

Practice Note: Satisfying Mindfulness

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on March 7, 2012

I want to say something about mindfulness practice, which might be meaningful or interesting for you as you practice this morning. Some people have a sense of mindfulness as being momentary – moments of being mindful, of recognition, of being present for something, or conscious of something. For other people, their sense of mindfulness or presence is more expansive, and it extends over a period of time. But in whatever way you are mindful, the hope is that this moment or this period of mindfulness, in and of itself, can be satisfying for you.

One way to help mindfulness to become satisfying or meaningful is to distinguish between the mindfulness of or the presence you have for something – the way you're conscious of something – and all the other attitudes in your mind. What I mean by that is that if you're anxious, and that's a primary state of your mind's consciousness, then there's a strong tendency for the mindfulness to be flavored by the anxiety. You don't separate the two, so you're anxiously mindful: "Oh, I've got to be mindful. It's really important to be mindful. I better be here on my breath, and I better not lose that breath." Or if the flavor of the consciousness of your mind is aversion, then you might not notice that when you're mindful of something, there's a subtle, or not so subtle, aversion: "Oh, that breath. I have to do it again. This is a terrible breath. I should be doing something else. Let's finish this in-breath quickly, so we can get onto the better stuff, the out-breath."

Subtle attitudes can get mixed in. If there is confusion, then the mindfulness may include confusion: "What am I supposed to be paying attention to here?"

Striving is another quality of the mind: "I have to get somewhere. I'm supposed to get something with my mindfulness." The mindfulness is striving to get to some place else besides here.

Another attitude is when there is a lot of selfing involved – self-identity, self-representation, self-image that we're operating under: "It's all about me, thank you." So the mindfulness is also all about me, as if it's tied in with the self-image or self-consciousness.

Mindfulness itself – or presence, or being conscious – can be a lot simpler. It's not meant to be intimately tied to these other attitudes of the mind. One way to help make mindfulness satisfying or meaningful is to experiment and find a way in which the mindfulness is so simple that it isn't tied to these other attitudes. It's not easy to do because some of these other attitudes can be subtle. It's said that the fish doesn't see the water it swims in, and sometimes we don't see the mood we're swimming in.

If a moment of mindfulness – the experience of knowing or being present – is not satisfying, that's a good indication that you're probably entangled and not really independent with the mindfulness. You've somehow been influenced by other things. So look for how the mindfulness – being present for something – has some aspect that is satisfying. This doesn't mean that your anxiety, or your headache, or your aversion, or your selfing has stopped. That can continue, but the mindfulness is not influenced by it.

An analogy might be that you're in a crowd of friends who are having a tremendous argument about something that they're all anxious about, worrying what to do. And they're all huddled over, bickering. At some point you become mindful of what's going on in the room with your friends. Rather than hunching over, you stand up straight and breathe deeply. You're still concerned, interested, and involved in what's being discussed, but you're not caught by it. You're present; you're mindful; you have an overview of the situation. "Wow! A lot of people here are really caught up. I was caught up, but now I'm not. Now I'm present." I don't know whether that analogy works for you.

If the moments of mindfulness are not satisfying and other things aren't satisfying, everything else can be dissatisfying. But if the mindfulness is not satisfying and meaningful, then pay more careful attention, and see if you can adjust. See if there's another way of being conscious. And if the word 'satisfying' is not meaningful for you, I'll offer a different word: 'settling.' If mindfulness is not settling for you, not calming, or if it doesn't help bring a little peace, then see if you can find another way to be mindful. Thank you.