

Dharmette: Being a Lighthouse in the Storm

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on November 9th, 2016

In places like Greece, olive trees take about twenty years before they become big enough to bear fruit. So the people who are going to be olive farmers have to plant twenty years in advance for their crop. The story is that when olive farmers get to be seventy or eighty years old, they are still planting olive trees that are not going to bear fruit in their lifetime. But they are planting them for the future.

Last week, some of you may recall that there was a five-year-old girl here practicing and meditating with us, and she sits at least as quietly as all of you – at least! It's quite remarkable to see her sitting next to her dad.

[Practitioner]: She's here today too.

So you being here today is maybe planting a seed for something to happen in twenty years. Who knows what you'll remember or what this does for you? What are you nurturing and supporting by just being here? The story about the golden Buddha, which I talked about in today's practice note, was an effort to choose something to teach that might work for you as well – something that might plant a seed that will bear fruit in twenty, thirty or forty years.

The long-term perspective is to remember that great tides come and go in history, and how we participate matters. How not to get too caught up in the moment – even in a tradition where we're dedicated to being in the moment – so that we can take into account the big picture as well.

When I was a graduate student in religious studies, there was a professor named Michael Saso. He was a fascinating man, a Jesuit priest, who had gone through his Jesuit training at a seminary in China or Japan. He was fluent in both Chinese and Japanese, and he'd also been ordained as a monk the Japanese Tendai tradition. He was deeply involved in Buddhist practice as well, and then became a professor of Buddhist Studies. When he eventually retired from teaching, he disappeared into southwestern China, where it's quite poor, and spent his retirement travelling between villages building schools. He'd use whatever retirement money he had to build a school, and then he'd go on to the next town, like Johnny Appleseed.

When I showed up in the graduate program, I introduced myself to him and said I was a Vipassanā practitioner. And he really brightened up and said, "Oh, Vipassanā! That's when your attention is 360 degrees all around – your awareness includes everything!"

We have to remember that our awareness and practice is meant to include everything, and one of the things it includes is ourselves. For some people, the challenge is how to include everything in oneself – the good, the bad and the ugly – the whole show of what's here. To include our suffering, our joy, our disappointments, our fears, our discouragements – to include how it is.

The 360 degrees of Vipassanā doesn't stop with the 360 degrees of ourselves, but it also includes 360 degrees of the world around us. To be able to be a witness to the world, and take it all in – the good, the bad and the ugly – and to see it clearly, to hold it in our attention, and to learn in that 360 degree awareness to be like a lighthouse.

Lighthouses are pretty stable. They're solid; they don't move around; they don't look discouraged in storms; they don't look afraid. They just stand tall, and are able to shine their light in a balanced way, and do their job. Our ability to look 360 degrees in all directions, inside and outside, comes with the cultivation of stability and confidence in the value of staying mindful and seeing what's here.

This is one of the gifts we can give to the world: the ability to stay present and be a witness in all directions, with balance and stability, without collapsing or getting swept up in the tides of fear and discouragement. Tides come and go. We can't stop the tides, but we can keep the lighthouse on. We can keep the awareness on and take refuge in the lighthouse, take refuge in the ability to see what's going on, and have confidence in that – and not lose the confidence because the storms are particularly big or strong.

I think with what's happening in America right now, we have a great need for this 360 degree awareness, where

we attend mindfully, carefully and compassionately to what's within us – to make space for it and to be with whatever is going on. But it may be even more important to learn to take our attention 360 degrees around so we can be a witness to what's going on in our society.

Being a witness means that we are willing to understand the suffering in our society. The huge upheaval that is going on right now in America with this new president is bringing some people a tremendous amount of suffering. As they say in the news, a lot of people are feeling ignored, and they're reacting to that. But if we set up a world of me versus you, us versus them – whatever side of the political spectrum we're on – there's going to be suffering. People are going to feel dismissed, ignored, or pushed away.

The pendulum will keep swinging. One the ways to be a lighthouse for the world – shining on everything equally – is to take an interest in being a witness, in being present, and in seeing and understanding not what's happening on the surface, but what's going on more deeply.

The specialty of Buddhism is to be able to look, recognize, and see the underlying suffering that is responsible for so much of the dysfunction and problems in society. To be able to have compassion for that, to be there for that, and in so doing, to start planting seeds that might not bear fruit in your lifetime.

No amount of goodness is ever wasted. We all have infinite resources, an infinite seed store of goodness within us. We can take those seeds and scatter them around the world – maybe we won't go from town to town building schools – but maybe we can go from neighbor to neighbor and bring our goodness into the world, planting seeds for something important to happen. Maybe they'll bear fruit in a week, or maybe will bear fruit when our five-year-old girl becomes twenty-five, fifty-five or seventy-five. Who knows when and how all this spreads and goes out into our society and the world?

If there is one thing that Buddhism offers, it is the idea of refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Saṅgha – refuge in the practice, and knowing that it's possible to remain confident in the midst of tremendous challenges and difficulties. It's possible to remain present, to be a witness, and not be overcome and overwhelmed by what's happening around us or within us. But to stay upright like a lighthouse for this world, so our light can shine on what needs to be seen: the good, the bad and the ugly. I always feel this expression is a little inadequate, but I guess it doesn't make for good rhythm to say, “the good, the bad, the beautiful, and the ugly.”

