

Dharmette: How We Lose Peace

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on May 2, 2012

Earlier this morning, I mentioned the practice of noticing peace – noticing some tranquility, ease, or stillness that might be in our experience. There are times when this sense of peace, tranquility, or relaxation is stronger; and there are times when it's weaker. Regardless of how present it is, it can create an interesting opportunity. It can highlight the loss of peace; it can highlight what is not peaceful, not tranquil, not still, or not relaxed. Part of the function of being relaxed or at ease is how that helps us see how we're not. It seems a little paradoxical perhaps, but these things can exist side by side. If you hold your body still, you might see how much agitation there is in your body; but if you're really busy, active and moving, you might be moving faster than your agitation, and may not know that you're agitated. Some people don't know they're tense until they finally stop and relax – they're so busy in doing. But in stopping and being a bit more relaxed, then they can notice what wasn't noticed. Yet both were there at the same time.

This juxtaposition, or this contrast of being at ease and not at ease, being relaxed and not relaxed, being peaceful and not peaceful, gives us an opportunity to notice and study what happens to us. What is going on that makes us agitated, tense, or lose our peace? One thing I'd like to suggest today, which may interest you, is that we often lose our peace by defining ourselves – by our experience, by ideas, by our relationships to other people, etc. The idea of defining ourselves, and having an image or concepts by which we then categorize ourselves, limits us quite a bit. More often than not, we limit ourselves dramatically in this way.

Sometimes it is hard to see in oneself. It's easier to see in others, or it's easier to see when people do it to you. Maybe some of you have been in a situation where someone clearly was seeing you through a very limited lens. Maybe once in your life you were angry, and you happened to be angry around another person. Then every time that person sees you, they see you as an angry person. You want to say, "Wait a minute. Hey. That was once. That was ten years ago." But they still don't want to see you another way.

Or sometimes people are seen as who they are by their occupation, and people relate to them through that filter only. Or sometimes it's through your relationship with a spouse. You're seen as the person's spouse, as opposed to being a person in your own right. But, "Wait a minute. I'm here. I'm not just a spouse. I'm someone else here too. I'm a person." Or people are seen for their ethnicity or social class. In America we don't have social class, right? So we don't see it. But there are definitely classes here. And it can be very limiting to be seen that way.

Sometimes you see people treat you a certain way. If people know that you're a meditator, they might have expectations that define you. "Oh, you're supposed to be calm all the time." It's quite burdensome to have people around you expecting you to be calm. "You know you're supposed to be the calm person. What's wrong with you?" It wouldn't occur to them that there was something wrong with someone else because of being agitated. That person is just agitated, but you're not. You're being defined that way. Sometimes you can feel it. You can feel how limiting it is to be defined by other people.

And then there are times when we define other people. We limit them. Sometimes it may be necessary or close to necessary. If a police officer pulls you over, you should operate by the definition that this is a police officer, not a parent, or a child of someone else, or a little league coach. It's not the time to relate in any way other than that this is the police officer. That's the expectation.

Other times you may actually limit someone else because you see him or her in a particular way, or you define or characterize the person in some way and hold them to it. Sometimes we hold people by our resentment, and we see them only in that way. Or we hold them only by what they can do for us, and so we look at them based on what they can do for us. Or we limit people for what they can't do to us. We limit people by being afraid of them, and we see them through the filter of our fear. That's a narrowing of who they are.

An interesting teaching, which I got from my first Zen teacher, was about my father. I had some difficulties with my father when I was in my early twenties. When I went to talk to him about my father, he said, "Your father remembers before you were born, and he remembers after you left home. He isn't defined by being a father. He

is more than a father. He was a person before you were born, and now that you've left home, he's living his own life. He does all kinds of things in his life. But you're seeing him only through the filter of being your father. He's more than that." It was really interesting for me to hear that, and it caused me to look at my father in a new way, realizing that I'd really only seen him through that one filter. My expectations of him, of what he should and shouldn't do, were for a father, but he is more than that. So that was helpful for me.

What's harder to see is how we define and limit ourselves through our definitions. The self-definitions we have are so obviously part of who we are. It's true, right? Your definitions are obviously true. Because they're so obviously true, they're invisible, and we just accept them as this is how it is. One function of meditation practice is to help us see how we define ourselves, and then to see when and how these self-definitions are limiting. But the practice of meditation can also show us that there's another possibility – that who we are is greater than our definition. Maybe we don't have to define ourselves at all. Or, if we do define ourselves, maybe we can do so in a bigger way.

People define themselves in all kinds of ways. One classic way is by saying, "I can't." For example, "I can't speak in public." In some ways that can be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Is it true that you're the kind of person who can't speak in public? Maybe it's only true because you're telling yourself that story. Maybe you can.

Another one way we limit ourselves, oddly enough, is by having needs. "I need. I need to have this happen." I think that most of the time when people say, "I need," I don't know how much people really need. Often the needs are another way of limiting oneself, defining oneself within a limited range of what's possible.

People define themselves by judging themselves, by being right or wrong. Or people define themselves by what they're willing to share about themselves with others – by what's acceptable to show and not to show. For example, it's not okay to show that I'm having a hard time. So if people ask, "How are you?" Then we'll help them out so that they can have the right definition of us, and we say, "I'm fine, thank you."

Sometimes we're trying to manipulate people so that they can see us in a particular way, the way we want them to see us. We're trying to create a definition, a representation of ourselves that other people will live by. I think it's usually pretty unsuccessful; most people see beyond how we want to represent ourselves.

All these movements of self-definition are self-limiting, and often involve clinging onto something. This is one of the important ways we lose our peace, our ease, and our relaxation. Usually living in definition comes along with agitation, tension, resistance, tightness.

It's possible to have definitions that we don't live in. You can say in certain circumstances, "I am [my occupation] – like I'm a Buddhist teacher." I can define myself. I think most of you may want me to define myself a little. I think it's a bit of an expectation that Gil's supposed to think that he's a Buddhist teacher so he can sit up here and try to teach. In a certain role or circumstance, the definition works okay. But I don't limit myself by that. I don't think that being a Buddhist teacher is what defines my identity, who I really am. I'm quite happy to let it go and do something else, or be something else. But it's useful, so I take it on at times.

It isn't that having definitions is wrong. It's about the agitation, the loss of our peace when we cling to the definitions, when we get caught. And so a really interesting area to explore when you are suffering, or when you feel agitation or fear, is to ask yourself, "In what way is this suffering connected to a limiting way in which I'm defining or identifying myself? A limiting way in which I'm telling myself a story about who I am, or who I'm not?"

What's the relationship between your suffering and your self-definition?