

Dharmette: Inhabiting Support

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on October 31, 2012

I have been thinking about the topic of support – how we are supported in the practice, and how the practice supports us. I think part of the motivation for this topic is that a lot of people I meet, feel unsupported in one way or another. They feel they're not getting enough. They're not capable enough. There's not enough time – not enough something to get by or to manage. Things are somehow out of control, or too uncertain. There's confusion. So people spin out, get agitated, and think a lot.

For me, the idea of support is a place where the mind and the heart can rest, and feel at ease. When you feel supported, then you feel safe, secure, grounded. You're not unsteady, not uncertain. The expression *satipaṭṭhāna*, usually translated into English as the “foundations of mindfulness” could just as well be translated as “supports for mindfulness.” We have these four places where mindfulness is supported, where awareness can rest – not go to sleep, but so that it can somehow flower, and be more fully here in this life of ours.

Support in our body is the first foundation of mindfulness. Do you feel supported in your body? Or, when you tune in and pay attention to your body, do you feel like it is agitated, not quite there, or unsteady? Is the body a place of support, or is it not a place of support?

There is the support that feelings tones provide – the way we experience the world around us through the intimacy of direct feelings of pleasant or unpleasant. There's a way that feelings tones can be a support for awareness – to rest in and be with.

There are all these different mind states the mind goes through. How can they be a support, rather than a distraction or something that keeps us spinning? How can we be supported by mind states?

The last foundation is the truth: being supported by different aspects of what's true, the truth of things. Seeing directly into the truth of how the mind works can be a support, a place to rest, relax, and be settled. It's important.

Last week I was feeling agitated and restless. My approach to this was to go to my body, and feel how tense, tight, and agitated it was. And then my approach was to *inhabit* the tension and agitation I was feeling. “How can I inhabit this? How can I enter into it, and really live in the middle of it?” I could feel that my tendency was to pull back and be agitated about being agitated – to be on the edges of it, unsteady with it, trying to fix it. I had various ideas and interpretations that kept me tottering on the edge. But instead, I entered into the middle of it, which was counter-intuitive. The expression I used for myself at the time was “How can I *inhabit* this? How can I inhabit my agitation, my tension, and just be in the middle of it?” In a sense, I was asking, “How can I come in there and find support for those unsteady feelings?”

The more I could inhabit it, the more I felt supported by something, and the more I felt it was a good place to be. It was counter-intuitive because in the middle of that was also a feeling of, “This is not comfortable, and I'd rather pull out.” But pulling out of it felt disconnected. It didn't feel right. So, I entered into it fully: “Let me live this, let me be this.” The more I could be in it – the more I could enter into and live in it, or inhabit it – the more I felt supported. Less and less, I felt unsupported by my experience. And as the experience became something safe, it became meaningful – something that could unfold, and resolve itself.

To feel unsupported is common. There are many ways of feeling unsupported. The practice of mindfulness is to enter into, to inhabit, to live in our experience. In this way, we find support in the immediacy of our experience. When people feel a lack of support, it usually has to do with ideations and thoughts that are often not so immediate. These thoughts might be immediate, but usually they're projections into the future – fantasy ideas of what should be, or could be. The idea of immediacy is very different. When we enter into the immediacy of our experience, we find that there's a way in which it supports us, and that we can feel supported. This can be very helpful.

To get to that kind of support through a willingness to enter into the experience and rest in the middle of it, it can

be helpful to actually consider and reflect on how much our direct experience does support us. It's remarkable how much of our life is supported by things we have no control over. I like to joke that we're not at all involved in 99.999999999 percent of what it takes to keep us alive. And we're neurotically obsessing about the approximately 0.000000001 percent of our life that we have some control over – as if it's all up to us, and we have to do all this stuff, and figure it all out, or fix it. Maybe the 0.000000001 percent is the part we're most concerned with, and where we have the biggest impact. But so much of our life happens outside of our conscious control, or even awareness.

If you cut your finger, healing is a very complicated physiological process, which involves biology, neurology, and chemistry. You have to do your part by keeping the wound clean and covered. But your little mind couldn't manage to orchestrate the phenomenally complex processes that are involved in healing that cut. If you were directing all those things: "You go there and do that," it's not going to happen. Mostly you create the conditions for the body to do its thing.

It's the same thing with the heart and the mind. There's a tremendous inner intelligence there. A lot of what we're trying to do in practice is to get out of the way, by creating the trust and support to rest in our experience in some meaningful way. Keep the experience clean. Keep it protected from the dirt so that this 99.999999999 percent of what our life is about can operate. It will be much more effective than if the 0.000000001 percent tries to run around in circles.

What supports you? Your body supports you to a great degree. Your world supports you in great ways. We have a tremendous amount of support in our society. Probably more now than at any other time in human history, we mutually support each other. We're supported by other people. We don't have to go out and chase down our own animals in the woods. It's not all about us.

I remember when I was young, I visited a few farms in Norway that were farmed in the old way, where the only thing that they couldn't take care of themselves was salt. They would trade for salt, or buy salt because they were up in the mountains. Otherwise they were completely self-sufficient. There was a time and a place where people could take care of themselves and not rely on other people, except for salt. But nowadays, we have to rely on other people for 99.999999 percent of our life – for almost everything. There's so much mistrust, but then we realize how much we are being supported.

I find it helpful to reflect on how much support there is for our lives. In considering how much we are supported versus unsupported, probably the biggest part of the percentage is how much support we actually receive. And all the ways in which we feel unsupported are probably a much smaller percentage of the total. But often that's where people focus – not remembering how much support there is.

This is certainly helpful for meditation. In meditation you can put to rest some of the preoccupation with the lack of support you may feel, and you see that there is some deeply important, valuable, and nourishing support to be found by coming in and resting here – fully inhabiting the present moment.