

Dharmette: A Good Enough Practice

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on June 13, 2012

We have a ping-pong table at home, and two days ago I was playing with my fourteen-year-old son. Last year we played a lot, and periodically, we still play a lot. A year and a half ago he was intensely competitive, really working hard to beat me. Eventually, about a year ago, he got pretty good and beat me regularly. Then we didn't play for almost a year. But in the last couple of weeks we've started playing again. Right now he's not as good as I am, and mostly I've been beating him. On Monday night we were playing, and I won the first two games. He was trying his best, working really hard. He used to have a really good return – it was almost defenseless for me. But he doesn't quite have that technique now. So we played two games, and he lost. Then he wanted to play one more game, and said, "With this game, I'm just going to be really relaxed. I'm going to relax." In fact, he stayed really relaxed. All he tried to do was relax when he'd get the ball back. That's all he tried to do – and he beat me [laughter].

I thought that was a great lesson for him. And, in fact, the reason I thought of this is that it represents a nice lesson for many areas in life. When I came to IMC to

teach that evening, only a half an hour after the game, someone came up to me and described how he had been involved in three very intense conversations that didn't go well for him. He realized he was too attached to wanting things a certain way, and he was self-righteous, which turned people off so they didn't want to listen to him. I told him that story – how sometimes, if you're relaxed in what you want, people will listen to you more carefully. And then, if you are not so intense about it, maybe you'll be more likely to get what you need or want.

I think the same is true with Buddhist practice. It really helps to be relaxed about it – relaxed about yourself and about what you are doing. But not so relaxed that you are not diligent. The balance is about being diligent, making good continuous effort – doing your best, but being relaxed. When you do Buddhist practice, sometimes you don't want to give it all the effort you possibly can, because if you give it your all, you will probably mess it up. Some people feel they have to try a lot, and be a good practitioner. But I think that if you try to be too good a practitioner, you're in trouble.

Probably what works best for the unfolding of practice is for your practice to be good enough. If you try to do anything more than good enough, you might get in trouble. People strive, push, have expectations, measure themselves, and they end up like my son who

lost his first two games. In the game he won, he didn't look like a hot player. He just gently tapped the ball back. The returns were not that dramatic. But what happened was that I wasn't able to make the correction fast enough. I wasn't able to get relaxed fast enough to match his being relaxed. I was still trying a bit too much. So maybe next time, I'll try to do the relaxed thing in ping-pong.

One reason this works in Buddhist practice is that the heart of what we are trying to do in order to free the heart is to let go of how we're tight, or clinging, or attached. Being relaxed is like the doorway through which it is easier to let go of what you're clinging to or holding onto.

For some people it's counter-intuitive to relax, because it's so important to do, to accomplish, and to be the one who can do it. This makes some sense, because when many people come to any kind of spiritual practice, there's a huge need for the kind of support and guidance a spiritual practice can provide. It's not unusual for people to come with great personal needs, crises, and challenges. Sometimes the need is so great to get help that the idea that you're supposed to relax is counter-intuitive. So people grab on and hold on. They huff and puff, and try really hard.

Then there's the other end of the spectrum – the

pendulum can swing. Sometimes when practice is working – when, for example, meditation is comfortable, and you settle down and learn not to strive, then the danger is complacency. If people are too relaxed, it's easier to spend a lot of meditation time – years sometimes – falling asleep, dozing, being lulled by meditation. Everything's cool. So managing the balance between being relaxed and diligent is a very important aspect of practice.

Some people think things have to be only one way. In terms of meditation practice, I think maybe it has to be at least two ways at the same time. It has to be both effort and relaxation. It's not just about making effort, and not just about being relaxed. It's about doing both simultaneously. How do you balance that? How do you find balance where both are going on, so that it's not just one way, but two ways?

A lot of people in America emphasize the value of practicing acceptance when doing mindfulness practice – to be very accepting of your situation. But if accepting is all you do, then it's too easy to become complacent, to condone things that shouldn't be, and to actually strengthen qualities of mind that shouldn't be strengthened. Acceptance has to be paired with real discernment, recognition – an evaluation of what is helpful and what's not helpful. To really see that, yes, I can accept everything – meaning I'm not going to cling,

nor resist anything – but I’m also going to look at what is useful and not useful.

If what I’m doing now is not useful, and I can accept it in a certain kind of way: I’m not going to resist it or cling to it. But it doesn’t mean I just have to let it continue merrily on its way. I’ve known people who have been too much on the acceptance side of Buddhist practice, and they end up just accepting a wandering mind. “Oh, it’s just a wandering mind. I just have to accept it. It’s what my mind does, and I just let it be. I’m learning a little bit about what my wandering mind is.” This doesn’t serve them well. If anything, it may reinforce a certain addiction to thinking.

So, next time you play ping-pong, try a balanced, relaxed effort.