

Practice Note: Stillness and Movement

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on January 19, 2011

Sometimes we get to see or understand something most clearly when we have something to contrast it with. The contrast can be quite strong, almost like opposites. One of the interesting contrasts for people who meditate is the contrast between stillness and movement. In a sense when you meditate, you're sitting still with your body. But sometimes if you're still with your body, you start seeing small movements or the urge to move. These can be quite subtle, but they represent our inner psychological movements. You can sometimes see it much more carefully than in your busy and active life. You might not have even noticed that you have adjusted your posture slightly when you're in a restaurant hanging out and talking. But when you sit and meditate, the urge to change your posture is seen.

Even if you don't have any urge to move and you just sit really still, you can see that the stiller and more attentive you are, what's actually going on in your body is all movement. There is nothing that is actually still in the body. Even though there is a feeling in the body of stillness – at the core, the center or the overall container feels still – but the particular sensations are all moving, changing and buzzing. It's very vibrant. It's quite something to feel an inner stillness, and take that with us into our lives, and feel when we're actually quite busy there can be a stillness there with us. To feel that contrast or the combination of those two, can make it all very rich and meaningful. It's like being calm in the middle of lots of things going on. It feels more satisfying to be calm or still while we're in motion and moving.

The same thing happens with the mind. The mind can be still, or the mind can be moving. Sometimes the mind moves a lot. For example, say you sit down to meditate and the body is still, but the mind is just jumping around like crazy – thoughts, ideas and feelings are spinning around. Sometimes we can see the active movement of the mind clearly only if we keep the body still and close our eyes. If you live a busy life and everyone around you is busy, it might even seem that your mind is pretty calm and still, compared to what's around you. But when you sit down to meditate, you see that the mind is quite busy and active. So to discover how to be still in the mind is a beautiful thing.

A wonderful thing that can also happen is when the mind can be still while it is active. Just like in physical activity, you can sense stillness and movement together, the same is true with the movements of the mind. We don't have to stay stuck always keeping the mind still and placid. There is a wonderful way that stillness can be there all the time. It is a reference point, a refuge, a way that highlights the movement. So we see the movement more clearly and then can take more responsibility for it – whether we get involved or not, whether we get pushed around by it or not.

One of the most powerful things to become aware of when there is stillness, is the urge, impulse or intention to do anything at all – to act, to speak, or to get involved in some mental activity. And to have enough stillness to watch the intentions arise, and have enough sense of connection to stillness that you don't have to act on it right away. Sometimes you feel the impulse to act with a sense of urgency. I sometimes see in myself when the telephone rings, that there is first an instinct to rush to answer it. But why not wait for a few rings? Or when the bell rings at the end of the sitting, is there immediately an intention or reaction that says, "Now I can open my eyes and move"? Boom! What happens if we see the urge or intention, and then act on it in our own time, when we're ready, or in harmony with stillness?

So, stillness and movement – to notice the movements and to notice the stillness. I think that people who meditate get an increased appreciation for the stillness part that adds richness to the movement part. As you practice today, you might see if there is any reference point for you of stillness that might be interesting. There may be more stillness within you than you realize. But we don't tune into it, we don't value it – meaning other things are important.

And if you can't be still, then be mindful.

I hope you enjoy your morning.