Dharmette: Questions and Answers

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on January 26, 2011

Good morning. This morning I actually have nothing to talk about. So I think that's a good day to see if you have any questions you'd like to bring up, and I'll try to respond.

Practitioner 1: How do you practice when you're sick?

Gil: It's a good question, and it depends on how you're sick. One of the first things is to be mindful of what it's like to be sick, and your reactions to it. Mindfulness works in many ways, but an important way that mindfulness works is that you pay attention to what your relationship is to what's happening. Sometimes it is very fruitful to look at the relationship, because that's something you can do something about. There are many situations in life where you can't do something about the event – you might get sick, you might get really sick, you might be dying, you might die. Sooner or later that's going to happen. You might not have much choice in the matter, but you might relate to it in a way that either causes you a tremendous amount of suffering, or hold it in a way that actually can be freeing and liberating.

People will suffer a lot extra because of how they relate. When we're sick, we can feel depressed, embarrassed, guilty, angry, or discouraged. Many kinds of secondary reactions might be there. Mindfulness can help you free yourself from the secondary reactions. Just let your self be sick in a simple way. It's bad enough to be sick. You can't expect not to be sick, and you'll probably heal a lot better if you don't add the secondary reactions on top of it. So mindfulness can be a great help. Just look at it and understand it. That's one thing to do. You'll be surprised at how many secondary reactions there are that maybe you didn't think were there.

When I'm sick in bed, I do a lot of mindfulness of the body, where I focus on my body and all the ways there might be some tension or holding. My meditation practice in bed has a lot to do with just relaxing the body, and looking at how deeply I can get relaxed in my body. Anything else seems hard to do – like following the breath. I find the breath, but then I slip right off. But somehow being connected to the body that's sick and relaxing into and with it seems to help. It's also probably healing just to relax. And it's good to get rest when you're sick, and drink a lot of fluids.

Another thing that happens when you're mindful is that you can sometimes be more likely to pick up the signals inside that tell what you need in order to take care of

yourself when you're sick. If you're mindful and attentive to what's going on, you might know when you need sleep. Depending upon what kind of sickness you have, maybe you need to go to the doctor, or do something practical for it. Sometimes it can be quite subtle. When I'm sick, sometimes the foods I want to eat change. I pay attention to the particular foods I feel I want to eat. I can't give you a medical reason why those foods are the right things, but I feel strongly drawn towards them. I trust that somehow my body knows that this is what I need to do right now. These are the things that occur to me.

Practitioner 2: I wonder if you could share a few thoughts about how to be mindful of sadness and grief without feeling like you're wallowing, or you're sitting down and saying I'm going to try and feel bad [laughs].

Gil: Good, thank you. I think that some of the same things apply. Sometimes rather than being mindful of the grief directly, it's good to be mindful of the secondary reactions, beliefs and identities that are connected to it. With grief and sadness, there can be identities. It's okay to grieve for a day or two or a month or two, but then we feel embarrassed because people tell us we're supposed to be over it by now. The whole idea that I should be over it and it's not okay to grieve is a secondary reaction that can cause suffering, embarrassment, anger, and confusion.

There are a lot of different secondary things that can go on. Sometimes people are attached to their grief or sadness, and that's secondary as well. People can get an identity from the support they receive from others. Because they're staying there in their grief, they hold onto it to get the support or to be seen in a certain way. Some people hold onto grief and sadness because it's a tangible connection to the one they've lost. Sometimes people don't want to give up their grief because they feel that they'll lose what they lost or that it's disrespectful. They have a big loss when someone dies, and think that they if they don't grieve, then that would be disrespectful. Those are all kinds of secondary things.

It's important to see these, come to terms with them and work through them. Part of the advantage of looking at secondary reactions is that if they really can't be let go of, then maybe they can be put aside enough that you can feel the primary emotion more fully. One of the ways to feel sadness or grief is to feel it in the body, and give it permission to be there. Generally grief or sadness is part of a very natural process moving through us, and unfolding within us. If we can get almost out of the way, and let the natural process unfold, then generally the body or the heart knows what to do – whether it takes a few months or a few hours.

A friend of mine lost many people in one year – a father, brother, best friend. She had a tremendous amount of grief, which would come in waves. When she went on ten-day meditation retreats, the grief was much more intense, although the waves only lasted for a few minutes as opposed to a few hours. That's because being on retreat is really a way of getting out of the way more fully. Meditation is that way. Get out of the way and just let it come, and wash through. It can be more intense, but it's cleaner and more complete.