In 360 degree awareness, part of the wisdom of being a practitioner is knowing where that light needs to be shone at any given time. Today, I suspect a lot of it needs to be shone on ourselves, so we can really be present for how we feel, for what is going on with our thoughts, fears, discouragements, or even the sense of betrayal that some people feel, and to shine on that. To have confidence in the shining, confidence in the power and the value of mindfulness, in being present and aware. That's the home we can live in – the home of mindfulness.

So with those thoughts, does anyone want to say anything or ask anything?

Practitioner 1: What you're saying and the events of the last two days, what they bring up in me is more softness, and supremely valuing the honoring of goodwill. It's increasing the intention to find it whenever possible.

GF: Great, nice. Makes me think of how a pearl is made by the thing that irritates the oyster.

Practitioner 1: Yes.

GF: So maybe it could mean new pearls now.

Practitioner 2: I just want to say that talking about the lighthouse is interesting because I grew up on the East Coast and there are a lot of lighthouse there. The shape that they are built in is rounded, so that when the storms come, the water pushes and goes around it. It's always been a really powerful image for me.

GF: Nice.

Practitioner 2: And it still stands and shines.

GF: Nice. A couple of months ago, I met someone whose introduction to Buddhism and meditation was when she was backpacking and met this other backpacker who had spent time at the Tassajara Zen Monastery. Somehow it came up that he was going to teach her how to meditate there in the wilderness. His instruction for meditation was to imagine that you're a boulder sitting in a river, and everything else is just water rushing by. That was the instruction for meditation – so a little bit similar to that. Thank you.

Practitioner 3: I spent last night, election night, with my daughter in San Francisco. My daughter was up all night and this morning crying, and I'm aware of the tremendous grief that's around today. Although the lighthouse image is very beautiful and I feel it in my heart, I think there is also a time where one has to sit in the darkness, with the clouds, the rain, and the storm.

GF: Right. That's the 360 degrees. It has to include our grief and the people who are mourning. One person told me today that she feels like someone just died. So you have to sit with that too. If we don't sit with and shine our light on that, then we're short-changing ourselves, short-changing the world, short-changing the pearls being made. The heart of it is to allow the grief to be there, but to stay as the lighthouse, staying firm, strong, and mindful – as opposed to succumbing to it and falling into it.

Practitioner 4: I've been pondering what you said this morning, and I'm actually feeling kind of excited, which seems very strange. In lots of ways, I've been ignoring the craziness that's been going on, and trying to look at the big picture, the macro. Clearly what you said is true – there are a lot of people in a huge amount of pain right now. I think the pain is going to get bigger. The saying is, "May you live in interesting times." I think it's going to be very interesting to see what happens in the next four years. And I have to hope that the pendulum is gone. Maybe it needs to go a little further before it changes and things become better. But I try to look with some sense of optimism at whatever is happening. Ultimately this is going to help people gain a better perspective of what it is that needs to happen, and I haven't a clue what that is.

GF: There's a lot of wisdom in what you're saying. I appreciate it. I'm reminded that the other date with 9 and 11 in it, the original 9/11, and now it's 11/09. The events of 9/11 had a big impact on many of us. They had a big impact on me. The bigger the impact that something like this has on us, the more important it is to do more than just be mindful of it. It's important to have a way of actually responding. Plant an olive tree; do something. We do a disservice to ourselves if we don't actually step forward and respond in some way and do something. It doesn't have to be running for president yourself.

In 9/11 the big change that I did, which has had an impact on me for the last fifteen years, is that I started a training program for Buddhist chaplains, training people to be able to respond to the suffering of the world, to go out to places of tragedy and crisis: hospitals, prisons, and other places. I put a lot of time and effort into training people – some people here today have gone through that training program. I felt like I had to do something. I couldn't just go back to business as usual.

It's too easy to feel tremendous overwhelm, grief, anger, sorrow – all kinds of things – when something like this happens, and then after a few weeks or months, going back to normal. I think if we do that, we do a disservice to ourselves. Hopefully we can allow these things to change us in some way, and how they change us is very individual for each person.

For some people, maybe it's the job that you're already doing, only now you feel you do it with more kindness and dedication, to support and help other people more. Maybe you're more dedicated to be of service to the neighbors and other people around you. When they're sick, you go shopping for them, or bring them food. Maybe it means you get involved in an organization or political party. If we're not changed by this, then that's where the lighthouse analogy is limited. I suppose the lighthouse could decide to do a better job, like making sure that the mirror or the glass always stays clean and is always on. But to think that you should only be mindful is not enough. It's the beginning; it's the heart of it all, where it all begins. The light comes out of that.

"How do you want to be changed by this?" is a question I want to encourage you to carry with you over the next week or so. How do you want to be different? How do you want to change? How do you want to be affected by this, so that in some way the world becomes a better place because of you? Because if it's only a matter of overwhelm, or anger, or grief, then the world will just continue the way it always has.

One of the things I really want to try pass on is the tremendous importance and value of having confidence –

having confidence in the practice, confidence in yourself, and confidence in the value of moving into the world to make a difference – as opposed to looking to other people as if they're supposed to do it, that they're supposed to make things better, or they're supposed to do it better. But it begins with us.

I think that's one of the teachings of Buddhism: that every world, every future always begins with you. That's where it begins. So if you want a future world to live in, and if it begins with you, if you're the seed – how do you want to go forward next? It could be in small ways or big ways, so long as it's something.

It's a curious time. I agree with Jeff that we don't know what's going to happen. It's possible that major upheaval, major challenges are coming, and that when things get shaken, something will arise out of the ashes. Sometimes it's good to shake things up to see what goes on. We don't know what's going to happen, and that's also something to keep in mind. Pay attention. Watch what's happening so that you're prepared.