Vietnam, maybe in the 1990s. Buddhist leaders from all over Asia I guess were there. And Mahā Ghosānanda came to give a keynote speech at this big convention. Mahā Ghosānanda was one of the few Buddhist monks to survive the Pol Pot destruction of Cambodia. He survived because he was practicing and studying in Thailand. After the downfall of Pol Pot, he went back to try to help his country, and try to revive Buddhism. He was a Ghandi-ish kind of person. I met him, a beautiful man: very simple, humble, clean man. He went back to Cambodia and became the Supreme Patriarch because there was no-one else to do it. He was the last man standing. So here, as the Supreme Patriarch, he was asked to give the keynote address to the convention. He came up on the podium, and he began his talk. I guess Cambodia and Vietnam have a background of French colonization, so maybe that's why he spoke in French. What he did was to conjugate the verb 'to be' in French: *je suis, tu es, nous sommes* – "I am, you are, we are, they are, he is, she is." And as he was speaking, people started to cry. "I am, you are, we are?" I don't know how many French words it takes to give that talk. But what is it that can be so profound that people cry in conjugating the French verb 'to be?' What gets recognized in people's minds and hearts? What do they hear? What do they touch? What happens to you, just to be? "I am."

This is a story I've told sometimes of when I was fifteen.

I lived for a while at a boarding school. It was in a very beautiful location, high in the mountains. Above us were the higher mountains with beautiful snow-capped mountains, and below beautiful green valleys. Beautiful blue skies! It's a beautiful place to go to school, except that it was a reform school. And I remember I was walking on the dirt roads in the mountains with a seventeen year old friend, and I was just in awe of this place. It felt like somehow, something inside of me stopped or opened in wonder. And I turned to my friend, without really wanting an answer, but just to express what I was feeling, and I said, "Why are we here? Why are we alive? What is this?" Unfortunately for me, I think, he turned to me and said, "Don't be silly!" And something in my heart just closed up.

It took many years for that part of me to open again. But why is any of this here? How often do you ask and look around? Why is this here, any of it? What's going on here? It's kind of a miracle. It's been said that if you really want to experience a miracle, follow your next breath. To breathe is a miracle; to have a thought is a miracle.

How often do we find some profundity in just being alive? How often do we have a sense of amazement? Wow! Why does anything exist? How did this happen?

A very significant moment in my life was on the Bay

Bridge in about 1978 or ’79. I was driving across the Bay Bridge with Mel Weitsman, who was my Zen teacher. Back then, he had a 1960s Volkswagen bug. He was giving me a ride, and he was asking me about myself. What I was up to? I told him what I was doing. I don’t know if I was in the middle of telling him, or had finished, but he turned to me and said, very simply, “Just to be alive is enough.”

Just to be alive is enough. And somehow that just touched something inside of me, and resonated. Or was so meaningful that something inside of me just let go, and relaxed. It’s enough to be alive! How often do we have to prove ourselves? How often do we have to protect ourselves and do something different, or get something or acquire something, or be the right kind of person, or do all kinds of stuff? How often is just being alive enough? How often just being is enough?

And I know from being a teacher on retreats – it happened this week as well – I’ve seen that people stop their busy lives to sit still for a week, to sit still for half an hour: be mindful, be present to meditate, do nothing, just be – and it’s boring [laughs]. Why would anyone want to do this? And not only sometimes it’s boring, but there’s resistance. And the lawyers in the mind come up to explain why this is the most ridiculous thing in the world to do, because there are important things to be done, and important things to think, important things to

avoid and to run away from. There's all this stuff.

The mind has tremendous capacity to be churning around, spinning around, and thinking and planning and fantasizing and wanting and averting. I think what happens, often enough in some minds, is that there's this momentum that gets set in motion, which is self-propelling. And if you sit down to meditate – to be quiet – it doesn't just stop. The spinning of the mind continues. And that spinning of the mind spins because it's being fueled by things like: it's not enough just to be. I have to get things. I have to fix things. I have to protect myself. I have to have pleasure. I have to have success. I have to have a relationship. I have to; I have to; I have to. There's a lot of authority in that. And with that authority, and with that momentum, and with that movement of the mind, and always wanting – it can seem that the meaning in our life, the success of our life, is at the other end of those thoughts: the fulfillment of those thoughts. Often it's like the gold pot at the end of the rainbow. People look for the gold pot forever, but it's not to be found.

To stop the searching, stop the looking, stop the wanting to do with the mind, the spinning of the mind: it can be a very difficult transition because the authority is in getting and doing and wanting and thinking. That's where the value seems to be. To stop and interrupt that can seem very boring. It can seem like nothing, like

there’s no value. To have nothing has no value, right? Obviously, nothing is nothing. Nothing is less than something. Isn’t something better than nothing?

But to sit and discover that having nothing in the mind – churning, agitated, wanting, averting, pushing – to let the mind come to rest – to let the desiring mind rest – and to open the eyes and see with wonder, with amazement, to appreciate each other directly for being fellow sentient beings, as opposed to seeing each other through the filter of our desires and wants and aversions and fears and all these ideas we have – it’s a beautiful thing.

One of the things that often happens on retreat is that, by the end of the retreat, so much has dropped away, that when people finally break silence and talk, they talk with so much friendship and warmth. So much of the usual social ways in which people see each other fall away. We meet more as equals. It’s a beautiful thing!

What does it take? What perspective does it take? What approach does it take? Where am I? Or today is today? Or just to be alive is enough? Where does that express something really deep and meaningful? And what prevents it? What are the protests that say, “Well that can’t be enough! I have important things to do! I’m an important person! I can’t stop – I have important things to do!”

That’s all I have for today. I am. You are. And wonderfully, we are together. Thank you for being here today.