

# Dharmette: Rhythm In Practice

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdaal on February 2, 2011

Good morning. I think a useful approach to meditation practice – or even to a spiritual life or a human life – is to notice how things happen in rhythm, and to tune into the rhythm of things. There are rhythms to how things occur: how they pass away, occur again, and pass away. There are a variety of different types of natural rhythms that are a part of life. It's part of the Buddhist teaching that all things are impermanent. But this doesn't say too much about what happens when they're impermanent, or what way they're impermanent. Some things that are inconstant are impermanent because they're in flux – they come and go, and they come and go. They don't just disappear forever, but they come back, go away, and come back. There is a rhythm to it.

Some people think in absolute terms: this way or no way. It's an absolute way: yes or no. Something that's present is really present; something that's absent is completely gone. But instead, you can have a sense that there is a rhythm to things, and learn to be gracious, to flow with the rhythm, to allow for it, to be patient with the rhythm, and not to be absolute about things.

There are all kinds of rhythms of life, which we are a part of. The big rhythm of the day is sleeping and being awake. There's a rhythm to getting sleepy, going to sleep, waking up, and being awake. At times I've struggled with that rhythm, thinking that I was supposed to be in some different place in the rhythm. I've thought that there's only supposed to be one way – completely alert, awake, and I'm never supposed to be tired. That's silly. But now I realize that I'm in that part of the rhythm, or the oscillation, where I'm going towards sleep. I'm tired now. Then I'll change and come to another part.

There's the rhythm of eating. We eat, we're satiated to some degree, and then after a while we get hungry. We go in and out of that rhythm. There's the rhythm for at least some people of work and rest, or engagement and activity, and resting. It's useful to have that rhythm. If you only rest, then you tend to get lethargic. If you only work, you get exhausted. It's important to have this rhythm.

So where are we in the rhythm? What part is needed in the rhythm? It's important to tune into it. Sometimes I can feel it. I'm doing activities, and I can feel my interest and energy beginning to wane. I realize that the energy is there, and now the rhythm is changing. There was energy for doing it for a while, and now that it has changed. I need to change gears. The job's not done, but it's time to take a break and do something else – participate in the rhythm – and wait until the rhythm swings back again.

There are rhythms in conversations with people. There can sometimes be very intense, fast conversations, and then at some point you feel that the energy, emotions or topics have changed, and so the conversation becomes quiet, maybe with lots of pauses. You and your friend may actually not talk for a while. If you're uncomfortable with periods of silence, then you may fill it up too quickly, and do something artificial. But then you realize that there is a rhythm. I've been with my friend for the last couple of hours, and now we have a need to be quieter. We're still connected together, and that rhythm will probably change at some other time. It's part of the rhythm of how things are.

There are all kinds of rhythms in meditation practice. There's the rhythm of sitting and not sitting. But within the meditation, there is the rhythm of the breath – the breath comes, the breath goes. We tune into that rhythm. It's a changing rhythm or oscillation in what goes on.

There's also a rhythm to getting distracted. "Oh no, I'm distracted and lost in my thoughts. This is terrible; this shouldn't be. I need to come back, and really stay where it's important, and be back with the breath." That kind of thinking sets up too much tension and oppositional feeling about what's going on. But if you relate to it as a natural rhythm, then it gets easier to work with. What you're doing in mindfulness is you're working with the rhythm, and harmonizing or aligning yourself with it in a way that's helpful in the long term. If you consider that the mind produces thoughts, and that there's a rhythm to getting pulled away or lost in thoughts, and then noticing it, then your contribution to the rhythm is to come back. After a while you'll go away again. This is the rhythm – you go away and then you come back.

When you go to the beach and play in the waves, you don't fight the waves. You get into harmony with the waves. Especially with big waves, you better find a way to surf them, dive under them, or do something with them. But you don't fight the waves. So it may be the same thing with the mind. You don't have to fight the waves and rhythms of the mind. If you appreciate it as a rhythm, and your contribution to the rhythm is to come back, then it's gentler – you're coming back. Every time you come back, you're doing your part of the rhythm. Slowly it's like a massage, and slowly you begin to settle down. The length of time that you have with the breath becomes longer, and the length of time that you wander off becomes shorter. But you can't expect that it's going to work just like that. Of course it's going to go off. You're going to go off and come back, go off and come back. As you keep working and massaging that rhythm, you'll find yourself staying more and more in the present. The idea of it being a rhythm makes it more nonviolent and non-conflictual. It's just a rhythm that I'm a part of. I'm just supposed to work with the rhythm so that I slowly work in the direction of being present.

