

Dharmette: Expanding Our Perspectives

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsda1 on March 9, 2011

One interesting thing to think about is that in mindfulness practice, we're often instructed to be in the present moment, as if the present moment were a simple thing, whereas this present moment is amazingly complex. There're a lot of different things going on at the same time in the present moment. Anytime that a human being pays attention to the present moment, they're actually choosing certain aspects of the present moment to notice, or certain aspects of the present moment get highlighted and known.

I think it's probably impossible for one person to be aware of everything that's going on in their field of vision or experience. There's so much going on in the present moment. For example, you sit down to meditate, and close your eyes. It's a relatively simple thing for you to sit there and have your eyes closed. Not much is going on. Some people get bored because nothing's happening. But there's a lot happening. There's the whole physical experience of being in a body that's happening. Maybe you just had lunch; you're digesting; and you have the sensations of digestion. Perhaps there's some concern about your digestion. Did I eat the right thing? Or how's that going to sit with me? Or maybe there's tension from the day in your body. And one thing that is happening is that the tension becomes revealed as you're sitting. Even if you don't focus on your tension, some of the tension begins to relax because you're sitting still and quiet. There's a releasing that goes on.

Perhaps you cut your toenail, or cut your little toe during the day, and it's healing. Maybe you're not interested in your little toe. It's healing just fine, so it never occurs to you to look at it, or pay attention to it. Or perhaps you're obsessed and really vain about your little toe, and how the world sees it is really important. You're completely zeroed in on the fact that it got cut. That little toe is the most important thing in the world, because of how it represents you. Or you don't pay attention to your little toe at all, because who cares about it? But it's still happening in the present moment.

There's a whole array of different sensations going on in your body, some of which you wouldn't think twice about. You might be aware of the contact of your butt against your cushion. But perhaps it never even registers at all that there's contact of your knee against your mat. I've spent whole sittings where I've been aware of many things, but that particular contact point just didn't come into the radar. But it's there. Or I've had situations where I've sat, and even though the cushions are pretty soft, if you sit on them non-stop for three hours, they feel like concrete. And then I've sat down, being cautious, and tuned in to the sensations of my knees against the soft mat – "Oh, how does it feel? How is it going to be?" It becomes really interesting. At other times, I can go weeks, months, and years without ever being aware of that particular sensation. But those sensations are there, ready to be felt and recognized if I'm interested or directed to pay attention to them. They're part of the present moment.

All those sensations have feeling tones. They're pleasant or unpleasant. Some people get really interested in: "Is this pleasant? Is this unpleasant?" So you can pay attention to the pleasure, or the lack of pleasure that's there, and some people get really tuned into that. Other people hardly notice. They don't experience the world through the filter of pleasure or displeasure, unless it's really dramatic. All the subtle pleasures and displeasures in the body just go unnoticed because it's not so important for them. They still get concentrated, peaceful and quiet. It's just that they do it without the feeling tone coming into awareness.

There're all kinds of perceptions going on while you're sitting. Which perceptions do you really register and take in? I could take in the fact that there are traffic sounds outside. I'm capable of hearing that. But I'm also quite capable of not, and instead could sit here being absorbed in my breath. It doesn't really register in some conscious way that there are traffic sounds, but the traffic sounds are happening. Or I could be obsessed about that – "Why did we choose to buy a building on the corner of such a busy street? I wonder if I could write to the city. Maybe we can turn this into a parking lot so no cars would be driving by. Let's change this somehow." I could obsess about the sound, or I could just not even notice.

There are all kinds of subtle perceptions and thoughts that go on in the mind that are drifting through. Some of them just waft through, and we don't pick them up. Some of them get our attention. I've had a subtle thought just wafting through, and then thought about my high school girlfriend, and boom, everything gets solid and tight, and

boy, that got my attention! At other times, something just comes, and I don't even notice it, because it doesn't have any charge to it. It just goes right through, I'm staying with the breath and think, "Oh I think that was a thought, but I don't know what it was." I wasn't interested. But there are these thoughts, and subtle layers of thoughts, that go on.

There are attitudes and choices we make. Because there's so much going on in the present moment, there's always basically some kind of choice of what we pay attention to. Sometimes the choices are because we have been given instructions in sitting to pay attention to our breath, so we choose that. But subtle decisions sometimes are made about what has priority. What is important to pay attention to in our experience? It has to do with life experiences, things that happened just before, and our values, priorities, and sense of self. Often what we pay attention to is related to our sense of self, safety, status, and wellbeing. We tune into that part of the environment that reinforces ourselves or threatens it, and that becomes important.

