

Dharmette: The Spider or the Space?

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on April 12, 2017

This week, someone who regularly comes to IMC told me a wonderful analogy for himself: as a spider, who makes a web, and a fly. You can imagine seeing all three of them. The fly is caught in the web that the spider has made. This person told me that he realizes that his mind is all three. Sometimes he's the spider who's making the web that he then gets caught in.

You can imagine that one of the webs that many of us get caught in is our thoughts. We can think wonderful thoughts, fascinating thoughts, compelling thoughts, and we get stuck. We're the fly that's stuck to those thoughts. We can have desires, fears, hostility, anger, resentment. Who is it that's spinning these emotions? Somehow we are. Then we get stuck in that web of feelings and emotions. So, we're the spinner, the web, and what gets caught in it.

Then the person said that there's actually a fourth thing. We can identify with being the spider, the doer; with being the glue, the web; and with being the one who's stuck in the web. All three are possible. But then there's a fourth thing: the air around it all. There's space. And

that air, that space, flows freely through the web. It flows completely and intimately around the spider and the fly. In a sense it's not connected, but it is in touch with everything. It's not separate from anything, and it's free, fluid, relaxed, and open with it all.

In the same way, in our minds, there are ways we are spinning. We're the spinner, the doer for all kinds of things. We spin these things, and then get caught in them. We're the one who's caught. But there's also a certain kind of space all around everything. The space that we talk about in Buddhist practice is the space of awareness. Awareness doesn't need to be stuck. It can be intimate with the experience. It's in touch with it, but it just passes through it, around it. It doesn't hold onto any of it. There's lots of space.

Today I met with someone who may be dying, or preoccupied with dying. I said to her, "Imagine that you go to a beach on the coast, and it's a beautiful day. The ocean is wide. The horizon is far away and spacious. The sky is open and blue. You're sitting in a nice beach chair. What's it like for you to do that? In that moment you've accomplished everything that's needed. You've had a nice hike. Everything's going well for you, and you have no preoccupations. You're just there. What would it be like for you to just sit there, looking at the ocean?" She said, "It would be spacious, beautiful, awe-inspiring, and fantastic to sit there."

Then I said, “What if it’s the last minute of your life? Would you rather be sitting there in that spacious openness looking out? Or would you rather be caught in the web of your thoughts, and all you haven’t accomplished, and what you’re leaving behind, and thinking there must be a solution: “I have to figure out some way to get healthy quickly because...”? What would you rather do in those last seconds?” She said, “I’d rather look at that space.”

That spaciousness is available all the time – not just by going to the beach. That spaciousness is intimate and connected to what’s happening here and now. But it is fluid, free, and not caught by anything. It doesn’t stick to the web. So, can there be a shift of perspective?

Part of what Buddhism is pointing to is a shift of perspective. We are not the spider; we don’t identify with the spider. We don’t identify with the web, the attachments, the concerns, the thoughts, the feelings. We don’t identify with the fly; we don’t identify with the one who’s caught and who’s suffering. We open up more widely and see the spaciousness, the openness, the freedom. There is something that is actually not caught. It’s always here, and has qualities like being at the ocean, looking out at the space. It is not a thing in the world like the ocean scene is. It’s an aspect of the spaciousness of awareness – the spaciousness of the

mind that's always here.

How would you like to spend your last moments being alive? Would you rather be caught up in whatever your normal web is? Or in those last moments, would you rather be in that spacious, open, place of peaceful awareness – like looking at the ocean, the horizon, in a space where there is no time?

In a sense, there is no death, no dying, no being, no identity, no problems. It's just timeless. You can talk about time, but this is a timeless moment. There are no problems. There's no nothing. No thoughts have to be there. You're just there. So, for the last moments of your life, where would you rather be: one or the other?

But why wait until the last moments? Maybe this wider perspective – being free, at ease, and peaceful with how things are – maybe that's possible now!

It's your choice. The spider, the web, the fly – or the freedom, the openness, the space – the awareness that can hold it all, and which is the container for it all?

And if you're the spider, at least try to enjoy it [laughter].