

Dharmette: Riding a Bicycle with the Five Faculties

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on July 14, 2010

Today I'd like to use the analogy of learning to ride a bicycle. If you don't know how to ride a bicycle, then you can still obsess about where you're going on your bicycle. "Oh I'm going to ride the back roads of Napa Valley." "I'm going to go ride along the beach." If you don't know how to ride the bike, thinking about where you're going to go is an interesting exercise, but still a waste. You could also be thinking about the bike you're going to get. I'm going to get this super-duper \$800 bike. I hear they have bikes even more expensive than that. I'm going to get that one – the one that's \$2000. It's shiny and black, chrome tires, 52 gears [laughs]. It's interesting to think about the different bikes you're going to get, but if you don't know how to ride a bike, it's kind of silly.

Or you could think about how people are going to love you so much if you become the perfect bike rider. You'll be the best, most praised person on your block, for your bike skills. People will love you so much, and you can go around very proud, and get one of these bicycle uniforms people wear [laughs] – tight pants. And then people really know that you're a bike rider, and they treat you with the respect you deserve. [Student: "You'll be able to shave your legs."] Bike riders do that – they shave their legs? ["Yes."] I guess you can do that before you learn to ride the bike [laughs].

It's possible to obsess about these things so much that when you're finally going to learn how to ride the bike, you're thinking about where you are going, not about the riding the bike, and you fall over. You're thinking about the bike you finally got – you have this \$4000 bike you don't know how to ride, and you fall over [laughs]. Or you think about how all your neighbors are going to praise you no end because you're the world's best bike rider – you're thinking about that and you fall over.

There are all these concerns which you need to put aside if you're going to learn to ride the bike. To learn to ride the bike, you have to focus on your abilities. What do you contribute to this situation? You have to focus on the skills that you need to develop. You have to focus on learning balance, on learning how to get momentum going so that it's easier to hold your balance. You have to learn how to shift gears, how to navigate the potholes, how you handle the bumps. There are a lot of skills you need to learn. You have to focus on that internal world of skill building in order to learn to ride the bike. There are a whole series of internal things we monitor, which we keep track of as we learn to ride a bike. They get developed over time. There has to be some ongoing monitoring of these things – these inner psychophysical qualities – in order to be able to ride the bike.

In the same way, meditation requires us to monitor something internal. It becomes second nature after a while, just like riding a bike becomes second nature. It requires us to monitor something – but it's something which is not a thing. It's not a what; it's a how. It's how we are, and it's in process. We have to be interested in this inner process of what's going on. And it has to become more interesting than our interest in where meditation is going to take us. It's has to be more interesting than having the right shaped legs for meditation [laughs], or the right uniform for meditation [laughs]. It has to be more important than the identity you think you're going to get from a spiritual life. "Everyone thinks I'm enlightened. People love me so much more. I'll be the hottest person at IMC" [laughs].

There are a whole series of things that are not helpful to focus on. What's necessary to focus on are the inner processes – and to be interested enough that we can start riding the bike, start learning what goes on, taking responsibility, monitoring, and keeping track of it. That's one of the reasons we let go a lot in meditation. Not only is letting go good because it hurts to hold on, but if we are preoccupied with all these other things, we can't learn to ride the bike. We can't focus on what's going on. What are some of the qualities we need to develop inside?

What I'd like to focus on today are five qualities. In Buddhism they are called the Five Faculties: confidence, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, discernment (sometimes called wisdom). These are five processes within us that come into play when we're learning to meditate, when we're engaged in the spiritual life. Are they there in adequate form? Are they operating together in an appropriate way? These five faculties are relevant for any endeavor that people become involved in, not just for meditation. They're relevant for riding bicycles.

