

Dharmette: Mindfulness in the Time of COVID-19

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on March 11, 2020

After sitting in meditation, I don't feel like saying too much, but I'm sure I will in a minute or a few seconds. I suppose how I'm feeling, which appeared in meditation, is instructive for these times we're in. I was centered in my body, and my usual thinking mind got quiet. And now there is a different perspective on life – a different way of being present. Meditators have first-hand experience with this shift from being preoccupied or agitated with their thoughts to the mind becoming quiet.

We can be led around by our anxious, concerned thoughts of wanting or not wanting things. Sometimes thoughts can be quite relaxed, easygoing, light, and soft. They can seem to be a dime a dozen. At other times, thoughts come with a lot of emotional involvement, fueled by feelings of all kinds. They may come with a sense of importance or alarm. Somehow the picture we're painting in our minds – the imagery in which the thoughts are circulating – seem true or important, and these become the images and stories through which we understand our lives and our relationship to life.

With this involvement in our thoughts of some subconscious mental imagery, story or context we think we're in – our thoughts, for example, might have an image of an apocalypse, or a virus coming, rolling through the city streets like a big tidal wave. There can be a kind of emotional imagery, sense, or feeling, which is the background context for the thoughts we have. So then thoughts would be about alarm, worry, planning, and what's important.

But there is a whole different shift that can happen when we do something like meditate, go for a walk in nature or in a park, or sit and have a nice time drinking tea with a friend and chatting about things. That can somehow settle the anxious, preoccupied mind. But, more important than that, it can settle the background story or belief that it's important to be involved in planning, remembering, figuring things out, building up a sense of self – or whatever thoughts we're spinning and swirling in.

This whole background context is an activity of the mind. It's not inherent in the nature of reality. It comes and goes. It gets evoked in certain situations more than in others. One thing that really promotes this background activity of the mind is being busy. The more we try to rush around doing more and more things, the more the subconscious stuff begins to percolate up. The traces of our anxiety and concerns with the different things that we're thinking about remain somehow in our psyche, mind and hearts. We don't just stop thinking about something. We're still living in the traces that are left over from how we thought. The background stories have created an influence on our body, mind, and who we are.

So, to sit is a radical act. To sit, maybe close your eyes, with the idea that this is a time when you don't have to figure anything out, is a radical act. This is a time when you don't have to solve the world's problems. This is not a time when you need to plan ahead, make yourself safe, fix the social problems you have with work or friends, or whatever the challenges are. Those are for later. If they're important, you'll address them later. If you can put those aside in meditation, or at least have the conviction that this is not the time to devote energy to them, then it's a lot easier to let go of them. The mind may still bring them up, but it will be a lot easier to give yourself over more fully to the meditation, to mindfulness of breathing, of the body, and just staying aware here in the present moment.

This movement of coming back to the present moment, waking up here, and coming back to the breath is actually very powerful, and should not be underestimated. To do that movement over and over again, resetting in present moment awareness once again, is like doing reps at the gym. We're developing strength, capacity, momentum, and familiarity with a whole new world of showing up and waking up. So it's actually a very precious time.

It doesn't matter how many times your mind wanders off in thought. All that matters is how many times you come back. It's not that we make ourselves wander off so that we can come back, but just celebrate coming back. Enjoy it! Come back in a way that is enjoyable. Come back to the breath in a way that you're not jerking the mind, pouncing back at the breath, or berating yourself for the fact that you wandered off. Come back in a way

where you actually look forward to coming back. So, the next time you meditate, you can't wait, because you get to treat yourself with respect, care, kindness, and value. It's a wonderful way to treat yourself. Yes, your mind will wander off. Then lovingly, kindly you come back. Settle back.

Over time, being able to settle back, relax, show up, and develop some continuity of staying with the breath and the present moment takes the energy or fuel away from our agitation, preoccupation, and thoughts. It takes the fuel away from some of the emotions that afflict us with challenges and difficulty. It takes the energy away from the way our bodies, shoulders and stomachs are held tense. All of this takes energy; it takes a certain kind of fuel.

When that fuel of attention keeps going into the practice, and we're no longer doing those other things so much, things begin to relax. The body, mind, and heart relax. So, settle here and really feel the three-dimensional fullness, value, goodness, and benefit of just being here for a few minutes. It doesn't have to be a 45-minute meditation like we did just now. Even a three-, two-, or one-minute meditation can make a huge difference in shifting us out of the preoccupied, agitated, thinking mind, and into a fuller, relaxed presence here and now.

With that, you can go into the world. And what comes next, the second half of meditation, is really important. Meditation doesn't stop because the bell rang, or you've gotten up from meditation. I think it's very valuable to think that meditation is always twice as long as the time that you actually meditated. Once you get up, that's the second half. So if you sat for two minutes, then you have two more minutes. If you sat for 45 minutes, the next 45 minutes are actually quite precious and important. It's a time to discover how to enter the world with some sense of presence, mindfulness, attention – really being present in your experience, as opposed to rushing off and losing whatever presence or calm you had in meditation.

It's not that you have to stay calm when you get up. But can you stay centered and grounded here and now in this body at this time? You'll have to face a lot of things, but if you can stay grounded in the second half of your 'meditation,' then chances are you'll be a wiser person. Chances are you'll see and understand yourself better, and you'll have access to deeper places within – deeper understandings and values from which to live your life.

The idea is to learn to make that shift from being preoccupied to being centered here, and to do that over and over again in meditation and in other parts of your life until you become skilled at it. Then it becomes almost second nature. With practice, making that shift is not so hard to do. So, try it, even if it's just a teeny bit: "Here I am. Let's pause for a moment. Let's connect and see what's here. Let's be present."

I certainly hope that those of us who practice meditation and mindfulness are doing it for much more than just relaxation and stress reduction. I hope we're really doing it so that the wisest parts of us can be a contribution to the world. So that how we are – wise, calm, perhaps less anxious or not anxious, maybe even caring for others and for the world – has a greater chance to flow from us, and to engage and support us as we go into the world. So that how we live is not only for our own well-being and protection, but also to support, protect, and benefit others.

Now, with the COVID-19 virus going around, there are a lot of people who are anxious, and who don't have something like a meditation practice. So for those of us who do have a practice, now is an even more valuable time to meditate. Maybe you should pick up your meditation, or meditate more often than you have been, so that you can be a part of the change. You can be someone who shows up a little bit calmer than others, and maybe in some way, this settles everyone. Or you can be a little bit wiser, or more caring, for people who are in need of care, rather than feeling that this is too hard and you have to protect yourself.

It will do your heart a tremendous amount of good if you think about how you can care for more people now.