

Dharmette: Caretaking the Quality of the Mind

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on November 10, 2010

One of the very important and useful areas of mindfulness is called mindfulness of mind. It's one of the four foundations of mindfulness: the third foundation. It involves not so much looking at the details of what goes on in the mind, like the trees, as I said earlier, but rather looking at the forest – looking at the quality of the mind. Our mind always has some kind of quality. It can be spacious; it can be constricted; it can be anxious; it can be relaxed. The general mood of our mental state can be in the background. It can be quite subtle, but it is there informing the way we see and understand things, and it can have a tremendous influence on us.

The quality of the mind is something to pay attention to. It is probably the most valuable resource that you have. Buddhism sometimes puts a lot of emphasis on inner wealth. So we focus, not on outer wealth, which can come and go, but on becoming a custodian, a caretaker of our inner wealth. This inner wealth has to do with the quality of your mind, the quality of your heart.

It's easy to sacrifice that quality because all kinds of things seem much more important. For example, it's much more important to worry, isn't it [laughs]? People then sacrifice their peace or their beauty. Or they sacrifice the relaxation, or the love, or the compassion that can be the quality of the mind, because they need to worry. It's really important to worry. Or it's really important to crave, to desire, and to want. It's really important to hate, to be angry, and filled with regret.

We might feel that we don't have much choice around fear, or anger, or desire. Often we don't feel like we have much choice about these things, because we don't see the place of choice. But part of the function of mindfulness is to sit quietly enough to see: "Where do I have choice? What am I picking up? What am I focusing on? What am I emphasizing here?"

We pay some attention to the quality of the mind, which is closely connected to the attitude that we have or bring with us, and we become the caretaker of that quality. No-one else is going to do it for you. Sometimes, relationships can create feedback and put us in a good or a bad mood, but really, in practice, we try to become the custodian, the person responsible for our quality of mind.

For people who meditate, one very interesting exercise to do is to meditate in such a way that you're a little bit calmer after your meditation than you were at the beginning. It doesn't have to be dramatic, but just a little more calm, so the quality of your mind is a little calmer, more settled, more at ease, less agitated. Then, as you leave meditation, that's when your meditation really begins. So as you leave your meditation session, pay careful attention to what causes you to lose that calm, or that peace, or that sense of well-being that you touched into when you were meditating.

It is really interesting is to take your time in leaving meditation, and notice the first time that your mind gets agitated or caught by something. Rather than go along with it, and continuing your life being caught, stop in your tracks. Sit down and check-in. Notice what just happened. What was that about? Why was I willing to sacrifice my peace for this thing, whatever it might be? Have I picked being in a hurry? Am I wanting to get a lot done, or to worry about something, or whatever it might be? Really take that transition time coming out of meditation, in a slow, careful way, so that you can stop, look and see what happens – to see when you first lose your peace, or your inner sense of well-being, or whatever it might be. Then see if you can regain it. See if you can let go of something, or settle back into the calm that you had, and get back in touch with it.

Those two exercise are really important. The first is to look and see and understand really well what it is that you're sacrificing – what it is that you believe is so important that you're willing to give up your well-being for.

The other important exercise is to learn to let go and fall back into the well-being. Maybe it's not always easy to fall back. It depends how quickly and how much you got pulled in. Do this exercise in the transition out of meditation, because once you've started your full-fledged life, running around, doing what you do, it might be hard to do because you're already caught up in many things. That transition point coming out of meditation is a very valuable time in which you can learn a lot about yourself. If you do this on a regular basis, then you might

be able to stretch how long you stay peaceful, easeful, or contented. You can extend it longer and longer into the day, and you don't have to lose it one minute after getting up. Maybe you'll lose it in five minutes – that's 500% better! Then you keep working on it, and it becomes ten minutes, and then an hour . . .

Some people may feel that emphasis on caring for the quality of your mind, the quality of your heart, is selfish, and it may be a form of self-preoccupation. Hopefully, if your mindfulness is strong enough, you'll see if it's selfish. If it's self-absorbed, you'll feel the suffering of that, and you'll actually feel that it's not a very good quality of mind to be self-concerned in that way.

The best quality of mind comes when we're not so pre-occupied with self-identity, trying to do something for our own sake. It helps to understand that a good quality of mind is not something to do just for yourself or for your pleasure. But when you do it so that you can be more helpful to the world around you, then you can be more peaceful, more settled, and less gripped by greed, hate and delusion. And the encounters you have will be so much richer and more beneficial for the people you meet. The motivation behind caring for the quality of your heart can be inspired by having something good and beautiful to do for other people – you're not just doing it for your own sake.

A fascinating thing about turning the attention to the quality of the mind is how attention – being aware of something – tends to make more space around the mind. When the quality of the mind is contracted, constricted, or tight, and when we become really aware of this, then suddenly there's space in the mind. Even though you might still be constricted, there's more room in the mind, and the constriction doesn't define the mind anymore. Awareness becomes bigger than the constriction. Making a lot of space and room is one of the exercises in paying attention to the quality of the mind. So notice when the mind becomes expansive. And expansive doesn't mean that the details – the trees – have to go away. It just means that the forest or the space around it has become really big. This idea of using awareness – not to get rid of something – but to expand the mind and make it big enough so the mind is no longer troubled by a particular tree is a wonderful way of caretaking for the quality of the mind, for how we are.