

# Practice Note: A Reference Point of Stillness

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on May 31, 2017

I'd like to say a few words about the practice with the help of some analogies. When teaching mindfulness to children, teachers sometimes use a clear bowl filled with water and glitter, or something else floating in it, like mud. As long as they keep shaking the bowl, the water will stay full of glitter or mud. But if they hold the bowl still, everything in solution settles to the bottom, and the water becomes clear. But one of the things required for this analogy is holding the glass bowl still. So the stillness of the container is what allows the glitter or the mud to settle.

When my son was in preschool, I would go visit sometimes, and the kids would be running around as little kids do, and then it was time for a transition to another activity. The teacher would stand straight and still in the middle of the room, and would start to whisper! And the kids would get very interested, and would come settle down around the teacher, and they'd get really calm. It was much more effective than trying to herd cats, saying: "Come here! Come sit down!" The teacher held the stillness, and whispering in a quiet voice somehow settled the kids.

I don't know if it's the best example, but the analogy – I think it's from the old days; I don't know if they still do this – there was this idea that if you wanted to tame a wild horse, you'd tie it to a stake in the middle of a corral. The horse couldn't go anywhere but run around in circles. It's a wild horse; it wants to run away. But it runs in circles until it gets tired and calms down. And it gets quiet enough so that the trainer can come and put the saddle on. What you need for this to work is the stillness of the post in the middle of the corral. Without that pole being still,<sup>1</sup> that horse is not going to calm down.

So in our practice, sometimes there are lots of activities going on inside of us – physical, emotional, mental – and it's helpful to have a reference point of stillness – not to stop the movement, but to allow everything to quiet down and come to rest.

It's relatively easy in sitting meditation, when we are actually holding still with the commitment not to move the body. Then, that stillness can allow tensions to begin to dissolve and relax a little bit. One of the reasons this works is the contrast between the stillness of the container or the anchor, and all the movement inside. Becoming aware of that contrast, you can actually see the movement better. When you're in the movement, sometimes you can't see how much it's moving. But if you find a place that's a reference point of stillness, then you can see it. And just seeing that movement clearly, in the context of the stillness inside, can allow it to settle.

I think that part of how this works is if we start not identifying so strongly with the movement. Often we're concerned with the movement, the thoughts, the feelings, the bodily sensations – we're reacting to them – wanting to do something with them, get involved with them. And we identify with what's going on, or we latch onto it, in a strong way. But if instead, we focus on the stillness that is here, it helps us to dis-identify, to unlatch ourselves from this world of movement and activity. And when we unlatch ourselves from it, then it has a chance to settle down and quiet.

As you sit here today, you might look for: "Is there some sense of stillness I can find?" It can be as simple as the body not moving as you sit here. Or it could be a still place inside that feels like an anchor, or a grounded post, or something that's still and quiet. All the movement can move around, but clearly it's where you are centered that holds the place of stillness.

See what that does for you. See what that does to the movement – just the fact that you can see the difference between a place that is still and the movement. And then you start identifying with the stillness and resting there, more than in the world of movement.

In walking meditation, this can be a bit harder to do, but it can be done there too. Even though you're moving, you can have a sense of stillness in the body. Since as you walk and the lower legs do the moving, the upper

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<sup>1</sup> Editor's note: (and without more modern, compassionate methods of training).

torso is not moving so actively, and so the torso can provide a sense of stability, steadiness, or stillness. Sometimes in walking meditation, I imagine that I'm not actually walking, but I'm standing still and the world is coming to me. It's just a little shift: "Oh, it's coming to me." Then I get a greater sense of stillness. Or sometimes you can find a sense of stillness deep inside – a still, quiet place inside the body or the mind – and that can be a reference point as we're walking. So there's a lot of movement, but there's also a place of stillness that informs us, and creates a contrast – a little shift of identification, or latching on.

As you practice today, you might see if that contrast of movement and stillness might be supportive of your practice, and might help the stilling process to unfold more strongly or in a more productive way for you here.

Thank you.