

Dharmette: How We Hold Our Thoughts

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on December 8, 2010

Our thinking – whether in words or images – is a hugely impactful part of our life. We can have good thoughts, useful thoughts. We can have inappropriate thoughts, unhelpful thoughts, wrong thoughts. We can be wrong in how we perceive things and how we understand things.

In terms of the practice, in some ways, how we hold thoughts – how we relate to them – is more important than the kind of thoughts we have. In a bigger sense, the way we are attached, cling, and resist things – the way we are pushed around or troubled by things – has a lot to do with how we hold our thoughts, and ideas we have of what's going on and who we are. If we can learn to hold the world of thinking very lightly, then it's easier to have the experience of being porous, as opposed to having a wall, or something solid that the world hits when it encounters us. Someone says or does something, and it hits us if we're holding tight to some idea, concept, story, opinion, or world of thinking. That tightness, that holding, is often the thing that the experience in the world encounters and strikes. Sometimes it meets with hard resistance. Sometimes we get knocked over.

Sometimes, if the holding is tenuous, we can feel vulnerable because we're kind of holding and we're kind of not. We're kind of open; we're kind of not. We're not quite ready to let go, but we're not quite holding on either – so it feels tenuous. It's nice to consider that there's an option of how hold both so lightly that you're porous. Then when someone says something, it's almost as if it goes right through you. It doesn't stick anywhere. It doesn't hit anything. It doesn't get stopped by anything. Or in the common expression of a hook, there are no hooks inside that grab onto things. There are no buttons inside us that get pushed.

With the idea of being porous, we just let things come, move through, and move out. They can still have an impact. We can still be emotionally moved by things. It doesn't have to be completely neutral. Even emotional responses can also just move through freely and openly if we don't hold onto them.

I don't think we so much hold onto to emotional responses or the pain or joy we might feel. Rather, I think that often what we're really holding onto is the idea – the thoughts, concepts, stories, interpretations, and meaning that we assign to the feelings we have.

So this points back to how important and useful it is to look at how you're holding your thoughts. Are you riding them really close? Are you giving them a lot of authority? Do you believe that your thoughts are who you really are? Do you believe every thought should be believed? Are you judging your thoughts a lot? “This is a good thought; this is a bad thought.”

How do you relate to your thoughts? Can you loosen the grip of thoughts, the grip in the mind? “Oh I'm thinking.” Thoughts can be. They can float; they can arise; they can come and go. They can be good thoughts; they can be bad thoughts. But if we hold them lightly, then it's easier to be much more relaxed about what happens around us and with us – and let it be porous, and move through us.

Some of what can set up the hooks or the buttons are things like expectations and shoulds. Maybe we're attached to how things should be. We can be attached to how we want them to be or how we don't want them to be. It's reasonable to have wants or things we don't want. But it depends how we hold them. If we hold them lightly, then when things don't end up the way we want them to be, we can ask: “What would it be like to be porous to this?” – just to let it be, and not have it stick anywhere – not affect or impact anything.

It's quite interesting to notice the contrasting ways in which we hold things. You can feel that you resist it, or grab onto it, or pick it up in some way – versus having the same kind of thing happen, and it has no impact at all. You feel it just washes through like a wave. Or you're porous to it. You realize you don't have to pick something up. It's not required to tighten up; it's not required to react to something. It can just move through.

In that space of being porous, or non-reactive, chances are that we'll be able to consider, determine, or understand more wisely what is a good way of responding. But when we have our buttons pushed, or we have reactions going on, then we tend not to think as clearly, or fully, or appropriately. We don't understand the fuller

picture.

I would encourage you to look for some opportunity in your daily life to experiment with what would it be like to be porous in that situation. Usually it's good to choose a situation that is not comfortable, but not something too monumental. For example, you pull into the gas station, and some person pushes their car in front of yours although you were next in line. Or someone is honking at you as you're filling up. They're impatient and upset that you're filling up your car so slowly. It's not a big deal. In a week, you're not going to think about this person again. So, experiment. See what it's like if you can shift yourself in some way. Feel what is it like to be porous in that situation. What's it like to be equanimous, or open, and just let it flow and move through you?

What does it feel like to be with something uncomfortable? It's really interesting to look for opportunities to do this. Begin stretching with small things. And then someday, there might be a big thing. Some people have big things to be equanimous about during the holidays. It's very common for the holidays to stir up things for people – so that might be too big to experiment with. But maybe the gas station is a good place to begin developing that capacity to be transparent or porous.

That's what's on my mind.