

Dharmette: Don't Complain – Investigate

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsda1 on January 19, 2011

There is a very challenging teaching that when someone takes refuge in Buddhism – meaning they really commit their life to the orientation, values and practice of Buddhism – then they have nothing more to complain about. Isn't that interesting? Another way of saying this is that people who practice mindfulness don't complain; they investigate.

Complaining stops something; it somehow contracts. When I think of complaining, I don't mean going to the Complaint Department and saying that something needs to change. But rather, complaining means there is resisting, stopping, or giving up responsibility. With investigation, we put our effort into something that is open. Complaining closes, but investigation opens into what the possibilities are. How can I learn from this? How can I learn from mistakes? How can I learn from what's difficult here?

For someone who is involved in Buddhist practice, one of the primary things we investigate is not what's wrong

with other people, but rather what is happening here for us. If you find yourself wanting to complain, then turn the attention back and see what is it that you're holding onto. What am I attached to? What am I feeling? What am I believing? What's going on for me here?

See that there is a path to being open and fluid. Not that we can always be open or fluid, but we can be engaged in the process of investigation. Simply saying, "What's going on here?" is a very different response from saying that what's going on here is wrong – to feel that we're stuck, that there is no way forward for us. Or we have to give up, sink down, be oppressed, or be a victim. The kind of complaining that comes from that doesn't fit in this practice, because the practice is to always be open and to learn. What can I learn from this situation? What's the way forward to freedom in this situation?

A friend of mine told me that when he ran a business, he told his employees that no one was ever going to be fired for making a mistake. But they would get fired if they didn't learn from their mistakes. I thought that was pretty good. A few of us have probably made mistakes from time to time. It does happen, right? So we can complain about ourselves and be upset, or we can learn from our mistakes. The approach of Buddhism is to continually say, "What can I learn from this?" Buddhism doesn't say that everything is fine and dandy, but rather that we have a life with a lot of suffering, difficulties,

mistakes, failures, and things that cause harm. How can we learn from that? How can we learn to be better people? How can we learn to be people who don't add further harm? How can we be more at ease, and respond from that ease in a way that's hopefully a strong response when necessary. So in mindfulness we don't complain; we investigate.

There was a great sign posted in the dining room at Spirit Rock many years ago. It was a sign from the cooks to the retreatants that said: "It is our practice to make the best food that we can, and when we don't, then it's your practice." [laughter] I think they were counting on the fact that the retreatants trusted that the cooks were doing the best job they could. That's what they were really trying to do, but of course they were going to fail. When the food got burned or had too much salt, it became the practice of the retreatants to work with that – with their reactions, judgments, aversion, anger, whatever goes on. See what comes up and practice with that, as opposed to tightening up around complaint. And the rest of the afternoon, sitting in the meditation hall thinking, "Oh, those cooks, how could they? This is a personal affront to me. I'll have to write a letter to the president of the board of Spirit Rock." You could do that, but the path of practice is not necessarily found in the letter. It is found in understanding how we're attached or caught, and then freeing ourselves from that caughtness. That's where the practice is. If

we're not caught, then hopefully we have access to the wisdom to know whether we need to write a letter or not. If we need to write a letter, then it's easier to write it, because we're not caught by anything, and it comes across more clearly.

You might spend a little bit of time this week noticing if you find yourself complaining about something. You probably won't. But just in case you find yourself complaining about something, notice that you're doing it, and see if you can turn it around. Rather than staying on the complaint, transform it to investigation. What is going on here? What's happening here? Rather than staying with, "I don't like this," ask, "What is this?"

"What is this?" means not only the thing you don't like, but also, "What is this here with me? What is my response? What's happening here with me?" "What is this?" is the primary Vipassanā question. What's going on here?

So certainly my wish for this week is that you get at least one good complaint to practice with [laughter]. Now I just could go on and on and talk until 12:30 or 1:00, which would give you something to complain about [laughter]. But it won't work because the lights will turn off and you guys will just leave. So we'll have to figure out something different.

So don't complain, investigate.