# Dharmette: Q&A – Moods, Trust, Focus

**Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on June 6, 2012**

Good morning everyone. I don't have any particular thing on my mind to talk about today, so perhaps it's an occasion for questions you'd like to ask, or something you would like to bring up for discussion. I'd be happy to try to respond.

**Participant 1**: I'd like to ask about emotions and moods. What I know about them is that emotions arise in the body. They go fairly quickly. Sometimes you hang onto them, and sometimes they disappear. Moods I don't understand, except that they hang around a long time. Is there a connection between the two? Or are they completely different?

**GF**: It's a good question. I don't know if I have a good answer. One distinction is that you can have a whole series of different emotional responses and reactions within a larger mood, which is more constant. You could be in a good mood but when someone cuts you off in traffic, you get irritated for a moment – but the good mood is still predominant. You could be sad or angry, then suddenly see something beautiful, and, for a moment, feel some delight, but it doesn't really shift

your mood at all. Emotions are momentary mental factors or activities. As you said, emotions in and of themselves are brief. They don't last very long. But when emotions last it's because we keep refueling them, keep recreating them, and keep being involved with them.

Moods might be something we're creating, but they are more subtle. For moods, a deeper operating system in the mind might be involved than with an emotion. For example, someone might be momentarily afraid. An emotion of fear comes through and is gone, but the person's mood might persist – maybe even for a lifetime – with a background atmosphere of insecurity and worry. The fear of the moment, which arose and passed may be because a mountain lion walked into the room and then walked out. It made sense to be afraid, but when the mountain lion left, the fear may have dissipated pretty quickly. However, the insecurity might have to do with some really deep conditioning or lesson the person learned earlier in life. That lesson, that conditioning, that way of thinking operates at a much more subtle level than, "Oh no, it's a mountain lion!" This has to do with our sense of self, and our understanding is of what life is about. It might have to do with some deeply held emotion. This deeper layer is sometimes harder to see. It tends to be something that can stick for a longer period of time.  That's one thing that I know. Is that helpful?

**Participant 1**: Yes.

**GF**: Why is it helpful?

**Participant 1**: It's helpful, first of all, because it confirms what I'm thinking, what I feel – that there's a difference. And it confirms what I think I know about emotions. It isn't very clear about moods, but it helps in the sense that I feel it's worthwhile – that I'm not going on the wrong track to explore it more.

**GF**: It's interesting. It's not directly connected to your question, but in Buddhism sometimes a distinction is made between two kinds of emotions. One is afflictive emotions; and the other may be called beneficial, wholesome, or skillful emotions. The afflictive emotions are those that hurt, such as anger, which – even if justified – kind of hurts. Fear – it kind of hurts to be afraid. Self-criticism hurts. Greed (if that's an emotion) hurts – having the contraction around it. Afflictive emotions tend to be reactive. They tend to arise out of some kind of clinging, holding onto something, or resisting something. Some we call clinging-based.

Then there's a whole other class of emotions or feelings or moods that are not in reaction or relationship to anything. Afflictive emotions tend to be in relationship to something that we want or don't want. But it's possible

to feel joy or to be happy independent of what's happening around you, independent of reacting and relating to things. It's possible to feel love independent of someone you love.

One thing that can happen in meditation is that the afflictive emotions, the reactive emotions of the mind, can settle away, relax and soften. The mental system still has the capacity for joy, happiness, love, and a variety of positive feelings. They don't arise because of a conventional reason. They arise because the inner ecology has , and allows them to come forth. Someone who is fairly mature in the Buddhist path will probably experience a lot more joy in life than someone who is immature. They're not creating the joy, or thinking about being joyful, or trying to be joyful – it's just there, a pervasive feeling of well-being.

**Participant 2**: I just want to share an observation, which as I think about it seems obvious, but feels important. It felt important through practice this morning. It was an inverse relationship between tension and trust. Thank you for the invitation to focus on tension. Something occurred for me that doesn't occur very often during my practice. It was memories of situations as a young person where there was a lack of safety or trust in the environment. I have carried a fair amount of tension or anxiety in my day-to-day life through my development. Practice has really helped me over the years to

recognize that, and reduce the experience of it. I just wanted to share this observation that I had today, the inverse relationship between tension and trust.

**GF**: The more trust you have, the less tension?

**Participant 2**: Yes. It seems obvious. But to have really clearly experienced that through practice this morning was powerful. So I just wanted to share that observation.

**GF**: I think it's wonderful to hear that. A couple of things I'd like to say in response. One is that another word that's been in my mind related to trust is safety. Trust is a little more internal – you feel trusting. Safety is a little more external. But they're closely connected, and it's very hard to relax and open up deeply unless we feel safe. Deep trust and confidence help us feel safe. But sometimes the conditions around us need to be created so that we can feel safe, and can open up to something. That's one thing. The other is that it's really great if the trust can be such that you trust opening up to your tension. Actually, it doesn't have to be either/or. Rather, the trust can actually support the practice so that you feel safe enough to feel the difficulties inside.

**Participant 3**: When I meditate, I don't usually focus on my breath. Sometimes I spend an entire 45 minutes just trying to relax myself. Sometimes I just observe myself.

So it’s a mixture of different types of meditation. Is that okay, or do I have to focus on one and be good at it?

**GF**: It’s all okay. There’s no external standard you’re supposed to measure yourself against in order to be this kind of person, or do this kind of meditation. I think the standard is, “Is it useful for you? And what is most useful?” So if it’s useful for you to just focus on your tension, or if it’s useful to observe yourself, then it’s a wonderful thing. You’re lucky to have found what benefits your life.

If it’s useful to stay with your breath, then do that for a while. If you do one way of practicing for a while, and you have some question such as you’re asking now, I think the best thing to do is not to ask a teacher for a categorical answer about what you should do. Rather, experiment. Listening to your question, I would encourage you to experiment for a while with your breathing. Focus on doing breath meditation, and see if that’s beneficial and helpful for you.

This is what I’ve learned for myself. Sometimes I’ve had a certain kind of tension or preoccupation. My mind is stuck on something or on some feeling. So, I’ll bring my mindfulness to it, and try to be mindful of it carefully, and be present for it. I’ll do those things, and then I’ll stop paying attention to it, and just be with my breathing. Sometimes by simply being with my

breathing and not focusing on it, the tension dissolves more quickly than if I'm focusing on it.

There's a way in which any kind of focus on our issues can very subtly reinforce them and keep them going. Sometimes it's helpful just to put them aside, and focus on the breath as a neutral place. Then, as you're with your breathing, maybe the way that issue is fueled by paying attention to it can abates, and the whole thing can dissolve by itself. Sometimes in meditation, I've noticed that a faster way to relax my body is just to really focus on my breath, rather than focusing on the tension. At other times, I find it useful to focus on the tension. As I said earlier today, it varies. It's not one way. Part of becoming a wise meditator is experimenting – learning a number of different ways, and which way is good at a given time.

Great! Thank you for these questions.