

Practice Note: Allow, Aware, Alive

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on January 4, 2017

One of the interesting statements that people have told me over the years is that they're not interested in being mindful. When I hear this, the first thing that goes through my mind is to restate it to myself. I say, "Oh, so the person's not interested in being alive." When people say they're not interested in mindfulness, I usually assume they take mindfulness to be a technique. In fact, whenever someone talks about mindfulness as a technique, I recoil a little bit. In my mind, a technique is something extra that you add on top of your life. It's like a little piece of engineering that you do. It's something you do from the control tower.

I like this expression, "the control tower." It's a place where there's a sense of "me" or "I'm going to do," "I'm going to decide," "I'm going to engage," "I'm going to apply myself and do a technique," "This is what I believe," or "This is how it affects me." In all this, there is a sense of agency – of self – operating. I call it "the control tower." In an airport, the control tower is high above everything else. Most people associate what I call a control tower with being up in their head, high up, looking down. Some people will practice mindfulness

that way, where they're looking from the control tower. They're observing their experience from this wonderful place, and it's a technique that's applied.

But I think of mindfulness as just – it's almost too much to say – but to be alive with presence. In fact, I prefer to just call it “being alive.” To not be mindful – to not be aware – is somehow not really being alive. It dampens our lives, cutting off part of who we are, limiting us in some way. If we spend a lot of time distracted, we're losing our lives. In Buddhism, occasionally there's very strong language about living a distracted life. To paraphrase the *Dhammapāda*, it says that “if you're distracted, it's as if you're already dead.” And in more dramatic language, it says that “if you're mindful, it's as if you're never going to die.”

There's something about not being alive that actually hinders awareness and mindfulness. As we become more alive, mindfulness becomes more natural. It's not something we add to our lives, it's not a technique that we do. It's more something we allow for – and that arises and is just there.

As you practice this morning, you might take a look under the hood of your practice to see if you practice from the control tower. Do you practice as if you're doing a technique? There's nothing wrong with that, but it might be limiting you.

Is there a way of stepping back, and just allowing yourself to be alive? And in that simplicity of just allowing, can you recognize that there's awareness and mindfulness there? There's recognition of what *is* there will operate naturally if you relax – if you just soften, allow, and just be – be alive. In that regard, what you're mindful of – what you're aware of – will not necessarily be your choice. The control tower might choose to pay attention to something, but life will give you plenty of things to be aware of. If you're really alive, really here, there's no shortage of things to be aware of. You don't have to be so in charge of what you pay attention to. Just allow for your natural awareness, which is there for whatever is emerging in this life of yours.

If what I said makes any kind of sense to you, it might be interesting to experiment with it. And if it seems confusing or very foreign to you, then I would encourage you to not worry about it. It's a really good practice to let go of what teachers say. Don't get too caught up in it. Thank you.