

Dharmette: Our Inner Light

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on December 21, 2011

I suppose for some people, today is a special day, as it's the solstice. It's the shortest day of the year in the northern hemisphere – the heart of the darkness. You see people put up Christmas lights. People light candles. At this time of year, people bring light to all kinds of things in their lives.

For some people, the darkening in winter is quite difficult. But, there's also an opportunity at this time of year to come closer to ourselves. Unlike spring, this is not exactly the expansive time of year. But, it's a time perhaps to be more settled, quiet, or a little more pulled in. I think there's something quite beautiful about being – I don't know if "pulled in" is the right word – perhaps it's "connected" or "close in." Stay close to yourself.

There's a story from the time of the Buddha that when he was getting close to death, he gave the instruction or the teaching to: "be a light unto yourself." The Pali word he used was *dīpa*, which means both 'light' and 'island.' There are various debates about this. Did he mean island, or did he mean light? But, for today's purpose, I'm happy with light [laughs]. Be a light unto yourself.

Is there an inner light that represents what's meaningful or sacred for you – things that are connected to yourself, or to a place of feeling home? Do you have something that is inwardly or spiritually a source of light for you – some reference point of meaning, value, or significance? It could be a feeling of freedom, a sense of love, gratitude, or connectedness to others and the people around you. It could be a sense of compassion, or the path of practice. It could be your inner sense of wisdom, understanding, or intuition that's very meaningful. It could be a sense of community – of being connected to others: family, friends, or other practitioners who are wise, loving, or compassionate.

So, what is your light? What is your light that lights up the darkness for you in this life we live, which is often difficult? Is there something that brings you a sense of beauty, value, or inspiration, and that lightens you up, so that you don't get so heavy? I think that at this time of year, we're called upon to get close to and remind ourselves of our light – to come home to it, and be settled. It's a time to feel connected in the darkness. Maybe it's bit harder on a day like today in California with this particularly blue sky [laughs].

Be a light unto yourself, so that there's something you can do, so that you find yourself at home, safe, or connected to something meaningful. It's not dependent on someone else. It's not that someone else is going to do it for you. It's not like you're going to place yourself in the middle of other people to entertain you or take you away from yourself. But, find something that brings you home to yourself, so you feel connected to yourself.

I find the darkness at this time of year to be kind of lovely, for coming inward. I'm always so surprised at how early it gets dark. It's not as dark as where I grew up in Norway, where you couldn't even see the sun at 3:30 or four o'clock. It was dark.

So, as the darkness pulls you in, be connected and here. Don't go out so much. How you interpret this, I don't know. But, those are my thoughts – just the feeling sense of today and being here with you. It's kind of lovely to come here and sit. I hope that this time of year is one that is nourishing for you as you pull in, stay home metaphorically, and stay connected to your light.

So that's all I have; I don't have much more. What else is there? We have a few minutes. If any of you want to ask a question or say something, we can take a little time.

Participant. [Indecipherable] my practice of and the reason I'm asking the question is so I don't [indecipherable] So the instructions that [indecipherable] as practice just pay attention to the breath, and if I find myself thinking, come back to the breath. [indecipherable] Mahasi method. And I think I've found in this past year different instructions both from Andrea and you about paying more attention to [indecipherable], reflecting on it, [indecipherable], understand the threads of what's going on in me, the emotion that's arising and so forth. And that's different, as I said, from the instructions that I practiced for a long time. Is what I'm describing a suitable method of practice?

Gil: So, you're saying that for many years you practiced what you call the "Mahasi technique," which is to use your breath as the anchor of practice, to come back, and be there. And then if you wandered off in thought, to just come back to the breath, to let go of that and come back. But here at IMC, listening to Andrea Fella or myself give instructions, it seems we emphasize something more than just letting go, but also investigation, bringing mindfulness to the wandering, distracted mind. So, you notice that there are different instructions, and you're wondering is the way you were practicing good enough? Is it good? Is it right? That's what you want to know. You want to be reassured.

Participant: [Indecipherable] doing the way I practice, the Mahasi technique.

Gil: You want to know if that's good enough or if it's okay to keep doing it that way. Is that the question?

Participant: Yes, the question is that prefer paying more attention to my feeling, mood, thoughts, and try and unravel what's going on. And I was told absolutely not to do that.

Gil: Oh, by the Mahasi people.

Participant: Yes.

Gil: Okay, so what's the question?

Participant: The Mahasi style instructions were clear. It was simple, clear. What I'm doing now is not so clear.

Gil: Well, that's because your life is not clear. When your life becomes clear, it'll become clear [laughs]! But most people's lives are not so clear. You can see mindfulness as meeting your life as it is, and your life is complex and involved with many things. And so, of course, you have to find your way.

I don't know why this comes to my mind, but let's say you're a swimmer. Apparently, there are people who swim across the gap beneath the Golden Gate Bridge from San Francisco to Marin. I think there was a thirteen- or eight-year-old who did it. So, it's possible to do it. But, I don't think there is just one technique of swimming across, and that the time of day or anything else doesn't matter – you just jump in and swim across. One, two, three: you do it, right? It's not that way. It's a complex thing. You have to look at the tides, currents, wind, temperature, and the shipping lanes [laughs]. There is a lot that is going on. So, if you have just one technique, you're in trouble. Swimming across the straits is complicated, so you have to take into account all kinds of factors, and adjust what you do.

Your life is probably more complicated than swimming across to Marin. There are a lot of changes and shifts that happen. So, to find your way with your life as it is, you're probably not going to do so well if you just have this one technique that's going to do it all for you. Life is messy, and so we bring mindfulness to it. We try to understand.

A big part of my understanding of Buddhism is investigation, and with that comes trial and error. We investigate. We look more deeply to try to understand what's there. And then we try different things. If I try this or that in meditation, what are the results? Is it helpful, or not helpful?

There's a trial and error approach to meditation. The wonderful thing about trial and error is that we mostly learn from the error. So don't be afraid of that. And in that way, we get to understand the actual dynamics of our own life, and how to work with it. As we learn, it becomes easier and easier. But, if we have one technique that's too narrow – it might be a very powerful narrow technique – but it works well only in certain settings. Mahasi practice works well in intensive retreat settings. But sometimes we can't get the sense of how to bring our practice to the complexity of what goes on in life.

The art of meditation is be careful not to get so reflective or so analytical that the mind just spins out. But hopefully, if you're being mindful, it's self-correcting, because when you're mindful, you notice that. "Oh now, I'm thinking so much. I'm trying so much to understand what goes on in my thinking that I'm just tying myself in knots, and thinking even more." So that approach is not useful. Maybe I should go back to the Mahasi technique

for a while – get really simple, and calm down [laughs]. And then maybe I'll go gingerly and look more at what happens when I'm thinking. What are the emotions that keep popping up when I think?

I hope that's useful.