

Practice Note: Meditation Attitudes

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on October 19, 2011

In terms of the Dharma and the practice we do, there is the particular technique or approach that you're using when you meditate, and there is the attitude in which you do it. For example, the technique might be focusing on the breath. Or it might just be general mindfulness of whatever is happening in the present moment. Or the primary technique might be loving-kindness meditation. No matter what meditation practice you do, there are a number of attitudes that might come into play when you do it. It's very important to be the custodian or the caretaker of your attitude, because if you don't take care of your attitude, then something else will [laughs]. That something else might not be the best attitude to have.

One of the reasons it's important to have a good attitude when we meditate is that a lot of meditation is about failure, especially before you get settled down. You sit down, and you're going to stay with your breath. Then the mind goes off; it doesn't stay on the breath. You could call that failure, right? You set yourself to do something, and you don't do it. So you bring the mind back. Or you're doing loving-kindness practice, and before you know it, you're thinking about your shopping list. You've lost track of your practice, and you have to come back.

There are all kinds of attitudes that can come with the mind not going along with the program. You can feel bad about yourself. You can get angry or discouraged. A lot of these more negative attitudes undermine what you're trying to do. So I think it's really helpful to spend a little bit of time considering what would be a helpful and sincere attitude to bring into the practice. You don't want to artificially create something. But I think if you consider it, you might have a fairly good chance of finding something in your repertoire of attitudes and understandings that would help you have a more positive attitude to what's going on.

One attitude that Buddhism encourages is kindness, benevolence, good will, or loving-kindness. So, for example, when you notice the mind wandering off the breath into thoughts, a kinder way to respond is to go, "Of course, this is what minds do," instead of, "Oh no" or some negative equivalent – and then come back to the breath. Your job is to come back, and not to go, "Of course" and just continue being elsewhere. But, "Of course, this is what minds do," and then come back. It's not a big problem or mistake, but just a matter of fact.

An attitude that I like is, in a certain way, not to agree with everything that happens, but to have an attitude of "Yes," rather than "No, not that." It's like an acknowledgement of, "Oh yes, that's how it is now." There is openness or kindness, "not a problem-ness" – "Yes, this is how life is. This is how it manifests right now, and given that this is how it is, and that it is not useful or helpful to continue this way, let me come back to my breath and the present moment. Let me come back to my loving-kindness practice."

As you do the practice today, you might try to look at your attitude. See what your native attitude is when you're left to your own devices. Then see if you can bring some nice attitude that's more helpful, such as, "Of course," or "Oh yes, that's how it is" – some kind of "Yes." But "Yes" does not mean to continue being distracted.

There is a kind of opening to possibilities in the attitude of "Yes, that's how it is. Now given that's how it is, let me center myself again back on the breathing and continue." I find it's a lot easier to continue with the practice when there's an attitude of "Yes" – an openness, kindness, or "of course-ness."

When the attitude is "No," it's kind of closing something down. My experience is this actually gives more fuel to the part of the mind that gets distracted. So, I'm actually more likely to wander off or get concerned or preoccupied if I have the attitude of, "Oh no, not this! This is terrible, and I'm a terrible person for having this."

I hope that helps. You might explore that today. And if it doesn't help at all, then figure something else out [laughter].