

Practice Note: Longer Term

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on October 10, 2018

It's fairly well-known that mindfulness is practiced with a strong emphasis in being in the present moment. You try to keep your mind from thinking about the future or the past. That's certainly true, but it doesn't mean that you should never think about the future or the past.

If you go on a long hiking trip, which you really plan on finishing, and you happen to have a little injury on your foot, you have to be very much in the present moment when you put your foot down. In order to go that long distance, you don't want to worsen the irritation in your foot. The future – the idea that you're going a long distance – really puts you into paying attention to the present moment, to *now*.

It's the same thing with our lives. It's nice to be able to think about having some kind of long-term happiness, well-being, and peace. But this takes some planning and consideration. You don't want to just leave it up to wishful, magical thinking.

So, what are the conditions that need to be put in place to move in that direction? In our tradition, one condition is certainly to be here in the present moment. Feeling that your attention to the present moment now, today, or this morning is really consequential will set the stage for what's going to happen to you for decades to come. You'll pay careful attention to do whatever you're doing – how you attend to your breath, how you sit in your posture, how you do your steps, how you open the door to go to the bathroom or to go outside. You'll do this in such a way that in the moment, you maximize a sense of presence and alertness. Can you do it in a way that is most vitalizing, most clarifying, or really here?

For example, when you sit down to meditate, don't just sit down like you've meditated ten thousand times before: "Okay, here I am." Rather, in sitting down to meditate and taking your posture, you could say to yourself: "*This* is my long-term happiness. I'd better really zero in, and take this seriously. Let me sit in a way that maximizes my sense of presence and alertness. What is it like to be alert at the base of my spine, and all the way up the spine? Where shall I put my hands? How shall I sit so that *this* is really important? This is the final exam." If it turns out that the final exam of being a human being is how you really sit – in a way that is thoroughly present, alert, and connected, then you would sit down with care. You wouldn't just go, "Oh, just one more time to sit; here we go again. Okay, phew."

There is an example in the suttas that points to this idea. You're carrying a basket or a bucket on your head, as they do in some cultures. You're balancing it on your head, going through a crowded marketplace with lots of people and activity. The bucket is full to the top with water. There's someone walking behind you with a sword, and if you spill any of the water, they will lop off your head. Boy, *then* you'd be present!

I don't want to evoke the fear in this example, but the idea is: "How would you really engage in this moment here?" This moment counts. This is an important moment. Maybe this moment is going to set the stage for happiness for a long time. How would you really meet this moment? How would you open that door, as opposed to thinking about opening the door like it doesn't count – or that the door is in your way? Instead, touch that doorknob as if that is the most important place to be attentive. Is there a way of paying attention, really being there for this doorknob in a way that evokes some kind of attention, presence, and mindfulness that sets the stage for the rest of your life?

A traditional idea in Buddhism is that your last moment of consciousness sets the stage for how you are reborn. What if turning that doorknob happens to be when the meteor comes crashing through the roof? That could be your last moment. If that is your last moment, how do you want to be there with that doorknob? If you're annoyed with the doorknob, talk about major consequences! You'll come back as a doorknob or something [laughter]. Anyway, I think I'm making a point.

Enjoy yourself. But really give yourself to the moment in what you're doing as if it's the most important thing – as if how you engage in this *now*, is going to have long-term repercussions for you. Do it well.