

Dharmette: Coping with Problems

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on February 11, 2015

There are many concerns that people have – all kinds. A concern is something we are thinking about or preoccupied with. Certainly, some things need to be thought about, need to be considered. This is part of human life. Then there are things which may need to be considered or thought about, but we've done it 332 times in the last twenty minutes, over and over again. Maybe we don't have to think about it that often. There's no need to.

Then there are some things we are concerned about that don't really need to be a concern at all. But regardless of what the concern is, we can become aware of how we are relating to the concern. How we are holding it? How we are thinking about it? What is our attitude towards it?

You could be thinking about getting the oil changed in your car, because the oil needs to be changed. It's just a thought that goes through, and very quietly you wonder, "Where should I get it changed? When do I have time to do it?" – very simple thoughts. Or there can be anxiety about it: "Oh No! I have to do this. If I don't do it soon, my car is going to come to an end. I better do it soon. But I better choose the right place to change my oil, because then people will know I make good choices in my life. There is a lot at stake in choosing the best place for an oil change. Now I have to look it up all of the places on Yelp. It's really important I get it right!" So, there is this intensity around just choosing the right place to change your oil. There is a difference between that intensity of choosing the right place to change your oil, and calmly thinking about it: "I should think about it, and find a good place to change my oil. Maybe I should check Yelp, and see if the local place is well Yelped."

How we relate to something is something we become aware of as we practice. How are we holding it? What is our attitude? Sitting down to meditate is a great laboratory to see if there is tension, or contraction, or intensity around our concerns. The intensity, the contraction, the tension is different than the concern itself. They are two different things.

Especially in the context of meditation, this can become a safe, appropriate place for the intensity of the concern to begin to relax. The concern still remains. But the intensity of our involvement with the concern begins to relax – maybe enough so that we realize we have some choice whether we pick it up or not. Maybe we could say, "Actually, for this half hour meditation, I don't think I need to keep thinking about this. I've thought about it a lot before. I can think about it again later. But I don't have to do it now. Maybe there is something better to do right now than to keep churning away on the same thing." So the intensity, the tension, the contraction falls away. And with that, sometimes thinking about the concern falls away. And then we may have a fresher, more relaxed viewpoint. We have a different perspective, from which we can later go back and look at the concern.

A very important distinction that mindfulness practice can reveal is the distinction between our concern and how we hold it – between our concern and how we relate to the concern. A huge way of finding freedom is not to solve our concern, but to dissolve the intense way we are caught in or involved with the concern. Maybe the concern will remain. If it's an appropriate concern, you can pick it up with a more relaxed mind, and look at it.

But sometimes, you'll discover that the problem you had didn't really exist in the first place. There's a saying attributed to Mark Twain: "I've had a lot of worries in my life, most of which never happened." And so, anxieties, and problems that have to do with anxiety, are often like that. We are worried about some imaginary future, some imaginary outcome. Sometimes we don't even know what that outcome might be. We don't even have an idea of it. But still, we are relating to some mythical problem in the future that is going to befall us.

Sometimes we do have a clear image of what's going to be. And sometimes those things come along, but sometimes they don't. We spend a lot of time imagining something that never happens – or it happens, but it doesn't happen the way you anticipated. So the idea that some of the problems we have are not real problems is a very interesting thing to consider. As the mind gets quieter, maybe you can ask, "Is this problem a real problem? Does it really exist?"

The problem that I need to find an oil change place that is going to protect my status as one of the most significant meditation teachers on the corner of Hopkins and Birch – is that really a problem? If I get really calm,

relaxed, and mindful, I think I'll see through that one. I'll see that it's not really a problem I need to have. I don't think I have to worry too much about how people look at me here at the corner of Birch and Hopkins.

What are your problems? We all have problems. But can you take a new look at them? Is there a different vantage point from which to look at them? One vantage point I'm suggesting today is how you hold your problems, how you relate to them. If only you look at how you relate to them, maybe it's okay to relax some of the intensity around them, and the way we hold them. Then you can look at the problems themselves, and see how much they belong to an imaginary world, an imaginary outcome, what you think might happen – as opposed to what really happens.

If I have a flat tire, that's a real problem. Sometimes it's good to worry enough about getting a flat tire that you make sure you have a spare tire in the car, or you have AAA to take care of it. I have in fact worried about flat tires in my cars for many years without getting one. But if I'm constantly worrying about a flat tire, it is an imaginary problem.

So, it's possible that some of your problems don't have to be problems. They might still be real enough that they need to be addressed. But maybe they don't have to be problems. Maybe the idea that there is a problem is a problem. Some things are imaginary. Some things are guesses that we are living under.

Meditation can help us with both of these. It can help us understand how we hold our concerns. And it can help us question whether our concerns are really the right concerns to have. These concerns can deal with very deep, existential things like sickness, old age, and death, which in Buddhism are the classic problems. But how much are we living in an imaginary world? How much are we projecting into the future? How much are we imagining the situation in the way we are challenged by things like sickness, old age, and death?

These are such basic human phenomena. If people are lucky enough to live to an old age, they have to deal with old age. This is what comes with the territory. The problems of old age – what are they really? What problems are real? And what problems are imaginary? If we understand these, we can hold them more lightly.

May your mindfulness help you to be more at ease in this world.