

Dharmette: What Is Being Smuggled In?

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on July 21, 2010

When I was in Northern Ireland recently I was told a story. It was told as if it were true, so hopefully it was true. It was a variation of a ancient classic story in which the subject was a donkey. The way the story was told to me was that they used to have very sharp borders between Ireland and Northern Ireland, and it was basically a militarized zone. People were smuggling things. Some people were smuggling guns to Northern Ireland, but there were all kinds of smuggling going on. After the border was taken down, a border guard ran into a woman in a wheelchair and said, "You used to come across the border regularly, and I always had the impression you were smuggling, but we could never figure out what you were smuggling." She said, "Oh yeah, I was smuggling [laughs] – I was smuggling wheelchairs" [laughs]. The ancient story had to do with a donkey. For years a guy goes across the border with his donkey. The border guards asks, "What were you smuggling all those years?" "Donkeys!" [laughs]. I thought of those stories because sometimes in our practice, we pay attention to one thing, but we are missing something else that's really going on.

When I was in the Zen monastery in Japan, the short story is I didn't like it very much there [laughs]. I didn't think it was a good place for me to practice for a variety of reasons. I didn't think it was so serious. But I stuck it out – the period I committed myself to – and then I left. After I left, I was so surprised to discover how much I'd been affected and changed from the time in the monastery. I hadn't seen it when I was there. The training in the monastery had been a physical training, training through the body, whereas I was focusing on my mind, on getting concentrated and being mindful. I had one idea of what I was developing in the Dharma, but really there was something else being smuggled in: a variety of things in my body.

A lot of Zen training is through the body, through the forms that you hold yourself in. You don't just walk into a room mindfully, but you walk into the meditation hall holding your body in a particular way. You hold your hands like this. Here, you can keep your hands in your pockets as you come into our hall. In Zen you hold your hands like this, upright. It requires a certain kind of attentiveness to your body to do this. You pass someone on the pathway, and you don't just say, "Hey George," and give them a high five. You actually bring your hands together in a very intentional way, and you bow to them. In that greeting there's a physical involvement.

In the monastery, there are many, many ways in which you use your body. I was reprimanded when I was setting the dinner table for all the monks. We'd go to the kitchen, and get the food, and carry it out to the dining hall. I grabbed the pot of rice, and although there were two handles, I just held it with one handle – it wasn't so heavy. I was reprimanded because when you carry the rice like that, you're supposed to carry with both hands, because that's respectful. You have to respect the rice, so you hold it with both hands – you don't do it casually. But also what it meant was you engaged with your whole body, present for what you are doing.

The cumulative effect of this for months on end – having this very intentional form which you enter into and take on – affected me. It smuggled in a certain kind of ability, strength, presence in my body. After I left the monastery, I became aware how much more inner stability I had – how much more physical stability I had, and how much I was attentive and mindful to what I was doing through my body, aware of my body. It was very helpful because it helped me monitor much better how much I was caught or not caught – how present I was or not present I was. It added to my presence.

There are a lot of things going on in practice, some of which you are not paying attention to. You're the border guard, looking for something important to happen. Many people are measuring themselves, checking themselves out. "Have I made progress – the right kind of progress – yet in meditation?" Certainly this inner monitoring is a very important part of practice. But practice unfolds in many more ways than we often realize.

This is all to lead up to a point I wanted to make: the importance of regular practice, every day, day in, day out, independent of what you think might be going on. "I'm getting more concentrated, more mindful" – whatever it might be – "More free, more relaxed." The regularity of the practice creates a strength within if you have a regularity of discipline and if you do that discipline with your body, putting yourself in the same stable, upright posture whether you want to or not, whether it's chaotic in your mind or not, whether you're still or not, whether you're broken-hearted or not, whether you're completely confused about what to do with your life, whether you're

overwhelmed with what's going on. No matter what goes on, you don't succumb to anything; you don't give in completely to whatever is going on, but you meet it, you're present for it with this stable, upright posture.

You might think that you're the complete Buddhist disaster. You're a disaster sitting upright, strong. You think that your life's falling apart around you. You sit up, strong – over and over and over again – and something that's maybe not so visible or obvious begins happening and shifting and changing within. We come to have a certain inner stability, equanimity, balance, and strength that we carry with us through whatever we're doing, whatever is going on.

You find that in future situations, you have the capacity to meet them with some way of being stable, some way of not being pushed around by them, some ability just to stay and be. You keep showing up and being there for that, for that, for that. It's kind of dumb Buddhism, in the sense that it doesn't require a lot of intelligence to just sit upright be present. It doesn't require a lot of wisdom. It's a physical thing – almost brute force.

What I'm talking about today is physically showing up with your bodies, staying there and being present, upright, no matter what. You want to cry. You could just collapse on the floor in a puddle, or you could sit upright and be an island in the puddle that forms around you. Just let the tears flow. You have stability, strength, from this regularity. Here you are, in this rootedness. Slowly this gives a person a tremendous amount of strength to go through life with a certain degree of equanimity, with balance in the face of what's going on.

I was thinking of talking about this today because I just spent a few days at the Zen monastery at Tassajara. It was really obvious there. I was reminded how that body practice worked for me and how much I benefited from the forms – and not from what I thought was going on at the time. I could also see from people who had spent a year or two there, and whom I'd known before. One of them had a lot of psychological challenges. The psychological difficulties hadn't really improved so much in the conventional way, but the person had a greater capacity for stability, being upright, being present, just holding themselves in an upright way through it all. This gave the person a certain strength that wasn't there before in the midst of the psychological difficulties. It took months of Zen practice, sitting upright, holding your hands like this, discipline, showing up for your job – the regularity of the whole monastic life.

Some of that can also happen for all of us here in our regular non-monastic life by simply having a meditation practice every day – day in and day out – and sitting upright. Not giving in and saying, "Today I'm sitting on the couch. Today I'll just stay in bed and meditate lying down." "I'm mindful; I'm present, relaxed." Lying down is good, but you don't get that benefit of sitting upright in the midst of whatever is going on, good or bad.

Regularity of practice is so important – when you practice every day, whether you want to or not. Once you start engaging in this question, "Do I want to? Do I not want to? Should I? Shouldn't I?" then you lose this inner training, this other smuggling thing that's going on that you're trying to sneak by the border guard. Maybe the border guard is your usual, conventional preferences: what you want and don't want to happen. Just stay with the regularity whether you want to or not, whether it's difficult or not – just show up. Show up. You're there, you're there, you're there.