What we pay attention to is not a simple, innocent thing. There's so much in this field. What happens is that some minds get into ruts and habits of focusing on certain things. I'll give you all kinds of silly examples. I remember when I was in Burma, I was sitting in silence for eight months. In that kind of state, you get a little bit of what's called "yogi mind." It's like having a magnifying glass, and the things can seem so much more important than they really are. You can obsess about things in a wonderful way if you have nothing else to do but sit silently for days on end. I remember having this teeny, pin-sized thing on my shoulder that I could see. "Wow that's interesting." I got upset: "Oh I must have skin cancer." I would look at it, and look at it. A lot of things were going on in the present moment, but I chose a teeny, little dot to look at. At the monastery there was a dermatologist, so I went over to him and asked, "Can you please look at this?" He said, "Sure, I'll look." He looked at what I was pointing at, and he thought I was crazy [laughter]. I mean there was really nothing. It was a little dimple [laughter]. But I got obsessed with that.

So all of this is to say is that with everything that's going on in the present moment, what you're paying attention to is probably not so random. There're probably some choices that you're making, and those choices of what you're paying attention to might not be the best – the ruts you follow, and the things you constantly go back to notice. "This is important. This is what I should pay attention to" – but maybe is not really the important thing to pay attention to. Or maybe it's the perspective or the interpretation by which you see it. Maybe it's an okay interpretation, but maybe there are other interpretations as well. There are other ways of seeing the situation. There's a present moment, and there's how we see it, and there are many things going on in the present moment.

There are also many perspectives from which to see the present moment. When we encounter another person, we can see the person as a threat, someone who can do something for us, someone who has had a hard day, or someone who has struggles in their life like everyone does. Or because of a certain hairstyle or manner of being, do we see this person as vain and arrogant? And so we're going to focus on the fact that the person is arrogant. Or do we focus on the fact that this person is also struggling to make it through this life, and maybe has some arrogance, but that's not what we're going to focus on.

What are we doing in this life of ours? What do we focus on? What are the choices? What are the interpretations? I believe that Buddhism says two things in this regard. It says it's possible to relax, and do less and less of all that – less and less choice, and just let things get simpler and simpler. Let things stand out and show themselves to you. But the other is that it's very important and possible to choose what you focus on, and to start becoming creative in reinterpreting, or looking, and filling out the picture, and saying, "Is there another perspective or point of view here?"

This is not to deny one point of view, but to realize that there are maybe a dozen points of view, all of which may be relevant or valuable. There isn't just one thing going on here. When you sit and meditate it depends on what you look at. Are you looking at your digestion, the tension in your body, your feeling tones, or thoughts and beliefs?

With what perspective do you want to look at yourself right now? When you're looking at another person, what perspective is there? Are there many perspectives that you could have? Which perspectives are you locked into, and are you only seeing it that way? Or is it possible to shift perspective, open it up and see multiple perspectives?

I think the more perspectives and angles from which we can see any particular thing, the more compassionate, caring and wise we can be. The fewer perspectives and interpretations we have for seeing something, chances are we're missing a fuller picture of what's happening.

So part of practice is to be very simple, relaxed, and just be. Another part of practice is to start using our intelligence creatively, and asking, "What are the other perspectives that I can bring to this? What other perspectives are relevant in this situation?" Expand the intelligent, creative way in which we see any given situation.

People's whole experience of life and themselves can change dramatically just from a change of perspective. "Oh, there's another perspective. I didn't realize that. That's how it is." For example, I've known people who have had a lot of physical pain, and as long as the perspective was "my pain" and "my struggle," it was hard. It was reasonable, and they were trying their best to struggle with it.

But I've known some people with tremendous pain, who realized it wasn't just them having it, but there were other people in the world having it too. To see that perspective, and to feel some sense of connection and compassion beyond themselves made a big difference.

I've also known some people who have had a lot of struggles, and realized that the degree to which they struggled was a gift to others. The degree to which they could understand their pain was something they could bring to and support other people who were going through some similar thing. They weren't just doing it alone. They were doing it within a community. Their ability to deal with it was hopefully beneficial for others. To change that perspective of being caught up in their own pain shifted, and created a whole different way of being with it, and which was meaningful.

So someone tells you, "Be present" as if the present is a simple thing, you'll know otherwise.