

Practice Note: Vitakka and Vicāra

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on November 30, 2011

A very important functioning of the mind in meditation or dharma practice is something that's known in the Pali language as *vitakka* and *vicāra*. *Vitakka* is usually translated as placing or directing your attention at whatever you would pay attention to. In meditation practice, mindfulness works by applying your attention to notice something. That initial noticing of something is *vitakka*.

Vicāra is a different activity of the mind than the initial placing. It's sustaining the attention there and keeping it going. Some people are very good at the first. For example, their mind wanders off, and they come back to the breath, and they can come back over and over again. But they don't know about the second part, which is sustaining the attention – hanging in there, hanging out, and staying present.

An analogy that is sometimes used in the texts would be something like a bird, which – taking off from the ground – has to flap its wings a lot. But once it's up in the air, it stops flying and just holds its wings out, and soars or glides. So initially there has to be some work to get up there, but then you glide. That sustained attention is gliding or staying present.

The classic example of *vicāra* is if you are going to polish a bowl, you have to put the cloth on the bowl. Then the sustained attention is rubbing it – staying present. If you just put your hand on and off the bowl, you're not going to get it polished.

I don't know if this next is a good analogy, but this ability to sustain your attention would be like flying a kite. You can get a kite up in the air, but to keep it up in the air, you have to sustain a certain amount of tautness on the string. If it's too taut, the string will break. And if it's too slack, the kite will fall down. There has to be the right tautness to keep it up in the air. Sometimes, initially there has to be just the right tautness in your attention.

This involves some work, and some people are a little bit allergic to working in meditation. They think meditation is just about relaxing. But there is the sustained – hopefully gentle – work of staying, for example, with your breath. It might seem like a bit more work, but if you can do it, it turns out to be a lot less work than letting the mind chatter with itself in conversation or in images.

Sustaining this kind of focus of attention on the breath or whatever you're focusing on is one of the ways to help the mind become quiet. Part of the work of that sustained attention is to be alert enough to keep the mind from spinning out in a lot of thought. It's not that easy to do, but there has to be some alertness to notice that.

Another analogy I like for *vicāra* would be when listening to a very faint sound far in the distance that's important to hear, most people would let their thinking mind become really quiet, because when they're not involved in thinking, they can be more involved in listening. Maybe you don't try to strain when you listen, but you have to be very intent.

It's the same thing when you're staying on the breath. Sustained attention involves intentness to listen really quietly, and the thinking mind – the discursive mind, the mind that has conversations in its head – you want to keep that quiet. If you're lucky, perhaps you have the ability to turn off, turn down, or let go of the discursive, conversational thinking for a moment. Part of that sustained attention is not just keeping your attention on the breath, but it's also having enough alertness that you try to keep a quiet, relaxed mind. It takes some work, but as I said, you'll probably find that it's actually less tiring than letting the mind spin out. And it helps the mind quiet down. At some point, the mind quiets down enough, and you're settled enough, that you no longer have to apply yourself anymore in order to sustain the attention, because now it is effortless to stay there. The mind just stays present. So that's called *vicāra*, and it's usually translated as sustained application of attention.

Whether you're doing sitting meditation or walking meditation, you might today experiment a little bit to see what it might mean for you to do this sustained attention. Each person has a different way of experiencing or doing this. Don't think that there's some preordained way it has to be, but there is some way in which we can sustain the attention – keep it there, keep it there, keep it there, hanging in there, hanging out, and not getting swept

away with all the thoughts we can get swept away in.

If this is interesting for you, you might want to experiment with that and find your way in that today. Hopefully that's useful. Thank you.