

Dharmette: Using Awareness to Set Ourselves Free

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on January 11, 2012

There are two sides to mindfulness. One side is what we're mindful of. Then there's the side of the awareness that's used to be mindful. It would be similar to having a bell like this one here. You can hold the bell in your hand and feel the coldness, the hardness, and the smoothness of it; but you can also be aware of the hand that's doing the holding. Some people might focus more on the bell. If this were a solid gold bell worth millions of dollars, I'd probably be focusing a lot on the bell. And probably if I had to walk down the street with it, I might not even notice my hand getting sore from holding on so tightly, as if someone is going to take my gold bell. But if it's a cheap bell, I might notice pretty quickly that when holding it for a long time, my hand begins hurting. Or it might not even hurt; I might just notice what it's like to hold it. Rather than focusing on the qualities and nature of the bell, I can focus on the qualities and nature of what it's like to be holding the bell. I feel the tightness, the holding, the gripping in my hand.

It's the same thing with mindfulness and awareness. You can focus on what you're aware of, or you can become aware of the nature, or the quality of the mindfulness that you're actually using. The two often go hand in hand. It's like the lid of a box that fits together with the box. They can fit together really closely, but they can also be distinguished as two sides. For many people, the tendency is to focus on what they're aware of – not only externally, but also internally. You can think about yourself and your own problems; and so you're mindful of yourself.

A really useful thing to do is to start becoming more aware of awareness, or being more attentive to the nature of the mindfulness itself: its qualities, its characteristics, what it's like. The quality of the awareness is half of the picture, so if you don't include that as part of your attention, you're missing half your life. What is it like to be aware? Once you start to become more sensitive to what it's like to be aware, it tends to break the strong attraction you can have to what you're concerned with, what you're focusing your attention on.

If I think the be-all and end-all of a successful life is having the right bell, then I'm going to be looking at bells all the time, and focusing on this bell, holding it really close. It's all about the bell. I'm not going to be able to pay attention to what it's like to be holding the bell, or being with the bell, because I'm so focused on the bell itself. But if I shift my attention around, I can notice that how I'm holding the bell is what is really affecting my well-being and the stress in my system. If I'm holding onto the bell tightly, I can feel a little tension in the top of my shoulders. And if I hold it tightly for a long time, that tension is going to build. My inner tension, my inner sense of suffering has a lot to do with how I'm holding the bell – not with the bell itself.

When we start focusing on how we are in relationship to what we're paying attention to, there's more than just awareness. There's how we're aware. We can be aware with tension, with resistance, with hesitation, or with a lot of judgments and commentary. There's a lot we can add to being aware, and that's often the case. One of the things we add to being aware is being obsessed, so that we're not even aware that we're aware, because we're so invested in being involved. In mindfulness practice, one of the useful things to start paying attention to at some point is to include in the field of awareness getting a sense of what it's like to be aware – the quality of the mindfulness, the attention, and the attitude that's present. There are a variety of ways of pointing to something that has to do with how you are, besides just what you're involved in – it's the other half of mindfulness.

If you can start getting a sense of your awareness, your attention, your mindfulness – of the act of being mindful as opposed to what you're mindful of – then meditation can really begin. If you have a sense of something you can apply, or you can engage in, which is different from just being lost and preoccupied in your concerns – then you can start getting some freedom from those concerns, obsessions, and preoccupations. Then you can start applying and using your awareness. In a sense, you can take control of your awareness. You can take responsibility for what you do with your attention. You have some agency of what you do with it, as opposed to awareness just going along for the ride. There are forces inside of you that are directing your attention. You can focus on different things.

Awareness, attention, mindfulness are tools you start to discover, and then you start using these tools. First it

requires noticing. And then it requires not only noticing that there is such a tool as mindfulness of attention and awareness, but there also has to be an understanding that it's valuable to start focusing on that tool, as opposed to focusing only on your concerns and your problems. There has to be some willingness to step back from the usual way of being locked in to me, myself and mine, locked in to our concerns, desires, and fears.

Many of us have important desires and fears to be engaged in – I don't want to deny their tremendously important value [laughs]. I want to offer my deep respect to your neurosis [laughs]. But there's no meditation practice unless you are willing to step back from that. For some people, this is a huge step because it's counter-intuitive. It goes against what you've been doing for a long time, or even against what society might be indicating to you. Being willing to step back from your fears and your desires – to step back and be mindful – is to strengthen this tool of awareness, of attention. Even if what you're paying attention to is the fear or the desire, the focus is not on the desire, the fear, the concern, or the thought. The focus is on the nature of the awareness, the strengthening of the attention – opening up the awareness, stabilizing the awareness, being cognizant of what's happening, and feeling the cognizant quality of this – feeling what it's like, and knowing that you know. There's a strength, an 'oomph,' a sense of presence in the knowing, in the awareness. The sense of knowing is so strong, you know that you know.

Once you start having some appreciation for awareness, for knowing, for mindfulness as a tool in itself, separate from what you're mindful of, then you can start using that tool in useful ways. One way to use the tool of mindfulness, of attention, is to focus it on something inside you that helps you feel more steady, stable, and peaceful – more at ease. Is there someplace inside where you can feel more relaxed, more at ease, even just hints, little wisps of some inner sense of well-being? Then let your awareness come from that well-being. Let your awareness come from being more relaxed. Even though you're focusing on the breath, see if the focus on the breath isn't about the breath *per se*, but about how being with the breath helps steady, stabilize, relax, and create some sense of inner well-being, or inner peace in your steadiness, so that there's more and more a sense of being at ease, calm, relaxed, and here.

One tool to becoming more peaceful, more tranquil, and less caught up is learning to appreciate the value of awareness, and then to use that awareness. You don't just rest in awareness, which some people find is a great practice. But in mindfulness meditation, you use awareness to help set yourself free. Setting yourself free is a way of becoming more peaceful. And then you can go back into the world and pick up the bells, but you're much more likely to pick them up lightly, as opposed to grasping them. Just pick them up lightly, because you have a sense that how you are, how you carry yourself, and what you do is very important – as opposed to latching on, or locking on to something.

And, as you know, if you hold the bell really lightly, [bell sounds] you can make a nice sound that you can't make if you grasp onto it [some metallic clicking sounds] [bell sounds again].

May you be a bell that rings beautifully.