

Sati (3 of 5) Observation

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on April 1, 2020

I am continuing the talks this week on the topic of mindfulness as part of the Five Faculties. I have given five talks on the first faculty of faith, five talks on the second faculty of effort, and now we are in the third faculty. Those of you listening to these series might have understood that these talks are offered somewhat progressively. This goes along with the notion that Dharma practice is onward leading. There is a way that it evolves and develops over time. It certainly can go in spirals, or back and forth, up and down. It's not linear, but overall, the pattern of practice is to move along in a certain direction toward greater and greater freedom.

For this week on mindfulness, Monday's talk was on the initial establishment of mindfulness – the effort it takes to begin the practice, to show up, to wake up if we're lost in thought, and to begin again to be mindful. Once we are able to be more present, then mindfulness has another quality that comes into play. Not only are we present and aware, but we can also begin recognizing what is happening. Recognizing allows us to be more anchored in the present moment, and have more clarity about what is happening. There is more momentum to keep us in the present moment over time.

As we become more rooted in the present and have more clarity, then the practice can open up to a capacity to observe what is happening. We are not trying to make the effort so much anymore. The effort is more to stay observing, to stay present, to let go of interference, so that we can settle back and just observe whatever is happening.

This sequence is how the Buddha teaches in mindfulness as well. He talks about establishing mindfulness first. Then, a lot of the exercises the Buddha gives for developing mindfulness have to do with recognition, and understanding what is happening. Once that is established, he then talks about observing, "the body in the body, the feelings in the feelings, mind in mind, and dharmas in dharmas."

Observing has some characteristics. One is that when you look at something, the looking itself does not interfere with what is being seen. If you touch something, the hands might change it when it's picked up. But eyes, in and of themselves, do not change anything that is being seen. Eyes just see. The mind's ability to see, to perceive includes settling back, allowing things to be there, and knowing or seeing without interference into what is known. Certainly we don't physically interfere with it. But we also don't interfere with our perception via judgments, stories, commentaries, or attitudes of being for or against it.

These are all like pulling curtains across the window, obscuring what we're seeing. We add these things on top, instead of just simply sitting back and watching. It's not easy to watch without interference. That's why it can be useful to have the watching be 360 degrees. What that means is that everything can be included – including our interference. We don't condemn anything, but just keep opening up the awareness, the field of observing. "Oh, this too I observe. And I'll just hold it all, as just one more thing to observe."

Over time, this simple observation of experience becomes a radical act, because of how much human minds tend to be involved with fixing, doing, planning, and commenting. It's a radical act to be simple. It begins to loosen, dissolve, and unravel all of these complex worlds we have of the reactivity, judgments, ideas, and stories through which we see ourselves and our world.

An analogy I like for this is to imagine that you are on the river's edge leaning up against a tree, just watching the river go by. As it goes by, all kinds of things are seen – driftwood, leaves, the current, the waves. It's very relaxing. Then along comes a wonderful recreational riverboat with a band, a dance show, and lots of partying. The next thing you know, you are on the boat. But it takes a few weeks to realize that you are on the boat partying.

Then you get off the boat, and finally make your way back upriver to that tree, sit down again, and just watch the river. It's calm and peaceful. But then downriver comes a war boat shooting its guns in all directions. It's a good cause. So you jump on the war boat, and you fight the war. It takes a few months to realize that you have been fighting a war.

Finally you get off. This time it takes a long time to walk back and find that tree again. Then you sit under the tree watching the river go by. It's peaceful, calm, and nice. Then comes along a decrepit raft, barely staying afloat. You feel pity for the raft and before you know it, you find yourself on the raft, and you've been on the raft for years. "Poor raft. Poor me. It's so hard!"

Then you are finally able to get off the raft and go back up the river. The next time, something very alluring comes along on the river. But this time, you just watch it go by. You don't get on. Another boat comes by, and you just watch that one go by. All kinds of boats go by, and you just watch. You realize after a while that you don't have to get on those boats. The boats are doing their thing. They come and they go. There are endless boats. And you realize, "I can just stay here, observe, and watch – stay peaceful, and just watch them go by."

This example is like how we watch ourselves in meditation. All kinds of thought boats come along. All kinds of stories and ideas come down the river of time and experience. All too often, we find ourselves on the boats, on the thoughts. We entertain ourselves. We fight the good fight. We feel sorry for ourselves. We think about the great purpose in life, or the great fantasy.

It might not be wrong to get on boats, but sooner or later, we realize that there are other options. There are other possibilities for inner growth and development – and for a real discovery of freedom that is not possible if we get keep getting into the thoughts, onto the boats. So the idea is to settle in, and just watch the thoughts go by. Watch feelings go by. Watch sensations in the body go by. Watch the breathing go by.

One of the great things about breathing is that it has a wonderful flow or rhythm, like the waves of the river, coming and going. So, just settling back, watching, observing.

To observe. To establish mindfulness. To have a clear recognition of what is happening in the moment, so that the mind begins to step back a little. It's not so entangled and caught in experience. "This is an in-breath. This is an out-breath. This is a thought. This is anger. This is contentment. This is sound." Whatever it might be, clearly recognizing it is to begin changing the flow of the mind and what it's involved in. To recognize our thoughts, rather than being caught up in them, is the beginning of the movement toward freedom.

As recognition becomes clearer and clearer, a time comes when it's possible to just settle back and observe the experience in a peaceful, calm way. This creates the foundation for the next possibility of mindfulness practice – how the mindfulness faculty is used, and how it unfolds. This will be the topic for tomorrow.

In the time between now and tomorrow, you might be curious about this human capacity to observe experience. You might even go and sit somewhere quiet, and use your eyes to just watch the world go by. Watch nature. Watch the squirrels playing in the trees. Watch the clouds go by. See what you can learn about what it is like just to observe. Just observe – not interfere, not react, not make stories. Just let things gently flow by. Stand in the middle of your river, and just let all things flow by until such a time when everything is just observed, and there is no observer. Even the observer is flowing by.

Thank you very much for being part of this wide community of people meditating together, sharing and appreciating the Dharma – and maybe spreading goodwill into the world as we go through the next day.