There's a rhythm of strong emotions that arise. Sometimes there can be all kinds of emotions that come up. Emotions have rhythms of their own. It's really remarkable how quickly emotions shift and change if you're paying attention and not locked in to some story or idea. People sometimes come to me with intense emotions and feelings they have to deal with. Recently I talked to a man whose wife had died. Sometimes when someone is having strong emotions, it occurs to me that I don't have a clue about what to do or to say to this person. Then my refuge is that I'll just stay present. I'll just stay here with the person, and let them talk, and see what happens. If you have presence and attention, it's remarkable how quickly things shift for the person. People don't get stuck if you're present for them, or if they're present for themselves. So I don't have to know. I just have to stay present, and things with shift and change, because there's always a rhythm and a change.

There is a rhythm to grieving, and then not grieving. Grief comes back again as a wave, and there's a rhythm to that. If you have a sense that there is a rhythm to these things – that things are always changing and flowing – then there doesn't have to be an opposition to them. Rather, appreciate them for their rhythm. If you fall into what I call the delusion of permanence, you think, "Oh, this is it; I'm grieving and I'll grieve forever. I'm stuck." That's not very useful. Instead, recognize that there's a flux, a flow, an oscillation, a rhythm here. Now it's this way in this part of the rhythm, and the rhythm will change at some time. Something will happen and shift back and forth.

While there is the rhythm of being distracted and coming back, there is also the rhythm of being really fully present for things, and then not being so fully present. So we're here, and then we're not quite here anymore. So you can appreciate that it's a rhythm – "Oh, that's what it is, and so my contribution is to come back and be fully present. Let me offer that – come back." Then at some point you lose it, and you come back.

Concentration has a rhythm – I'm concentrated, and then I'm not. There's a time to get concentrated, and be concentrated, and at some point concentration has a lifetime, or a half-life. At some point, you reach the half-life of your particular concentration for that time. I know I've been on retreat or meditating and had some idea of what it's supposed to look like to be perfectly concentrated. I get somewhat concentrated, and then at some point the concentration slips and fades away. "Oh shoot, I blew it. Terrible. Now I'm not meditating properly. I have to huff and puff and get back there." It turns out it's just the natural lifetime. With all the causes and conditions that were present for that time, the concentration had a particular strength, and it lasted a certain length of time. Then the power or energy behind it was gone, and so it faded away. Now that I've learned there is a natural rhythm to getting concentrated and un-concentrated, I'm more gracious, and just go with that. When I notice that I'm no longer concentrated, it's because I'm on the other side of the wave. I keep doing mindfulness practice the best I can. I'm not going to beat myself up, because I'm on the other side of the wave. I just caught the wave for a while, and if I'm lucky, I'll catch the next wave.

Getting concentrated also has a rhythm. You focus on something, you start to get settled, stable and concentrated on something, and then you fall off. You realize that that's a rhythm. What I'm supposed to do is work the rhythm, as opposed to being locked in. Let me come back. Let me stay there and hang in the best I can. And then when I slip off the concentration, I know that it's just a rhythm and I come back. It's gentler, and you're not dealing with a conflict.

So there are all these rhythms. You might see as you practice, if you approach what's happening as if it's an element or a phase in a rhythm of things, whether that doesn't make it easier to be with it – and you're less conflictual, less forceful, less reluctant, less resistant, and more willing to just go with it. Difficult emotions or things can arise, and when you appreciate that it's a rhythm, then maybe it's okay to ride the wave. See if the

idea of rhythm can open up and make things more fluid and easier for you to have some confidence, to stay present, and to contribute to the rhythm in a way that is helpful and supportive. Keep showing up.

Getting into the rhythm of practice is a good thing. So thank you all, very much.