

Practice Note: Being Actively Present

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on October 5, 2011

Probably one of the biggest issues to deal with or overcome in meditation is the mind that wanders off in thoughts about the future and the past. It's interesting to study that phenomenon and understand how it works. There is often a kind of passivity to it, where we find ourselves wandering off for a few moments, a few minutes, a few hours, or a few years. In that passivity where the mind wanders off, we find our attention is either hijacked, taken over, or lost to whatever concerns we might be having. There may even be a relinquishment of our own agency, or our ability to direct our attention, or in a sense be in charge of it.

So there is an active part to mindfulness meditation where we try to overcome that passive way in which we slip off. Sometimes it's not so passive. People may choose to go off in thought. But instead of being passive, the idea is to be more active in staying present and being here. There is an awakening of an active choice or intention of, "Let's be here."

It's not always recognized that active qualities are needed, because people sometimes just want to be soothed in meditation. It's a busy day; the mind is busy; and they just want to relax and take it easy. The emphasis on relaxing and settling in is sometimes conducive to the mind feeling like it can just wander off freely back into its thoughts.

Often when we bring in the idea of being actively present, keeping the attention on the breath and on the present moment, then that becomes a magnet for all kinds of issues and attitudes we have about doing anything. When we do something, we have agency and apply ourselves, and then there are a lot of issues around: "I'm the one who's doing it;" "I can't do it;" "I have to do it;" "I have to prove myself;" or "I'd better be the best one." There might be attitudes around success and expectations, and so there are attitudes of "I have to try hard;" or "I can't really do it, so I'll just kind of try." All kinds of attitudes can come along when, "I'm the one who's going to do it."

Part of what happens in meditation is that we have to bring some active agency to be attentive in the present moment. Then, over time, we begin discovering all the ways we make that more complicated than it needs to be, until we let it settle away, and just be actively present – here – without a lot of tension, striving, giving up, complacency, or ways in which we might tie it to a sense of self.

With time, we learn to bring an activity of being attentive in a very simple way. Initially there's always an active side to being attentive. But when our attentiveness gets strong enough, then at some point it almost takes over, and we don't have to make so much effort anymore. It becomes effortless effort. Maybe we could say our role becomes more passive, and we have to get out of the way and relax. But initially, there has to be that active quality, because if we're too passive early on, then we'll just wander off in thought.

You might experiment this morning with the idea of being actively involved in the activity of being attentive. With that choice or intention, see what you discover. See if it helps you to be present, and see if you begin purifying or emptying out all the extra stuff that you bring along with making effort or being active.

I hope that makes sense. If so, try it out. If it doesn't, do what you were doing. Thank you.