

Practice Note: Amoeba Mind

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on August 4, 2010

One of the important areas for mindfulness practice is to notice the feeling tone, or the hedonic tone, of our experience. All the things we experience have one of three different feeling tones: they are either pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant. There are a variety of different kinds of pleasant things, of unpleasant things, and of things that can be neutral. Sometimes to just see these feeling tones – not their individual, unique characteristics – but to just see whether they're pleasant or unpleasant is very informative. Many times, how we react to our experience, is not by reacting to the details of the experience, but rather to simply whether it's pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral.

Sometimes there's a reaching forward to hold onto, or grasp, or want what is pleasant. And there's resistance, or contraction, or pushing away, or aversion to what we don't like. Sometimes there's confusion or delusion when our experience is neutral – we don't know how to relate to it. It's very interesting to just simply look upon things from the perspective of whether they're pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral – and just see that part of it. And then see how you react based on that, without making it any more complicated.

In terms of sitting and walking this morning, if you're interested in this, just do the simplest mindfulness practice of the breath, being present here for your breath, and whenever something makes it difficult for you to be with the breath, or takes you away from the breath, then notice whether that experience is pleasant or unpleasant, or whether it is connected to something pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. See if you can notice this in a very simple way. Don't analyze the details.

How are you in relationship to that pleasant or unpleasant? Are you for it? Are you against it? Are you balanced? Are you equanimous? Or is there some contraction, resistance? Or is there some holding on, some way in which you get involved with the experience?

You can do the same practice with the walking meditation: simply staying with the steps as you walk, trying to be present as best you can, getting into the mindfulness of the walking. But if something happens that pulls your attention away, or makes it difficult for you to be present, then look at it through the perspective of whether that experience is pleasant or unpleasant, and see what you can learn about the simple amoeba-like reaction that we often have.

Sometimes very complicated philosophies, or even political positions, have their genesis not in well-reasoned, logical arguments or understanding. The well-reasoned, logical arguments can be a cover-over, or a justification, for the amoeba-like reaction we have that we want to avoid what's unpleasant, and we want to keep what's pleasant. It's sometimes quite humbling to realize that we operate in this way.

If you've never done this before, it can be an interesting experiment to keep the mindfulness really simple, and just see how you are with the pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral aspects of your lived experience.

I hope you enjoy your morning. Thank you.