

Dharmette: The Art of Practice and Life

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on April 6, 2016

An important part of the art of practice – and probably the art of life – is to know the balance or the interplay between taking responsibility and not taking responsibility. Understanding what we can take responsibility for, and what makes no sense to be responsible for. Sometimes, what we don't take responsibility for is other people. We don't take responsibility for other people's choice, or the consequences of those choices. Responsibility for other people is a whole topic in itself.

For some people, like me, it's their Achilles heel – like it's up to me to make them better, to support them. They aren't going to be happy unless I do things for them. I can spiral down and get exhausted pretty quickly from that. So how do we care for people and be engaged in a caring way without taking responsibility? How to be “respons-able” (able to respond) without being responsible in the wake of that is part of the art.

What I'm thinking about right now is not so much about our relationship to other people, but about what to be

responsible for, and what not to be responsible for, in our own inner life. One of the principles or instructions of Buddhism is not to take too much responsibility for the cause of our happiness and unhappiness, but be responsive to the conditions that bring about happiness and unhappiness. Buddhism focuses a lot on putting in place the conditions that allow the movement toward liberation, toward freedom and peace – rather than becoming the one responsible for that movement.

Plenty of people who have done meditation practice have taken too much responsibility for their meditation. They are constantly trying to fix, to adjust, to make something happen – as if it's up to them to make the practice unfold: "It's up to me and I have to huff and puff, force myself." It's possible to create too much agitation in the mind for some deeper process to happen.

Rather, you do certain things with the idea that – if they are in place, if the Dharma is willing, and if the conditions are right – then the meditation will unfold in a certain way. You are not in charge of it, and you may not even expect it, but you do your job by putting the conditions in place.

A lot of the conditions Buddhism focuses on involve living an ethical life, and living a life where you don't get too actively or too easily caught up in the sense world.

The sense world can mean anything, like getting caught up in Facebook, email, what's in the refrigerator, the news, websites, all kinds of things. Another key condition is that you don't get caught up in the hindrances. These are the tendencies of the mind to get caught up in desire, in ill will, in sloth and torpor (in resistance to being engaged in a good way), in agitation and worry, and in doubt. Being *caught up* is related to the movement towards not believing in these things, not believing that they are the answers to life, not giving these things authority. Those are not the conditions for your well-being, and so you let go of them.

Our movement in relationship to these three things is a very important part of Buddhist spiritual life:

- To not do things that are unethical.
- To not get caught up in the sense world.
- And to not get caught up in the inner world of the five hindrances.

This is mostly a description of what we don't do.

What allows is for the mind and heart to have space and time is when they are not caught up and preoccupied. When they are not agitated, then there is much more room. When the mind and heart are caught up, it's like they are claustrophobic or really tight. So you create the conditions that give space for the mind and heart to unfold, and trust the unfolding. You don't take responsibility for the unfolding of the heart, but you

create the conditions that best allow it to unfold.

It isn't that being ethical, or not being caught up in the world, or not being caught up in the inner life will cause us to be happy – but these are conditions that allow something deeper to move and unfold within. It's a remarkable thing to start feeling and trusting a deeper movement that is not of our doing. It is within us, but we are not causing it. The idea that I am going to cause myself to be happy is more agitation, more ways of getting caught and contracted.

How do we make lots of space for things to unfold and move?

Happiness one thing that can unfold in the space that is created when we're not caught up. The Buddha was quite explicit that there is happiness in living an ethical life. There is happiness that comes from not being caught up in the sense world. And there is happiness that comes from not being caught up in the inner world of the hindrances. He doesn't say to let go of these things and then check them off on the happiness project. It's more like if we create space, then our natural state is one of wellbeing. The sense of wellbeing that can arise is not a static thing. Rather, it begins to move through us, and unfold within us.

The heart is designed to unfold in certain directions. It is

deeply affected by conditions. When the right conditions are in place, the heart will move and unfold. You can take responsibility for those *conditions*. One thing practitioners can do is to get out of the way, so that there are no obstacles to the beauty of the unfolding heart – and to the healing, reconciling, and wisdom aspects of the heart.

To take too much responsibility might not make space for something which is not you to operate and unfold. If you constantly take responsibility as the person at the helm, then there might be no space. While it might be good in some ways, it doesn't allow for some deeper insight or understanding of a Dharma process within that can unfold if you get out of the way. It's not so mystical. If it's been a very busy day, your body is tense, and you sit down on the couch and relax, then some of the tension will dissipate. If you meditate, more of it might dissipate. You don't have to make the dissipation. It just unfolds on its own. It's a natural process that if you stop fueling the tension, then over time it will relax.

My understanding of the Buddha's teachings is that we take a lot of responsibility for the conditions, but not for the consequences. We put into place certain conditions, and then make space to allow those conditions to unfold.

One thing that helps is time, not filling life with things, but having time. Have time to meditate, to look out the window, to go for walks, to have the kind of time that allows for something to move and bubble up and unfold. That can't happen if you're always doing, always engaged.

So, one of the conditions to create is space – space in time, space in territory – just space. I hope that coming here today was one way to do that. I hope that something here could unfold here that was not of your doing – and that over time, you come to trust something inside of you that is not you.

Isn't that nice? Because if it's *you*, we're all in trouble! [Laughs] But there's something inside of you that's not you. It's still you, but it's not in the place you identify as you in the control tower running the whole show.

Thank you.