

Dharmette: Meditation as Self-expression

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on June 9, 2010

It's interesting to look at the approach one has for meditation or spiritual practice, and the variety of different approaches we could have. One of the approaches that have been very meaningful for me is that meditation practice is not about attaining anything. It's not about making something happen, or going somewhere, or producing some states. And it's certainly not about fending off something, getting rid of something, or protecting us from the world. Rather, meditation is a form of expression, of self-expression. We're allowing space for something to be expressed through us.

Maybe it's no different from the way an artist would express herself through a canvass or through music. You don't play a musical instrument to get through the music as fast as you can. My seven-year-old son is learning the piano. And he chose this little minuet by Bach, which he wanted to play at his second-grade talent show. But his way of doing it was to get through it as quickly as he could. So I asked him, "How do you eat ice cream? When you eat the ice cream, do you lick it and then savor the flavor and take it in, or do you just lick, lick, lick, lick?" And he got it. "Oh yeah, you lick it, and then you swallow it slowly and enjoy it, and then you do the next one." So I said, "Okay, that's how you should play your notes." And then he got it – how to slow down. And then there was a little detour from the idea that you don't play the music in order to just get through it as quickly as you can – it's a form of expression that is moving through you.

The expression is to sit quietly, upright, in meditation – and then to have enough trust or confidence, that it's okay just to be here – that you don't have to prove yourself. You don't have to defend yourself. You don't have to accomplish something. And then you relax enough and notice what is it that wants to come through you. What arises in you?"

Not just anything that comes through, because if it's anything at all that wants to be expressed, we're in trouble [laughs]. There's a lot of greed, hate and delusion that wants to be expressed. There has to be some way of differentiating between that which is not helpful and that which is skillful. I think that what's most helpful from a deeper form of self-expression – the kind that wells up from within – comes from a very different place within us than greed, hate and delusion.

When the mind is caught in preoccupation, things come out of that. It could be tremendous frustration. And then out of that frustration, what most wants to be expressed is anger, or it could be screaming. And Gil says, "I'm supposed to trust my self-expression" [laughs]: IMC becomes a screaming house. No that's not it. But it is to sit quietly and be able to tap into some deeper wellspring of wholeness, integrity, or some nourishing stillness. And out of that stillness, we can see what bubbles up, what wants to be expressed through us.

One of the images that the Buddha talked about is, in meditation, having the feeling that your body is like a lake. The lake has no streams running into it, and there's no rain filling it. Rather what fills the lake with water is a deep underwater spring bubbling up from deep inside the lake. The current of that underground spring brings up this refreshing water into the whole lake. So in the same way, is there a deep wellspring in yourself, which you can allow to surface and move through you, and nourish you, and refresh you in some way?

For meditation to be a form of self-expression, where you're tapping into what's most deep inside of you, it becomes an alternative to the idea that there's something to get, some place to go, something to accomplish, or that you're not good enough – the idea is that at the heart of who you are is already something complete, full, healthy. How do we tap into that?

One of the ways is to be mindful enough to be able to differentiate between those movements that want to come through us that have greed, hate and delusion – those that come with compulsion – and those that come with a sense of freedom, peace, or stillness. Peace or freedom is a really important touchstone or reference point for this, because if there's no peace connected to that inner expression, then it probably doesn't come from the deepest wellsprings within us. If what comes up has to be expressed, it's probably not from the deepest places. The deepest places of expression which arise don't need to be expressed. They have no needs at all. It's

something very simple: vitality, a sense of presence – not something we make a decision about, like “What career am I going to do with my life?” It’s something deeper – something much more intimate.

Sometimes when people hear instructions for mindfulness practice, it can seem very focused on technique. You’re supposed to do this and this and this: follow your breath, and then if your mind starts thinking a lot, then you notice that and come back to your breath – a lot of techniques, a lot of things to do. If you get too busy with all the things to do in meditation, then it’s hard to let go. It’s hard to relax enough, or be still enough, to allow something to bubble up from within, to allow something to be expressed through you, which comes from these deeper wellsprings within.

What is it that comes through you that expresses your integrity – the intimacy you have with the integrity within? Then meditation can become very satisfying, because it doesn’t require attaining anything. You don’t have to get anything. You don’t have to stop your thinking. You don’t have to attain different states of deep concentration or insight. All those things are possible, but it’s really a beautiful thing to experience this wholeness – a sense of completeness – here, where nothing is needed. You don’t need to attain anything. Just to be alive is enough.

The last thing I’ll say is that the reason I gave short instructions earlier about stillness is that there’s a very close connection between stillness – physical stillness and mental stillness – and feeling, or connecting, or allowing this healthy sense of life being expressed. We are being expressed through ourselves.

You might look into that. You might see, when you sit down to meditate and get settled a little bit, rather than trying to make something happen, try to make yourself still. And see if you can listen, or hear, or feel, or sense, what is it that is coming through. What is being expressed now, here?

Maybe that will nourish you as well.