

Dharmette: What is Being Requested?

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on September 1, 2010

An interesting perspective on our human life, is that what human beings are always doing is responding. We're always responding to something. Even if we don't respond, we're responding. If we don't do anything, that's a response. If we do something, that's a response. The way we're built is to always be in relationship to the world we live in. And the question is: "How are we relating at any given time? What's the relationship we're in right now? What's the relationship we're forming now?"

If something beautiful and wonderful happens, then perhaps we respond by reaching out and taking it, wanting more of it, or entering into it. Or if something unfortunate and uncomfortable happens, the response is to pull back. Or if you practice mindfulness, then maybe you've learned that one response would be to neither go forward nor back, but just be present – and that's a response. Perhaps it looks like you're not responding, but it's a response just to be there, acting – and you're acting with presence.

We're responding to every situation we're in. And part of what we do in Buddhist practice is to have some choice, to be conscious of the choices we make in how we respond, so we're not acting on automatic pilot. Many times people's reactions or responses to the world are from automatic, built-in habits, biases, or prejudices. These habits kick in, and we end up saying and doing things we regret later because we weren't so conscious about it.

A lot of our values come into play in how we relate and how we respond. For some people, their default is to always engage: they attack, get angry, or grab. Some people's default response is to withdraw, get quiet, staying undemonstrative and not revealing who they are. There are many different ways of responding. As we become more mindful, we start to see where we have a choice in the response.

If you live a busy, frazzled life, and things are going very fast, your mind's also going very fast. You can't notice all the unconscious and subconscious choices you're making. But if you slow down, or if the mindfulness gets stronger, then you see that there are more choices. And if there's more choice, then there's more freedom. Freedom and choice go closely together. You're not free if you can't make choices. But if you can make choices, then you have more freedom. You might not act on those choices, but still you have more possibilities for freedom.

How do you respond to the different things that arise?

Some of our responses weigh us down. Some lighten us up. One way to be weighed down is to respond to the past. The past is gone, but many people think about the past. They respond to the past by thinking about it a lot, reviewing it, repeating past conversations, coming up with better rejoinders, better responses in that past, or they doubt themselves, or feel bad about themselves. Guilt is a classic response of being weighed down by the past. Something has happened, and the response is to stay dwelling on it, caught in it, and weighed down by it.

Other responses lighten us up, rather than weighing us down. Buddhism encourages us to be forward-looking rather than backward-looking. So what's the response looking forward about how I can do better in the future? Rather than being weighed down by the guilt, by the despair, by what's happened, we look back just enough to learn from the past, and then respond by looking forward into the future. How can I do better? That's meant to be a bit more empowering. What can I do here? How can I improve myself? How can I improve the situation I'm in? How can I be more helpful? The idea here is of stepping forward into our life, as opposed to stepping back into the past.

How do we respond? Do we have a response that keeps us from going forward into the future, or a response that keeps us from acting? Or do we have a response that allows us to act and to respond in the world?

A very interesting issue is: What are you responding to? Or what's prompting your response to any given situation you're in? Are you responding based on selfish ideas, selfish concerns, what I want, what's in it for me, myself or mine? Or are you responding to the situation out there where someone needs help, so that you'll step

forward and help that person?

With any situation we find ourselves in, part of the task is to understand the situation as best we can, breaking down the barriers between self and other – but not to do away with them. What I mean by breaking them down is to be able to pay attention equally to the situation around us and to ourselves here – not one or the other. And then find out what's the appropriate response? What's needed in this situation? What's needed of me? What's this situation calling on me to do?

Some people like the expression, "What's the request?" What am I being requested to do here? What's the request of the situation – rather than what do I want from the situation, or what's in it for me? What's being requested in this situation? And how do I respond to that request?

Some people live their life as if they're always tuning into the request of the moment. They find this very helpful because it breaks open the idea that it's all about me. It's not all about what I want and what I demand. It's more: "What's the request? What's being asked of me in this situation?"

In Buddhism the metaphor for spiritual practice is that of walking on a path. The idea of walking on a path is that you have to do it, and it's forward moving. You're walking down the path. So the idea of responding and being forward-looking, engaging, stepping into acting, is a big part of Buddhist practice – even if what we're doing looks like non-doing. That's a response too. That's the request at the moment.

What is the request of the moment? If the request is, "Don't do anything," just listen and get to know it better. What's the request of the moment? What's the response in this situation? Oh, it's to go and offer my friend tea.

I offer you these reflections with the suggestion that to carry this question with you – "What's the appropriate response? Or what's being requested in this situation?" – is a great question to have.

Go into any new situation and say, "What's being requested here?" "What's the appropriate response here?" To have that question pauses the automatic momentum of the mind wanting, and doing, and being up to its own devices. It gives the mind a chance to stop and notice, "What's going on here?" – to open up the mindfulness. What is the situation I'm in? When we can be more attentive to the situation we are in, then perhaps we can find the most appropriate response for that situation given its time and place.

I hope that makes sense, and if it didn't make sense, then you get to respond accordingly. How do you respond to that?