

Sati (2 of 5) Recognition

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on March 31, 2020

This morning I'll continue with the discussions of the faculty of mindfulness (*sati*), the third of the Five Faculties. I could probably talk about mindfulness for a very long time. But at the same time, I don't quite know what mindfulness is. I've been doing it for forty years, so I have a sense of the practice of it, but I haven't found it particularly useful to narrow mindfulness down to a particular thing. In these coming days, however, we will get to my understanding of the essence, or the full potential of mindfulness.

As I said yesterday, I want to make a distinction between the faculty of mindfulness and the practice of mindfulness. For example, the distinction could be that someone might tell you that they run. That doesn't tell you much. But if they tell you that they are doing a training program for running, then you have the idea that it's not just running, but also involves strengthening, speed exercises, a whole training program. In the same way, mindfulness training, mindfulness practice, involves more than just mindfulness. But the function of training in mindfulness

is to strengthen mindfulness – to strengthen the capacity of mindfulness so that it becomes strongly established.

It used to be that the Four Foundations of Mindfulness were called just that. Now the tendency is to call them the Four Establishments of Mindfulness – or my preferred translation is the Four Ways of Establishing *Sati*. We have practices that really begin to establish and strengthen our capacity to be aware and attentive in a clear way in the present moment.

One key element to help with this establishment (which is sometimes equated with mindfulness itself) is recognition – the mind's capacity to comprehend what is happening, to know what is happening. If I am breathing, I can know I am breathing. I can go through much of the day and not really pay attention to my breath – I know I'm breathing, but I don't really *clearly* know, "Oh, that is breathing going on."

I can hear a sound and just kind of know it in passing, and hardly pay any attention to it. Or, I can know, "That's a sound." I can really *know* it as a sound. And I could recognize and clearly comprehend that it's traffic sound.

This is the ability to clearly recognize what something is. There are two slightly different ways that this is said

by the Buddha. One is *sampajañña*, a Pali word usually translated as “clear comprehension.” Then there is *pajānāti*, which is “to know.” Those two are the key elements of the practice of mindfulness. As we cultivate the clear recognition of what is here, then our capacity for awareness begins to grow, as does our capacity to stay in the present moment with awareness of what is happening. It creates momentum. It grounds or connects us in a stronger way.

The capacity to understand what is happening is not a complicated, analytical thing, like knowing all the causes and conditions of what is going on. It’s really the simple act of recognition – recognizing the specificity of what is happening in the moment. There is clarity. Things begin to stand out clearly so that we can make distinctions.

I don’t want to make this too analytical, but I will offer an example. If someone says to you that they are having a bad day, that is a very broad judgment of the day. It’s such a broad judgment, that in a certain way, if that is how they are seeing the day, it’s a self-fulfilling prophecy. It’s bad because those are the eyes through which it is seen. But that is a broad, abstract concept. What part of the day is bad?

You are talking together, walking down the street on a sunny day, with a blue sky, a peaceful setting. You look

around and say, “Is this the bad part of the day?” They say, “No, no, this isn’t the bad part of the day.” “What is the bad part of the day?” “Oh, the bad part of the day is that I’m having a lot of trouble at work with my boss.” “Oh, does that boss come with you when you go home in the evening?” “No, no, but the thoughts of them do.” By simple questions, we can begin to separate out what is actually happening, and we get clearer moment by moment. And we don’t tend to generalize with big statements like, “It’s a bad day.” As practice gets strong, the direct experience in the moment might be:

Here, my mind is having the thought, “This is a bad day.”

And we see clearly and recognize, “Oh, that’s a thought of a bad day.” That puts it in a different context. That thought is one of the many features of the present moment.

There are body sensations. There is what we see physically around us. There are emotions, and other thoughts going on. To see each thing in its specificity – and not in a generalization of the mind – begins to make us wiser about what is going on. We don’t generalize, or get caught up with judgments. This also starts to highlight more and more the value of staying clearly present – really seeing the details of the moment as they arise and appear. As we do that, awareness, mindfulness gets established. We become clearer and clearer. Sometimes the concept of clarity – to see or

know clearly – is almost synonymous with the idea of being mindful.

In mindfulness training, one thing we are doing is training ourselves to begin to recognize the specificity of the moment. Not to dig in underneath, like an archeological dig, to see what's going on – but just to begin seeing what is happening in the moment. It could be as simple as looking around where you are and just identifying individual things. I'm seeing a chair over there. A shelf over there. A door. A light switch.

Even though that may seem mundane or not very spiritual – for some states of mind, to look around, see, and identify is phenomenally useful. In fact, some therapists do that exercise with people who are caught in fear and anxiety. They ask them to look around and name what they see in the room. It is grounding, settling. It begins creating the mind's capacity to start being clear about what is going on.

It might seem silly to do that, but when we close our eyes in meditation, we are doing the same thing. We are not sitting here thinking, "I'm having a bad meditation," or "I'm having a good meditation," or whatever we might say. These generalizations actually keep us removed from our direct experience and interfere with our ability to establish mindfulness, awareness of the present moment.

We can start recognizing the details of the moment in a relaxed, open way, without searching or striving – just noticing the simplicity of the in-breath and the out-breath. If we say, “I’m having a bad breath. I’m breathing in a bad way,” that is abstract. But we can say, “Oh, the inhalation is like this; the exhalation is like this. The weight of my bottom on the cushion is like this. The sound of the traffic is like this.”

It’s optional, but there is a long tradition for this. One way this is done is using mental notes or little labels. This is a beautiful art to learn. It takes a while and is awkward at first. Some people protest too quickly, saying it just makes their mind busy. But it’s like riding a bicycle. At first it’s wobbly and you fall off. It’s awkward. It takes a lot of energy. But once you learn to ride the bike it goes really smoothly, and you can lift your hands off the handlebars.

If we give ourselves time to learn the art of mental noting, and know how it works best for us, then it’s a very simple thing of, “In-breath, out-breath, hearing, pressure, thinking, warmth, contentment, really quiet.” I don’t always do it. But sometimes I find it phenomenally helpful and useful. I kind of love doing it.

One way I like to do mental noting to make it a really light touch. I will *imagine* I am doing mental noting. And

if I imagine I'm doing it, rather than it being whispering in the mind, then it's almost like there's no energy involved. It floats through like a vision. But it keeps me connected.

We don't have to use mental noting, but it is a way of getting a hang of the clarity and specificity of connecting to the direct experience, as opposed to the abstract concepts of the experience. As practice settles down, it's natural as the mind becomes clearer, and begins seeing more and more details of phenomena.

It's like when you've had a really good nap in the afternoon, and you wake up really clear. Everything seems precise and pristine because of the state of the mind. As we cultivate the ability to clearly recognize the moment – this, this, this – then awareness and mindfulness grow, and the ability to stay clear moment by moment becomes stronger and stronger.

Some people see recognition as the same as mindfulness. I am treating it a little differently from mindfulness, but it is a partner to mindfulness, an integral part of mindfulness training. It's an important part of this whole faculty of mindfulness that we are growing and developing.

We have three more days on the faculty of mindfulness, and I'm very much looking forward to sharing these

ideas with you. I want to thank you. I hope that you are well.