

Practice Note: Mindfulness Itself

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on December 1, 2010

It's one thing to be mindful of things; it's another thing to appreciate mindfulness itself. We have a tendency to focus on the things we're interested in or the things we're averse to – the things of the world. So you could be mindful of other people; you could be mindful of events; you could be mindful of your thoughts; you could be mindful of your feelings, your emotions, the sensations in your body. There are a lot of things you can be mindful of, and it's very helpful to be mindful of these things. You can learn a lot about yourself. You can learn how to be more relaxed about things. But there's also mindfulness itself, awareness itself – the awareness that is used by mindfulness – as qualities that are quite interesting.

There are two dimensions of mindfulness: what you pay attention to, and the attention itself. And occasionally in life, the attention itself stands out. It can become highlighted as something very precious and valuable. Sometimes it's what gives our life depth. The things we can pay attention to are interesting enough. But there's a poignancy to being really aware that you're attentive: to know that you know.

To be aware of the awareness that knows things lends itself to a more timeless dimension. When we're focusing on things – what we want and don't want and what's happening – we belong to the world of time. There's an interesting difference between the world of time and a world that is timeless. Time seems to stop in a certain way. It doesn't stop, of course, but it's as if there's no time. Some people have that experience when something dramatic happens. For example, you have a near-accident in the car, and afterwards, everything seems very deep, or rich, and time seems to stop. The future doesn't seem to matter anymore. You're so much here, and aware that you're breathing and aware.

Or a stunningly beautiful situation in nature can not only take your breath away in terms of the beauty of the place, but the awareness that knows this seems to fill the space. The awareness that is aware of that becomes more poignant, more alive. It lends itself to a sense of being alive, and here, and very full, in a dynamic way.

For some people, meeting death – maybe their own death – makes awareness stand out and become highlighted. It's so amazing that you could be conscious and aware. Often, time seems to disappear for people who are dying, when they are dying slowly and without too much fear.

There is this quality of mindfulness – the attention itself, the awareness itself, which is used to be mindful. You have to use your mindfulness, but you can also notice the quality of mindfulness itself. There's a way in which that can add depth, fullness, and poignancy to your life: here and now.

As you practice today – walking and sitting – you might see if there's some way that you can tap into something poignant about just the mindfulness itself, the awareness itself, as much as paying attention to the particular objects: your breath, your feet, or the sounds that are happening. There's something about the timeless, spacious expansiveness or depth of awareness that can take it all in and hold it all.

And, of course, if none of this makes any sense to you, then you can just forget it [laughs] and continue as you were.