

The Dharma, Part 2 (2 of 5) Now is the Most Important Time

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

akālika

Gil Fronsdal

This week we're reviewing the five qualities of the Dharma again. In part, the teachings of the Buddha, the famous saying that we're kind of relying on, is that the Dharma is well spoken by the Buddha. So something well spoken – beneficial, helpful. And the Dharma, as a teaching, points to something here and now. The teaching and what we awaken to are inseparable. What we enter into in this practice is inseparable.

A simplistic way of saying these five qualities is, first, the Dharma is here, unequivocally here. Secondly, it is now. The third quality is that the Dharma instructs us to look. The fourth one is to flow along. The fifth one is to feel the flowing along, feel the freedom. Know the freedom in this flowing along with here and now in the present. So, here, now, look, flow along, and feel freedom.

The topic today is now (*akālika*). It is what is immediate for us in this present moment for however long it lasts – the now that we can live in. One of the ways to appreciate its value is how easy it is to lose touch with it. One of the benefits of meditation, and something to celebrate, is when it highlights for us how the mind works. We get to see how much the mind departs from the present moment. One of the ways to see this is with the thinking mind.

For example, there's retrospective thinking – thinking about the past. There's anticipatory thinking – thinking about the future. We can feel ourselves leaning into or lingering in our thoughts. As we linger in these thoughts, there's a way in which we no longer linger in the present. We are no longer present for now as it unfolds, as it's present.

Being with your breathing – breathing in and breathing out – breathing is always in the present. Then you can find yourself thinking about something and be no longer in touch, or hardly in touch, with the breathing. You can actually feel the quality of losing touch with the present. You are lingering in those thoughts. Those thoughts might feel rich, valuable, important, and substantial, but they aren't. They are ephemeral, impermanent, changing, and fickle.

It's possible to be so centered in the present, together with our thoughts, that we don't linger in them. They just feel loose, light, soft, and kind of coterminous with space – just thoughts floating through, here and now. We're not tricked by them. We know them as present moment things. A wonderful aspect of mindfulness meditation is when there's a clear, grounding sense that when you're thinking about the past or the future, the thinking is happening in the present. That thinking is a present moment phenomenon.

So, in meditation, just now – the sense of here now. Not to dismiss or deny anything, but to wake up to, “Oh, this is what the present moment experience is.” We don't have to be at war with our thoughts. We don't have to be at war with thinking about the past or the future. But, at least in meditation, to discover how much thinking takes us away from the flow, the connection to here and now. And then learning to wake up to, “Oh, this is the flavor of now. There is this thinking.”

Seeing it that way, as now, we're not tricked into living in our thoughts of the past or the future. We just see, “Oh, I'm thinking about it.” And maybe we begin feeling the insubstantial nature, the lightness, of thoughts.

Thoughts can feel very heavy, and they can feel very light. They're not heavy by themselves. They're heavy by our involvement with them – our lingering in them,

our leaning into them. By themselves, thoughts are very light. Thoughts are coterminous with space. They have as much substance as the sky – sky-like thinking.

Here and now – this is where we can start recognizing how we obscure, dim, or narrow the open sensitivity of our love – of our delight, appreciation, friendliness, and care. We have such potential for beautiful qualities to come out.

As I said last night in a talk, we get caught up in so many different things in our lives that seem so important. We lose touch so easily with what is most important: to be present here, for this life, with our full attention. That might not seem important. It might seem dull or boring from the point of view of the mind that's spinning, chasing, wanting and not wanting things, and protecting the self. It might seem that just being present is not of much interest.

But to do this thought experiment. You're dying, and you know that you have only one hour to live. Maybe you'll be fortunate to die consciously and without any pain, but clearly, you know you're dying. Would you suddenly realize how important it is to go back to your 2009 tax return because you think you paid too much, and you need to fill out the paperwork to get your \$350 back? That is not what's most important in the last hour of your life. Probably, in the last hour of your life, vacation plans

– future planning, anticipating things – are also not what's most important. You realize that will not be happening. There's no point to that.

In your last hour, what's important? I'd like to propose that to find the wealth of life, the potential beauty of life, is to know how to be present, to be here and now. There's a way in which that hour becomes timeless, where that hour is not part of time. The idea that an hour away you will be dead doesn't have any relevance in the fullness of just now, this moment, where love can flow, where delight and freedom can be. Where the heart is not dimmed or obscured. Where our thoughts that are heavy don't interfere or get in our way. Rather, looking out the window and seeing the leaves and the trees blow in the wind can seem like looking at paradise or jewels. Not because they are that; you've seen them many times before. But the quality of now and presence are so rich and so unobscured and unencumbered by the things that dim it.

So now, *akāliko*, immediate, here. To be seen in this life, to be seen here, to be seen now, this is the Dharma of the Buddha.

I'd like to recommend that for this day that you carry with you the English word "now." And if you want to play a word game, you can take the first two letters of the word "now" and think of the W as the first letter of the

next word. That would stand for “no waiting” – just now. “No wishing” – just now.

Mindfulness meditation is not so much about being successful in being mindful in the way we might think of being now. But in saying “now,” seeing more clearly what you are doing now. We’re so much on automatic pilot, so much carried away by our thoughts and involved in things. We don’t really see in some higher quality way what we’re actually doing now. So this word “now”: show up for yourself, see what’s happening here, don’t be on automatic pilot.

When you’re now, what is the most important thing? What would be the most important thing if you had only one more hour to live?

I hope you can do this exercise for many hours. Thank you very much.