

# Dharmette: Simplicity as a Teacher

**Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdaal on October 3, 2012**

In our tradition, an important teacher for us is simplicity. The Theravāda tradition, which we are part of, and the insight tradition particularly, are characterized by a lot of simplicity: simple lifestyle, simple way of being, not a lot of religious paraphernalia or ritual. And there's often an appreciation that simplicity is a very effective and powerful teacher.

It teaches us when we are not simple. We can easily get complicated about things: ourselves, our relationships with others, our relationship to spiritual practice – many things. In meditation practice, it's possible to get all worked up about what you are supposed to do, and what is supposed to happen. It can get complicated. If you try to hold all the meditation instructions together at the same time – trying to do them, and find your way through them – you'll probably get a headache.

So, keep simplicity in mind, and then notice when things are not simple. Who's responsible for that lack of simplicity? Is there a lack of simplicity externally? Maybe there is. It can be a complicated world, but are we complicated in how we relate to it? Can we be

simple in the midst of all the difficulty?

You're not necessarily always supposed to be simple. But you can use simplicity as a standard, or reference point, to help you understand yourself, to put a question mark next to how you are, what you are doing, and what you are trying to do.

I believe that this is particularly valuable in meditation practice. For most people, meditation practice unfolds best when it's kept really simple. One way it's not kept simple is by being goal-orientated – trying to make something happen, or having expectations about what it's supposed to look like, what you are supposed to accomplish, how you are supposed to fix what's going on, how to get rid of things. One of the simplest ways of practicing meditation is just to offer your simple presence, simple attention to what's happening.

It's remarkable how much healthy unfolding – leading to a healthier life – can emerge out of the simplicity of just being present for our experience. When we try to control our experience, push it away, try to fix it, or improve it, sometimes we can succeed. But when we succeed, there's a way in which this can put an overlay on top of the natural unfolding of our experience. It's quite something to settle back and be present. It requires a lot of presence – simple presence. Then watch what unfolds as a consequence. Watch the unfolding, almost

as a natural way in which things change.

Sometimes, when we are trying to change things, they don't change. If you are tense, and you tensely try to stop being tense, you might actually get more tense. One way to get un-tense is not to be worked up about it, not to be bothered by your tension. Just be present, holding it there. Then in that presence, things can begin to unwind and relax.

Part of the reason this works is that most of our problems, which we feel experientially in ourselves – as being upset, angry, frightened, or tense – come about because of some activity we are doing: clinging, resisting, doing something. It's an antidote to simply be present in an open-handed way, to watch and be very simple, to offer our presence so that we are no longer actively interfering. Or, if we are doing something, we hold it in a simple way, and then it has a chance to relax, unfold, unwind, and do what it needs to do.

Another way that simplicity can be a teaching is that it can remind us of the question: "Why do I think this has to be as complicated as it is?" In these kinds of situations, maybe you don't have to see them as complicated. Maybe you don't have to approach them as if you need a degree in quantum physics in order to solve interpersonal problems. Maybe it's enough to offer simple presence.

There's a form of therapy called Family Systems Therapy. In Family Systems Therapy, if someone is designated as the "family problem," as the person with the psychological problem, Family Systems Therapy doesn't see that individual as the problem. It sees that something is off in the family system, and the person with the so-called psychological problem is like the canary in the mineshaft – the most sensitive one, the weakest link in the particular system of the family – not the one who's the problem. To see what needs to adjust and change, the family is looked at as a system. One axiom of Family Systems Therapy is that if one person can practice non-reactive awareness, it moves the whole system towards health. That is a nice teaching of simplicity. Many people think their families are complicated. Maybe they are, but there is something about non-reactive awareness – the simplicity of just being present – that can help shift and change the family dynamic.

I think it happens for ourselves as individuals. It happens in the family. It often happens in a community we are part of. I've been in large gatherings that were out of control, chaotic. It was really clear that if one or two people stayed calm, alert and present, that seems to settle everybody else down. This teaching of simple presence works on many different scales.

I would encourage you to take on simplicity as one of your teachers – whatever simplicity means for you. See if there is some way that, by having simplicity as a reference point, you can be wiser and more understanding about what's needed. My guess is that more often than not, you'll discover that less is needed, rather than more.

That's what I have for today. Thank you.