

Dharmette: Attitude Matters

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on February 8, 2012

Perhaps I can say a few more words about what I talked about earlier: about attitude. Almost always, we operate under the influence of, or through the filter, of some attitude, and it's easy for that attitude go unnoticed.

There's an analogy I like. I don't know whether you've had this experience. You drive around in a car with a clean windshield, and then slowly it gets dirty because it hits the bugs. It happens so slowly that you don't notice how dirty it's getting. But it's getting dirty enough that you have to strain to see through it. Still you don't notice, because you're focusing so much on the road, and the traffic, and driving safely. What does the glass have to do with driving? Then, lo and behold, you stop at a gas station and clean the windshield. When you start driving again, you're amazed at how clean it is. The world is clear! Those of you who wear glasses perhaps have had this experience occasionally. I've had someone say, "Gil, I'm going to clean your glasses for you." "Oh!"

It's possible to go for a long time with something that interferes with our ability to see clearly because we're so focused on our life. We're focused on what we're looking at, what we're concerned about, so that we don't notice the medium through which we're seeing, through which we're perceiving. The attitude can often be the medium; it's the background, the filter. There are all kinds of attitudes. Some attitudes are fine or helpful; but some are disturbing, disruptive, or create obstacles for us.

What's interesting about meditation practice is that sooner or later if the mind gets quiet enough, even good attitudes need to fall away – even things we think are great and wonderful. When I was in Burma with U Pandita, I was surprised at one of the things he would teach us. He said, "Don't have any compassion." He didn't actually say it that way, but that's how I heard it. What he meant was that, when doing deep meditation practice, even the attitude of having compassion was extra. Compassion might be there. He wasn't saying don't have it. But to assume or take on any kind of attitude isn't needed when you get really still.

There's another thing that opens up when you become attitude free. The hold, the grip that attitudes may have on you is loosened up. The idea that it's important to have an approach, or an underlying intention or attitude is loosened up. Some attitudes have to do with beliefs. A belief in the background supports the attitude. Or there's an attitude in the background that supports the belief. Which comes first depends on the situation. But just turn around and look, and see what attitudes or beliefs are operating in the background. Some beliefs are not really articulated. Nevertheless, our background beliefs influence everything we do.

One of the surprises people have on meditation retreats is slowly seeing over time the basic principles they're operating under highlighted. They see the repetitive patterns over and over and over again. In daily life, there are so many interruptions, and so many different things going on that the mind jumps around a lot. There are distractions, so you don't really notice. But on retreat, after a while, every time the mind wanders off, you're conscious of it. You know where the mind has gone, and you start seeing its repetitive patterns.

It's not uncommon for someone on retreat to come to an interview with a teacher and say, "I had no idea how pervasive my fear was. Fear underlies everything I do and think, and I had no idea." Sometimes when someone says this to me, there's no obvious indication that this is a fearful person – it's not visible from the outside. And it wasn't visible to that person until they got quiet enough to actually see what was going on in the background. A whole series of things can be background attitudes or approaches.

When I've worked very closely with people on their breathing in meditation, I have found it interesting that when they get quiet enough to really track their breathing and see what's going on in their breathing, they find that these attitudes are embedded in how they breathe. For example, it's not uncommon that the place in breathing where we give up control is at the end of the out breath (there's often a letting go there). For people with the attitude of liking to control everything, they feel unwilling to breathe out all the way. Or that's the place where they wander off into thought, or easily get distracted. It's a little frightening to let go, because it seems like a loss of control.

And then I've known people who don't want to breathe in. They're fine with breathing out, letting go of

everything, giving everything away. But breathing in is oppressive – it's like too much input. "Leave me alone. I have all this work to do. Breathing in is work; my life is work; and I don't want to work." So there are these very subtle attitudes. For some people, the hitch – the place where the speed bump is – is not with breathing out, but with breathing in.

There are people who are a little reluctant at the beginning of the out breath. Everyone's breathing fine, but you have to be very still to watch what goes on. There can be a very small reluctance to breathing out at the top of the in breath, because it's losing something, giving something up. The attitude is to hoard everything, keep everything close in, including the breath. So there can be a slight reluctance. Talking about the breathing in this way points out how subtle the operating attitude or belief can be in the psyche, and how influential they can be in many different ways.

An attitude can influence things as subtle as how you walk. If you're walking through the city, through the town, it could be that you're doing it with an attitude.

Or how you sit. I spent three years at Tassajara Zen Monastery. In Zen monasteries a lot of things are choreographed. How you sit in meditation is choreographed. You sit in a certain way: upright, straight back, hands in a particular position, head in a particular position. When you stand up, you have to stand in a particular way, hold your hands a certain way. When you step through a doorway, you have to step through in a certain way. When you eat, you have to eat in a choreographed way. You have to bow in a certain way. What you do with your body is often choreographed, and you have to fit in. The consequence of doing this for three years, was that when I left Tassajara, I suddenly became aware that I had a lot more choices. I had always had these choices, but I became aware of a lot more choices about things I'd never considered that I had choices about. It never occurred to me that these choices were interesting or important. For example, how I would sit in a chair became a choice. Before I went to the monastery, I just sat in chairs. Then I became aware that I had a choice, and there were many different ways of sitting in a chair. I could slump; I could sit up straight; I could use the backrest; or I could not use the backrest. I started noticing these attitudes. I could sit down in a chair, but how I would sit was partially influenced by my attitudes, my beliefs, or what I was trying to do. Whereas before, I was just innocently sitting in a chair, this Zen practice interrupted or interfered with that. It's a bit of a drag to always be thinking about what I'm supposed to do. Sitting in a chair is supposed to just be relaxing, but now I had to think about how I sit in the chair because there are choices. What's the wise way to sit in a chair?

I remember once when I was a college student, being really depressed. I was sitting on the couch where I was living, and at some point I noticed that I was slumping so deeply into the couch that my shoulders were almost down to the seat of the sofa. That got my attention. "This is kind of dramatic," I thought. "Let me sit up straight." So I sat up straight, and when I sat up straight, all this energy came, and much of my depression lifted. Maybe I wasn't so depressed if it was that easy, right? What that taught me was the impact of posture. My attitude of giving up influenced my posture, and the posture then probably had a feedback loop influencing how I felt. Sometimes it's a spiral, and we spiral out.

So what is your attitude? What is your background mood? What are some of the background operating principles that might be there all the time – ones you may not have been so conscious of, but are always there?

When you open a door to go into a new place – a room, a store, some place you haven't been – is there a common pattern in the attitude with which you step through that door? Do you go in with concerns and worries, or do you just walk into a new space without any thought about it at all? Or are you just completely random in whatever you might be concerned about, or whatever your attitude is? Or is there a common pattern in what you do when you come into a new place?

If you answer an email, or if you're composing an email, is there an attitude that you have?

I have attitudes. One attitude is that I like getting the mail here at IMC. I'm the one who gets the mail here. I don't know what it is about picking up mail that is comforting for me, but I find it pleasant, so I actually like doing it. It's one of my little pleasures. I open it up and see what's there. There's seldom anything for me, but that doesn't matter, I don't care. There's just something nice about it. That's an attitude I have. I just go along with it, and it's easy.

Sometimes I see I have an attitude about emails. "Oh no!" It's very important to track and be aware of these

attitudes, because if I don't track these attitudes and take responsibility for them, then some of them can cause trouble.

For those of you who might have an attitude, I'd encourage you to be more mindful of it