

Dharmette: Three Ways of Responding to Challenges

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdaal on September 15, 2010

In thinking about how we practice with challenges in Buddhist practice, or in meditation practice, it might be useful to consider there are three different general ways to deal with things that are difficult. Each way is sometimes appropriate and sometimes inappropriate. Part of wisdom, and part of the exploration, is to figure out which way is appropriate at different times.

One approach is to ignore the difficulty. People usually don't associate mindfulness practice with ignoring what's going on, but sometimes it's helpful to ignore or avoid it. Sometimes if we focus on something, it makes it stronger, whereas ignoring or avoiding it can just let it settle away so that it no longer grabs us.

For example, thinking. If you're bothered by your thinking, then focusing on your thinking can just make you more bothered, and you just spin out on more thoughts. Sometimes it's better with thinking just to ignore the fact that you're thinking, and pour whatever attention you have into your breathing. Just let your thinking do whatever it does in the background. It'll settle down by itself, and ignoring it might be the best thing to do.

If you're very stressed out at work, it could be that staying at work way into the evening is not going to help you. Maybe you need to go home at five and go exercise, go for a walk, have a nice meal, take a nap, have a nice night's sleep. And then perhaps you'll come back in a refreshed way, and you'll be able to deal with the stress with a fresh, open mind. And then you'll see the situation in new ways that you couldn't have seen it if you stayed enmeshed in the situation: "I'm just be mindful of it. I'm going to stay and work through it." Maybe you'd better take a break. Get a fresh perspective.

There are many times in life where avoiding, ignoring, is very helpful and strategic. And there are certainly times when ignoring or avoiding is a big problem. Problems can fester. They can get worse. They can continue. They can keep coming back and biting us unless they're really addressed. Ignoring is closely related to repressing. If we repress something, then it can come back and bite in other ways. Part of wisdom is to know when ignoring a problem is appropriate and when it's not appropriate.

Another approach is to let go. Often Buddhism is associated with letting go. Just let go of the problem. It's different from ignoring or avoiding. It's more about how we hold the problem, how we hold our relationship to it, and how we hold ourselves in relationship to it. There might be some attachment, clinging, or attitude we have. Then it's good to let go. Just let go of that.

For example, you might be feeling tense in your meditation practice. You investigate: "What is that tension about?" It might be because you have a perfectionist streak in your meditation. You're supposed to be the perfect meditator at IMC today. You had better do it right – otherwise you're not perfect. You realize that what you need to do is not to avoid this tendency to be a perfectionist, but to let go of it. Perhaps you can let go of it once you see it. Maybe you can let go and lighten up on it. So letting go is sometimes a very direct and powerful thing to do in situations where things are challenging. "What do I have to let go of here?"

In some situations it can be very useful to let go of the need to be right. Or let go of our attachment, or of having opinions. Or let go of needing to be seen by other people in a certain way. Maybe it's an uncomfortable situation. Maybe people are not behaving properly, but the hook that keeps us struggling in the situation is not the situation, but rather how we are seen by other people. But maybe we don't need to be seen in any particular way. Let people see us the way they see us. It's okay. So you let go of the need to be seen in a certain way.

There are a lot of things to let go of, and it can be very helpful to do that. It's not helpful to let go when the letting go is a denial of something that's integral to what it means to be a human being. People let go of inappropriate things sometimes. What we need to let go of is our clinging to things, not the things in the world. So you find sometimes, people let go of their money, of their possessions, of some of their relationships, or of their sexuality because they think, "Oh having money, or being sexual, or having possessions – that's not spiritual. So let's just

let go of all this stuff.” And so, sometimes, if you deny and let go of something that’s integral to what it means to be human, it can come back and cause problems if you let go in the wrong way.

Another problem with letting go is when it’s only temporary, or if we only let go of the surface symptoms of the situation, and the deeper roots of the challenge are not addressed. You might have to let go a lot. It keeps coming up over and over again. If it keeps making a problem over and over again in our life, just letting go is not going to be very helpful.

The first approach is to ignore or avoid. The second approach is to let go, to see, “What do I have to let go of here?” The third approach is to go into and through the situation. This is much more the mindfulness approach, which generally is to really be present for what’s here, and to be present and mindful in a respectful way. Not trying to push it away, not trying to ignore it, not trying to hold onto it. But really see what’s really going on here. To investigate, be present, and to let the difficulty show itself. What’s the situation really all about? Rather than avoiding or letting go of the challenge, you go through it to the other side, and see what happens.

There’s a cliché that’s used sometimes in our circles that the quickest way to go from A to B is to completely be A. It’s not a matter of focusing on getting to B, but really entering into A in this situation. What’s going on now?

If you’re angry, for example, you want to let go of the anger, or you want to find resolution of the anger. A powerful way of doing that may be to just allow yourself to be completely angry in a safe way. The safe way is to do it in meditation. It’s one place where it’s safe, and you really feel it and are present for it – not pushing it away, not doing anything, but really being present, and then going into it, and seeing what’s there. Seeing what needs to be expressed, what needs to show itself, see what’s going on in a deeper way that you can’t see if you’re avoiding, or denying, or repressing. Or even if you’re letting go, you can’t really see the deeper thing that’s going on.

So you go through it, go into it and through it. I think this last approach is one of the hallmarks of mindfulness practice, because mindfulness is to respect everything, and in a sense to trust everything. Not to trust that it’s trustable, but rather that it’s trustable to be present for it. It’s trustable to study it, and to learn the information that’s there. Learn the lessons that are there. Learn what needs to be learned from this situation. We don’t dismiss anything. We enter into, and are really present for it, come what may – and we see what happens.

Sometimes that’s a really useful strategy, but sometimes it’s not useful. It’s not useful when there may be unconscious or subconscious reactivity to the situation that gets triggered by being present with it. For example, with fear – some people, when they focus on their fear, there can be subconscious or unconscious reactions, where they just get more afraid, and spiral out to a panic attack. It’s not useful to stay present for fear if you’re going to end up having a panic attack.

Or with certain fantasies or desires. “I’m going to really be present for my sexual fantasies” [laughs]. That can be okay. It can be useful to go into them and find out what’s on the other side. Some people have done benefitted from doing that, but others find that by being present for fantasies, they just end up spending hours fantasizing in ways that are not useful, and that are disconnected from life itself. So being fully present for that may not be useful. Maybe there’s another approach that’s needed.

There can be all kinds of delusions of grandeur. When I was a new meditator, when I was twenty, I remember I spent a fair amount of time when I was listening to Dharma talks, not listening to them, but imagining how I was going to give a great Dharma talk [laughs].

Student: “That’s what we all do here!” [laughs]

Gil: It worked out for me – thirty-five years later! [laughs]

You can be present for challenges in the wrong way. If you don’t know how to be present in a useful way, this can feed something that is not useful to feed. Part of the art of mindfulness is to learn how to be present, to go into something in a way that’s helpful and not to feed it, not get engaged in it, not be lost in it, and not reinforce it. Sometimes it takes a while to learn that balanced, non-reactive presence, which allows us to go through our challenges.

Three approaches: to ignore or avoid, to let go, or to go into to, study, or investigate. All three are useful at

certain points. All three should be avoided at certain points.

Part of your job, as a practitioner, is to know these three options and to start getting wise about when it might be useful to use one of them. One of the ways you get wise is by trial and error, by experimenting. One of the ways you get wise is by making mistakes, realizing, "Oh that didn't work!"

So try it. Explore it. Look at your situation through these three ways and see what you learn in the process.