

Practice Note: Three Phases of Practice

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on February 24, 2010

I find it useful sometimes to divide up mindfulness practice into three different parts. The first is to see what's happening, to recognize what's happening, to see it as clearly as possible. To see it means to not be judging it, or for or against it, but to really just see how things are.

The second aspect is to feel it. So not just seeing it, but really to be inside your experience and feel what it's like. Even with something like hearing loud sounds outside, you feel the vibration, what the listening feels like in the ear drums or in the head or wherever you might feel it. What does it feel like in an embodied way? So it's really in the subjective world of feeling, just here, not thinking about what's out there.

And the third is to soften around the experience, and to soften means different things. It might mean softening the seeing, the mindfulness, so that it's more equanimous, less reactive – just letting it be as it is. It could also mean softening in the body. It can mean softening around it, so whatever the experience might be, there isn't any grasping at it, or there isn't any resistance to it. It could be right in the middle of the experience itself. If there's some holding there, some tension, it might be possible to relax that tension. Or if it's not possible to relax it directly, maybe soften around it. Often there can be subtle or big ways in which we are bracing ourselves against life, or tensing up around something. And sometimes it's more useful to notice that, rather than noticing the object of our attention. There can be a softening of the shoulders, the arms ...

At the beginning of the sitting, I was noticing something as my mental concern, thoughts that I had coming here. And as I was present for it and felt it, and softened with it being there, what softened for me was the muscles of my forearm, not the head or the brain. But it was the way in which my arms were kind of pulled in, tightened up, and engaged with whatever I was thinking about.

So, to see, to feel, to soften. And at different times it's good to give yourself clear attention for each one – to differentiate. Now is the time to see; now is the time to feel; now is the time to soften.

You don't want to make softening into a big project. Do whatever is easy, whatever is simple. And when softening is not really necessary or the name of the game, then just see and feel. And when you're already feeling somewhat intimate and connected, then you don't need to emphasise or practice feeling at all; all you have to do is see.

When the attention is still a little bit moving back and forth, not quite concentrated, then the seeing maybe is more like looking – looking meaning a more active verb; you actually look. But as the mind gets more settled and stable, there's no more looking, but rather just seeing as an inactive verb. Just seeing what happens as opposed to something we do to look. We just see; we're present for how things are.

So as you practice this morning, it might be interesting for you to consider these three phases of practice: seeing, feeling, and softening – in your walking meditation, your sitting – and see if that might be useful.

So thank you.