Then how do you differentiate between wallowing in grief or sadness, and just have it in a clean way? With wallowing, usually there's self-pity: "poor me." There's usually a leaning into it, or collapsing that goes on. It's always good to keep the symbolic image of the Buddha sitting in meditation in mind. The Buddha is sitting so upright. The idea of being upright in the midst of our challenges is a really beautiful thing. It doesn't mean we deny or avoid them. Staying upright means we're not collapsing with our grief, or being pushed around by it. Just use your posture. So if a person who is grieving is going like this [collapsing inward], chances are they are kind of lost in it too much or wallowing. But if you sit upright and allow the grief to wash through, it's harder to wallow. It's harder to have self-pity or be caught in it if you use your posture as a good thing. Those are things that occur to me. Does that seem okay?

Okay. Sickness, sadness, grief, what else is there?

Practitioner 3: How about anger?

Gil: How about anger? [Laugher] Well, it involves some of the same things, like studying the secondary things. There are a lot of secondary things with anger, which come from our families, culture, and many different places about how we're supposed to be with anger. We're not supposed to express it; we are supposed to express it. It's okay to be angry; it's not okay to be angry. People have histories with anger. Some people are traumatized, because maybe once upon a time they were angry and got physically hit really badly for it – their parents slapped them. Now they're afraid of their own anger, and so there's fear connected to it. There are a lot of secondary things that go on.

One of the great advantages of meditation is that it is a really safe place to be angry because you're not acting on it. You're committed to not moving for a certain period of time, so you know that you're not going to punch anyone out, or make any mistakes with your words. So you sit there. It's a safe place to really feel it, and let go of all the secondary judgments about it, like it's not okay to be an angry person. No one needs to know. You have this beautiful place and permission to feel angry, and let it just bubble through so that you can see it and get to know better. I find with anger it's good

to find some way to let it come through in order to listen more deeply to it. What else is going on? Anger itself, more often than not, is a secondary emotion. But it's very hard to see what's primary unless you really let it move through you.

Practitioner 3: Well I feel like there is some social injustice about particular opinions that I'm dealing with. And so I get angry. In meditation, I resolve the anger itself. But then how can we address the social issues?

Gil: Well if there are social issues that you feel are important to address I really hope you engage in that process. The fact that you're no longer angry – I hope you still have the motivation to engage.

Practitioner 3: But it's hard to engage without getting angry. So if I'm on the cushion, I can kind of manage it. If I try to address it, it reoccurs and …

Gil: Yes, I don't know either. It is hard to do. So this practice here is not trying to get us to stop being an activist, but rather to be an activist without the anger. It might be compassion that motivates you. So you might see if you can find a different motivation. Don't just let go of your anger, but see what else motivates you to act, for example, like compassion or something. Then see if you have confidence in that other motivation, because if you don't have confidence in compassion as

motivating, then you feel powerless. Powerless people tend to succumb to anger much more quickly. But if you have a sense of personal power, at least you can engage the best you can. You might not get your way, but at least you can engage out of compassion, for example. Then maybe there is less of a need to get angry.

I don't know how you are when you're angry, but some people make tremendous devastation in the world if they're angry. They should really maybe take a year off [laughs], and deal with it before they go on. Buddhism basically says that it's not useful to be angry, but there can be ferocity. You can have ferocious motivation that's not angry, like ferocious compassion when you say, "No, this is not okay!" but there is no anger or hostility in it. In order to work through this link between anger and activism, sometimes it is important to differentiate between what's anger and what's ferocity. Like a ferocious "No!" – you're not going to hurt anybody. You're just taking your stand – "No. You have to deal with me, and I'm not moving" – in a ferocious way. So ferocity at the right time is a beautiful thing.

Another thing I want to say is that sometimes if anger is relatively mild, it's not a sin [laughs]. Maybe it's okay to learn how to negotiate that world of anger by giving into it a little bit, and acting based on it a little bit, as long as you think you're not going to cause a lot of harm. May

be you'll learn by doing, rather than holding it and bottling it up. You think angry, and do it in an angry way. Then you can refine it, work on it, and clarify it.

Okay, well: sickness, grief, anger… we better stop [laughter].

Practitioner 4: What about happiness?

Gil: What about happiness? That's what we do for lunch.