

Dharmette: The Value of Nothing

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on May 23, 2012

An interesting issue about these short talks I give occurs when I find myself with nothing to talk about. Then I do a little reflection. I consider that maybe it's meaningful for some of you to come here and listen to the Dharma. Since I want to respect you and your interest, I should try to think of something profound to say. After all of these years as a dharma teacher, certainly I should have something profound and meaningful to say. But then I look, and nothing is there. Then, I think, "But that's profound. That's really good. That's what I'll talk about today: the value of nothing."

Sometimes when we pay attention to ourselves, we realize what we are up to. For example, we might realize that we're afraid, so we spend a lot of time planning – believing it's important to plan and organize for the world to be a safe place. Then, at some point, we realize we don't have to do all of this planning to be safe; so there is a letting go of planning.

Or maybe there are a lot of desires – wanting things to be a certain way, having certain acquisitions or experiences. At some point, we realize that in having all of these desires, we aren't really here – not really living. And, then, sometimes desire can be let go of.

Some people live with issues of identity – wanting to be someone in the eyes of others, or in their own eyes, or wanting to attain a certain status or recognition. Hopefully, at some point, by paying attention, they realize that this is suffering; so there is a letting go of striving to be someone, or proving or defending oneself, or getting a promotion in order to be seen better in people's eyes.

Sometimes people carry resentment or anger that simmer and lead to scheming, planning, or being self-critical. How could I be this way? But in paying close attention, they notice the cost of all of these things, and realize how much of what hurts can be let go of. One of the remarkable things is to appreciate how much you can let go of. How much you can stop doing. That's for your betterment. Having these things interferes with your life, and diminishes your life.

Perhaps, *not* having the fear, the anger, the desire, the issues of identity, enhances you. You're more open, freer, more at ease, more relaxed. After a while, you see that having less means having more in the spiritual life or the practice life.

Then some people think, "Oh, this is great. Now I'm going to do a spiritual practice. Now I'm going to have to do it well. I was going in the wrong direction before, and now I've found the true path. I have to learn all about it. Let's get all the books out." You don't have to learn about it. You can let go.

Or some people with identity issues think that to be a good Buddhist involves looking around the room to see what all the Buddhists are wearing. I better go out and get a new wardrobe, the Buddhist costume, so I can be a good Buddhist.

Or maybe it's always having a lot of loving kindness – showing up in only a loving way. Heaven forbid that I come to IMC grumpy!

Sometimes when people come to Buddhism, they pick up the very thing they're trying to free themselves from – desires, identity issues, aversions. Then at some point, if they're lucky, they realize, "I don't need to do this. I can let go of being a good Buddhist. I don't have to be a good Buddhist." You're not going to be free if you try too hard at that. So there's a letting go of that.

With all these things you want to do and attain, at some point, you come to realize that you can do less. Maybe you don't have to do anything. Maybe there are times when it's ok just to be. Be present in a simple way. Maybe always wanting something interferes with what's best in us. One possibility in meditation is to learn how to put down all the desires, the fears, the doings, and realize the wonderfulness of having nothing.

Someone who is fully mature in the Theravadin track is referred to as *akiñcana*: 'a' means 'nothing' or 'not;' '*kiñcana*' means 'something.' So, "not something." In the monastic tradition, it partly refers to someone who doesn't have a lot of acquisitions. But from a spiritual point of view, it means someone who no longer has the desire for acquisitions, and no longer has the tendencies toward greed, anger, and aversion. They have nothing, and feel comfortable with having nothing.

Just show up and be. No need to have to give a good talk. No need to have anything to talk about. No need to have anything happen, except to show up and be here. That's how it is for me today. I had nothing to say, and I felt fine about it, and now I try to share being fine about it with you, so I had something to say.

We have a couple of minutes. Do you have any comments or questions about this? Maybe you have some really good rebuttals or protests – like, "That was fine, but there are things that I really have to do. It's never good enough to do nothing, to have nothing."

Audience member 1: I was reading through a book of Zen aphorisms once and came across the story of one of the very early Zen teachers in San Francisco. He had some kind of menial job, but whenever he saved enough money, he'd rent a hall in the city and put up signs announcing an upcoming meditation. Once on a sign he said, "There will be absolutely nothing of any importance said tonight." Then he couldn't understand why no one showed up. This isn't really a comment on your talk, but this story came to mind.

GF: Our sign outside could say, "The Insight Nothing Center," "Nothing Meditation Center." That person was Nyogen Senzaki. He came around 1905. He had been a teacher in Japan but was told not to teach when he first came here, so he spent twenty years just working in laundromats and elsewhere. At some point he began teaching.

Audience member 2: I'm really happy that you had nothing to say, and that you said you had nothing to say. For many years, I've thought that I always have to have something interesting to say. It's like a performance of life or something. Many times I've said to friends, "If I don't have anything interesting to say, do you still want to visit with me? I might be boring for you." Sometimes people would come over, and we would just sit and do nothing. I don't know if that was a good thing or not. It just gives me a lot of peace to know that I don't have to always be coming up with ideas. That's where my stress comes from, having to be *on* all the time, having this constant flow. So I really appreciate your doing that.

GF: Beautiful. I hope that you will develop more confidence that you don't have to show up and do anything. What can happen? Two things. One is that there is no requirement to do anything, and sometimes that can actually create a very good connection with another person, doing nothing with someone. I have told the story of when we were considering buying this building. The ministers who owned it were Christian mystics. They sat in silence. They wanted us to have the building because we sat in silence, and we would continue the silent practice. It took a long time before they showed us the building. Finally they were going to show it. I came first and met the two ministers, the couple. They gave us a tour of the building. It's a small building, so it didn't take long. We were talking, but as the conversation proceeded, there were gaps in silence. The gaps grew longer and longer. We finally came into this room – the main sanctuary room – and sat down on the pews that used to be here. One of those gaps of silence happened, and it continued for ten minutes. It was a very beautiful, meaningful time. Then some of our other people came to see the building as well. When they came in, we got up and greeted them. When I had the chance, I went over to one of the ministers and said, "Someday we'll have to continue where we left off." So something can happen when nothing's happening, something deeper sometimes. Sometimes all the doings interfere with the deeper, heartfelt, human connection that can occur. That's one thing.

The other thing that can happen sometimes when you do nothing, and you're relaxed and comfortable with doing nothing is that it allows for some deeper emerging, some deeper intuition to bubble up. It might be very different from what is conventionally expected for you to say or do. What comes out of you might be much wiser if you relax, don't think, but give yourself lots of space and time to see what wants to emerge. There is an expression: "Trust the emergence." If you're not comfortable with nothing, it's hard to trust the emergence.

This was meaningful for me: how meaningful this was for you.