

Dharmette: Fluidity in Mindfulness

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on July 28, 2010

The most common practice we do here at IMC is mindfulness. People have all kinds of associations with mindfulness. But sometimes I like to think that mindfulness is different in different situations. Part of the task of being mindful – of monitoring and tracking what's going on – is to know what kind of attention, what kind of presence, what kind of mindfulness is needed a given situation. It's important to have the fluidity, the flexibility, to switch the kind of attention we have.

Sometimes what's needed is attention to detail. You could focus on something very particular and refined – in your breath perhaps, or in the world around you. And sometimes what's called for is a very broad, panoramic or wide-angle awareness of what's going on. If you're in a group situation, rather than focusing on the particular person you're with and the conversation you're having, perhaps you need to open up the attention and take in the whole crowd, the whole room, and the group dynamics.

How do you know if what's needed is the small or the large view? You know it by checking it out. If I'm being very focused for a long time on a particular thing, sometimes I'll step back and say, "What am I missing here? What else is going on here?" Or if my attention is a very broad, spacious awareness, sometimes I'll check it out, asking, "Would it be useful here to focus more precisely and look at something more carefully?"

Part of the flexibility is not just whether we use a close-up or a wide-angle lens – but also what we pay attention to. To have some wisdom to know, "Oh, now I need to focus on my body. What's going on here physically? Now I need to focus on my emotions. Now I need to focus on my beliefs, my thoughts. Now I need to stop focusing on myself. Now I need to focus on someone else [laughs], or on the situation around me." When you are driving, maybe you should be focusing on driving [laughs], as opposed to other things that you could be thinking about.

The key thing is the flexibility to be able to explore and see if what I need to focus on here is different than what I think it is. If we're paying attention to one thing for a long time, it's helpful to step back and ask, "What else is going on here that maybe needs attention?" If I keep focusing on my past, and thinking over and over again about what happened in the past, I need to notice, "Oh that's what's going on. That's my focus right now. Is this what serves me best? Do I have the flexibility to not focus on the past, but rather on the present, if that what's needed here?"

Someone who's mature in mindfulness practice is someone who not only has the ability to be mindful, but they also have the flexibility to be able to switch back and forth in different states of attention, different focuses, different states of being. It's not a matter of always being one way. It's not always about being calm or in some deep state of concentration. You can be in a very deep state of concentration, perhaps, and something could happen around you that requires you to change gears right away. It could be anything.

On Sunday here at IMC, near the end of our sitting, a police officer came to our door. A lot of people come to our door, and we just keep sitting. But if a police officer comes, it requires a different attention. You don't just answer the door with wide eyes, "Wow [laughs], this present moment is sparkling; everything's so special: your eyes and the glint on your gun [laughs]." You need to have the flexibility to know what the situation requires. Perhaps that was appropriate in one situation, but now I need to say, "Yes, Officer [laughs]."

For people who have the ability to get into deep states of concentration, that flexibility to go in and out of concentration is very important to learn. It's important to learn how not hold onto to it or be stuck in it – and to have the capacity be fluid when something else or some other way of being in the world is needed.

If you're scattered and running around and you come to IMC, where people are settled and calm, do you have the flexibility to notice that, and adjust accordingly? To not come in here like you're a lumberjack: pounding the floor, slamming doors, and yelling out, "When's the next sitting? [laughs]." To just know that this is a place to settle down, and be in a different mode. To have flexibility, fluidity, is a very important part of practice.

Another part of our mindfulness practice is that it's not just a matter of bringing different kinds of attention, but it's

also a matter of bringing different kinds of involvement in different situations. Different situations call for different involvements. I sometimes think that one of the great synonyms for mindfulness or practice is the word 'participation.' Rather than, "How can I be more mindful here?" we ask, "How can I participate more fully in what's going on here?"

One of the shortcomings in our mindfulness tradition is that it's too easy to think that you're always supposed to have this self-conscious attention, with a little bit of distance, and calm, and always focusing on: "What am I feeling here? What's going on with my breath? What am I thinking? What's the attachment here? What's the delusion here? What's my intention?" It's all self-preoccupied [laughs]! This sometimes gets overdone in our tradition. Sometimes it's really important is to let go of self-preoccupation. Some situations require that we let go completely, and just really be there. The word 'participation' is wonderful: "How do I participate fully in this activity here?"

It could be as simple as washing the dishes. Sometimes you're washing dishes, and it's nice to do it being mindful of: thoughts, feelings, breath, body, your relationship to it, your intention. You can learn a lot from that. But sometimes what's more valuable is to learn how to let go of that whole focus on self, and just do the dishes [laughs]! Enter into the world of dishes as if that's all there is: you and the dish, you and the soap. And you almost become one with the dishwashing, and you forget all this.

In mindfulness practice, if you sweep mindfully, you're aware of the feelings, what it feels like to hold the broom, the sound of the rake across the gravel, and your relationship to it all – it's a big world to explore. But the way you rake in Zen, is that you become the raking. You disappear in the process of raking because you participate so fully in that activity.

Sometimes what's called for is not careful attention in the way that we often think about it in mindfulness. But what's called for is a capacity to be flexible, to let go of any real focus on oneself, of concern with oneself, and in that way, to really fully enter into that, in a clean way, a full way, without resistance, without holding back, without judging, without having a sense of self. There has to be the wisdom to know when it's appropriate. But it's very powerful to enter into something so fully that we have an experiential feeling of not being self-focused in any way at all. All that just falls away, and we kind of disappear in the activity of washing dishes. It's really safe to do that washing dishes. But there might be situations where it's not safe, or not appropriate to merge, to participate so fully. And there are times when that's what's called for.

I think that too often mindfulness students err on the side of this self-conscious mindfulness, and it keeps them a little bit removed from what's going on. And Zen students sometimes err on the side of being too merged with what's going on, and not being aware of their feelings and what's going on inside of them. So the Zen student can be seemingly completely merged with raking, and not aware of all the anger that's there, whereas the Vipassanā student is aware of all the anger [laughs], but they've forgotten about the raking [laughs].

Having the flexibility and fluidity to go back and forth with different kinds of attention, and different ways of being is part of that maturation – part of our growth in the practice.

How fluid are you? How flexible are you? How willing are you? How able are you to change modes of attention and modes of being depending on what the situation calls for?

Those are my thoughts for today. What kind of attention, perhaps, was called for when you were sitting here? Another way of being in the world is called for now, for those of you who are going to stay and help with the cleaning.