

Practice Note: Mindfulness of the Background

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on November 10, 2010

There's an expression about not seeing the forest for the trees – or not seeing the trees because of the forest. We can go back and forth between what we focus on. Sometimes we focus on the details of what's happening, and sometimes we step back and look at the bird's-eye picture of what's happening. What we pay attention to has different results. Sometimes it's interesting to switch the lenses of attention if we're focusing one way all the time. Generally with mindfulness, the tendency is to look more closely at the details – to look at the trees. Sometimes it's good to back up and take the broader vision: to see the background of what's happening.

One of the interesting areas of mindfulness is to be mindful of the attitude with which you're paying attention – the attitude with which you're approaching what's going on: the emotion, or mood, or motivation that's there in the background. Sometimes it's so far in the background that, perhaps, it doesn't even occur to you to look at it. For example, you might be sitting in some emotional or physical pain, and so you look carefully at that. That's the trees. Or perhaps you realize that your relationship to the pain is also important. Then maybe you realize that there's aversion, so you're looking at that.

But then you step back and look at what's in the very back. What's behind all that? Is there some background? Is there some pervasive, more subtle or quiet attitude or mood that seems to be there, whether you're in pain or not in pain? It could be a belief system, an idea, an assumption.

It could be an assumption that life is really dangerous. It's full of threats for you. So no matter whether there's something painful or not painful going on, there's a vigilance concerned with threat that's subtly there, in the background. It's always there when being mindful has this feeling of "Uh oh, I better pay attention, or something terrible is going to happen!"

Or there could be a background attitude of something that has to do with desire: "I want something." It's all about what I can get. And so you feel the pain. You notice it. You notice your aversion to the pain, but behind it all there's an attitude that, "If everything were right, I'd be getting exactly what I want! How am I going to get what I want?"

Or there might be a attitude of some understanding of who you are, of your self-identity, which is always there in the background – some background assumption about what the meaning of life is – what it's all about, and who you are in relationship to other people. There are a lot of different background attitudes which can be operating. But because they're subtle, sometimes they're overlooked because the trees are so much more interesting than the overall forest or the background of it all.

I'd encourage you to see if you can get a little bit more still than you usually might be. Just intend towards more stillness, more quiet in some way or other. And in whatever quiet you have, don't do as much as you usually do. Don't focus so much on the details of what's going on. Continue with that, of course, but see if you can feel or sense your way into the background of your mind, your heart, your attitude. See the attitude that informs how you're mindful – how you approach and do things.

Is there some background attitude? It can be very revealing if you look at that.

I hope you enjoy your morning. Thank you.