You have to have an adequate amount of confidence to ride your bike. If confidence is lacking, you're probably going to have a much harder time learning. You have to have an adequate level of effort, persistence, engagement – otherwise you can't ride the bike well. You have to make some effort. There has to be some mindfulness. You have to be able to track and monitor what's going on, to be present for what's going on in some careful way. And there has to be some inner stability. If we're agitated, it's hard to do any of this. If you're agitated and restless, it's hard to stay properly on the bicycle. There has to be some inner stability. The primary function of concentration is to really create this inner ballast – a foundation that allows us to hold our ground, to be still, to be here. Then there has to be some capacity to be discerning. Discerning here means the ability to monitor what's going on, which is mindfulness, and then be able to see distinctions between all the different things going on, and to know which are useful and which are not useful.

For example, bicycle riders are constantly being discerning. You have to discern what's going on with the terrain. Is it a slope? Do you need to adjust? There is a hill coming up, and you adjust your pedaling accordingly. You change gears; you go uphill; you change your breathing. A lot of things change depending on the terrain. The distance you're going to bike affects the pace you want to set. If you go a short distance, you can bike faster than if you're going really far. If the road is wet, you ride the bike differently, more carefully, than if the road is dry. There are all these different things that you adjust to and take care of. And if you're a good bike rider, it becomes second nature – you don't even think you're doing it.

It's the same thing with meditation. There's a process of discernment. And that discernment is: Is there enough confidence here? Or do I lack confidence in the practice, in myself, in the path? Is there enough persistence? Is there enough discipline to keep doing it? Do I need to apply myself more? Or am I applying myself too hard and making too much effort? Am I bearing down too tightly? Do I really understand mindfulness? Is the mindfulness really mindfulness?

Some people think that thinking about things is being mindful. Mindfulness has some really beautiful qualities, which are inherent to mindfulness. There's freedom or independence in a clear moment of mindfulness. So some people think they're mindful, but really their mindfulness is entangled with other associations and ideas and approaches. They might be entangled with thinking, or with grasping, or with expectation, or with self-identity. The mindfulness is not pristine. It's not just simple in and of itself. The practice is to look at the quality of the mindfulness, and readjust a little bit. Can I be mindful without expectation? Can I be mindful without measuring myself?

And then is there stability? Are we present in a stable way, or are we agitated? Are we spinning our wheels with our thinking?

These are very simple questions that the function of discernment looks at. One of the things discernment looks at in meditation is how are you being discerning? If you're being discerning so your mind gets more unstable, more agitated, more restless, then discernment is not useful. So can you discern – can you use your wisdom – in a way that's supportive of becoming more peaceful, more calm, more still, suffering less?

What I'm pointing to here is a series of five processes which don't exist unless you use them. They don't exist unless they're activated. They have no absolute existence, but they come into to play in any human endeavor. They come into play with meditation practice. So how we monitor this is an important part of practice.

The primary point I wanted to make today is that you have to have confidence and interest that monitoring this inner world is a valuable thing to do, as opposed to having confidence in other things your mind is caught up in. The mind can be caught up in many, many things that take you away from the present moment. Even if you are in the present moment a little bit, the mind can be preoccupied with things that are not very useful: your identity, or where you're going, or a variety of things.

So can you learn that shift? Meditation requires a shift of switching our attention from preoccupations – from things and ideas to processes. It's these inner processes that we're paying attention to. Once we're paying attention to processes, we're paying attention to something that is dynamic, in flux and moving – like a river. We learn to flow in that river of change of the processes, rather than being stuck in the ideas we have, the fixations we have, the concepts that we reify our reality with, and reify ourselves with.

The last thing I'll say about this reification process, this solidifying, being caught around concepts: it's like taking a bucket down to the river and filling it with water and walking away saying, "I have the river here in the bucket." You don't have the river in the bucket. You have water in the bucket. Once you've latched onto a concept that this is how things are, then you've removed yourself from the flow of processes. Once you start thinking about what had just happened a minute ago, five seconds ago, a day ago, you've pulled yourself out of the river.

If you want to meditate, you have to put yourself back in the river of these processes, which by their very nature unfold only in the present moment. To step out of the world of things and concepts, and into the world of inner processes is one of the things that are necessary in order to enter more deeply into this world of meditation.

I hope that is helpful. If not, leave it here.