

Dharmette: Balancing Past, Present and Future

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on October 26, 2011

In this mindfulness tradition, and often in Buddhist traditions in general, there's a big emphasis on being in the present moment – being here and now. If you're meditating, it's quite common to notice how often the mind is in the future and the past, and the idea is to come back into the present. There's a big training in that. But, in that emphasis, which is a useful corrective to how the mind often works, people can get the idea that all you're ever supposed to do is focus on and be in the present moment without ever any thought or consideration about the future or the past. I think that a life that doesn't include memories of the past or projections of what the future will be is a very limited life. If you're only in the present moment all the time, I think it's not really a human life, because human life includes past and future to some degree.

Many years ago there was a Calvin and Hobbes cartoon in which Calvin and Hobbes were climbing a tree together. Calvin said to Hobbes something like, "It's just wonderful to be so fully in the present moment, enjoying this time and place. Everyone should do this. This is really a rich and wonderful way of living a life." Hobbes said, "Yes, but you're supposed to be at school right now" [laughs]. If you listen to Vipassana teachers, it seems like they're doing their practice just right.

I've seen this in my kids. They're walking out of the house. They see the flowers on the side of the house, and the flowers or the ants really fascinate them. They're really in the present moment, looking at the flowers or the ants. There's nothing else in the world. They're completely there. Sometimes on retreat I wish I was that present for something. Nothing else is going on for them. I'm trying to teach people to do this, right? But, when my kids were small, we're going to be late for school [laughs]. School is starting in 10 minutes. This is not the time to be completely engaged in the ants on the sidewalk. This is the time to get in the car and go to school. So, there has to be some idea of the bigger context of our life, and this often has to do with things in the future. School starts in 10 minutes. We have to take that into account.

But, what happened in the past is also important. Some people focus a lot on the past, and one of the big things that weigh people down is feeling bad about the past – what they've said, what they've done, what's occurred. We're always looking backward into the past, just pulling ourselves down, feeling depressed, angry or ashamed about what's happened – ethical problems, mistakes, conflicts, all kinds of things. For some people, it's tremendous wind drag pulling them down, being fixated on what happened in the past. As I understand the Buddhist approach, or the wise approach, we want to be just backward-looking enough so that we learn from our mistakes and what happened in the past. The primary focus is forward-looking, not backward-looking. We don't ignore the past; we learn from it. We set the intention to learn from it, and do better in the future.

The first time I got a sense of this was when I was a cook in the monastery. It was great. We made all these meals. Sometimes we were making six meals a day for different groups. It was great to fail at making a meal, to somehow make a meal that didn't come out right, because a meal was distinct. After the meal was done, you worked on the next meal, and you got to start all over again. It was a whole new meal. You didn't bring the burnt rice with you into the next meal. That was then, and now was now. The idea was that you could fail at making the meal, and then you could look back and say, "Okay, I get to try again." Every morning in the monastery, I would wake up to go to the kitchen and I had this feeling, "Lucky me, I get to try again" – as opposed to, "Oh no, I made this horrible meal yesterday. Everyone in the monastery must hate me. I'm sure I'll do a really lousy job again. I'm just a failure as a cook, and I wish they would assign me someplace else in the monastery." Instead of being weighed down by the past, you say, "Yesterday I didn't do such a good job. This is what I did wrong, and I get to try again. Let's see if I can do better next time." So, the idea is to be forward-looking: "How can I do better?"

Having an intention or a vision of what's possible is a very important part of practice. It's possible to get too caught up in the future with planning. I've had wonderful, inspired, energizing, and uplifting plans of the superhuman Buddhist practice I was going to engage in [laughs]. It's kind of embarrassing some of the things I thought of. "I'm going to get up every morning at 2:00 a.m., and I'll do this and that. By the time everybody else gets up, I'll have done all these different practices." Sometimes the mind has no perspective where it's possible to get too caught up and lost in planning. That's a problem.

But, luckily we have the past and the future. Luckily we make a lot of mistakes that we can learn from, and in some ways be inspired by, and we feel we're on a path of development and growth towards freedom. So, in Buddhist practice, it's useful to remember the past and look at or consider what our situation is like just to the extent that we can learn from it and be inspired to try to do better, but not so much that it discourages us and blocks our path. We try to review it just enough so that it helps us to set a better direction, understand what we have to work on, and then we can commit ourselves to doing better.

If you only look towards the future and ignore the mistakes you've had, then it's also sometimes unrealistic. It becomes kind of Pollyannaish. It's important to be weighed down a little bit and not float away. But, it's important not to be so weighed down that you can't go forward in practice. At times, there's a wonderful balance between being in the present moment, remembering what happened in the past, and then seeing what we can do better in the future.

This morning you've been meditating. You can be so much in the present moment that when you leave here you go on to the next thing and completely forget what happened this morning, which is okay. But, another approach to practice is to spend a little time at the end of a practice session remembering and considering what happened: how it went, what came up in your practice. For example, "How was that? How was the walking meditation period for me? Well, actually, now that I think about it, I didn't really use the walking meditation period. I went and had some tea. I went to the bathroom. I went for a walk around the block, and then I thought I'd have some more tea. After that, I thought I should do some walking meditation. I should get serious about this stuff, but then they rang the bell to come and sit. That's how I did it. Now that was pleasant enough, but I think that I didn't really avail myself of the opportunity to fully engage in the walking meditation." Or when you look back at it, maybe you didn't use the walking meditation the whole 45 minutes. You realize that you were being too complacent, letting the mind wander off too much into thinking. By reviewing, sometimes you see better what happened than if you had stayed in the moment. Then, you could say, "The next time I come to a Wednesday morning at IMC I'm going to do the full walking period." Or "When I do the walking period, I'm going to try to remind myself to come back and be present more often. I'm going to try and do a better job next time." You're not trying to be a super practitioner, but just trying to do better.

So, there's a way of using the past – reviewing it – that can help us in this practice to set the course for the future. I would say that the emphasis in Buddhism is to be forward-looking rather than backward-looking, but we should look back just enough to learn, and then look forward enough to set the course to know how to go, and then to do it by being fully in the present moment.

Over the course of a day, the mind will appropriately go and review these three different times. Sometimes we're here in the present – that's the name of the game. Sometimes we review the past, because that's helpful, and sometimes we consider the future. I think part of a well-balanced practice life is being wise about how and when to be in these three periods of time.

Thank you for coming.