

Practice Note: Where Our Attention Goes

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on January 20, 2010

One of the very interesting and useful areas of mindfulness is being aware of and exploring how our attention operates, how our awareness is used, or how we use it. Do we use it? Is it used by other things besides our self-conscious deliberateness? If there's a really loud noise outside, probably your attention goes there without much choice – it just goes there. But then, if you're left to your own devices, with not much stimulus is coming in, where does your attention go then? And if you receive meditation instructions, then maybe it would go to the breath. So you then you choose to go to and pay attention to the breath. But if you have, somehow or other, gotten the message that your personal problems are really important and significant, then part of your attention is going to go to your personal problems, not the breath.

If you've heard teachings that in meditation, something is supposed to happen – you're supposed to get calm or concentrated – then part of your attention is looking out for the calm and the concentration, and you might actually be doing two things, focussing on the breath, or looking for the meditative effects happening. Or you might be so caught up in the meditative effects that this is really what you're doing. You're searching for those, scanning those, and occasionally checking in with the breath. Or it might be that your mind has a mind of its own and thinks that some fantasy is really compelling, and so your mind goes into the fantasy; that's where your attention goes.

How much of your attention is deliberate? How much are you in charge of it, and you apply it? How much of it is influenced by things you've learned, things you've been taught, ideas, values you have, things that you want to have happen? So your attention is kind of going in that direction. The last thing is how much is attention? When you're doing meditation, for example, it's a great place to study this. How much is attention, if you allow it, if you don't let it go into other times and places and things outside of yourself and you relax?

Is there a place within, like a center of gravity, where attention just wants to go and collect itself? What is attention itself? Where is it drawn or pulled into? Or where does it settle? Is there a place that feels very intimate and close, where your attention wants to go, if you allow the attention to go into that intimacy?

It's kind of like water: if you leave it alone on a hillside, it will roll down the hill. But if you put up a dam, it will block it. Or if you put in various kinds of barriers, you can direct the water to go left and right and different ways. But what happens if you just remove all the dams, and let the water just flow downhill? Where does it finally settle? Where does your awareness, attention, settle if you allow it to go into some place that's intimate, or some place that's close in, or close at hand?

What you do with your attention, how attention is used, how it operates, are really fascinating and important issues in practice. And becoming a little more sensitive to it can help you use the attention much more wisely, and will support you in this practice that we have here.