

Practice Note: The Nature of Attention Itself

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

One of the very interesting things about mindfulness practice is what we pay attention to, and another is how we pay attention. Sometimes we focus and pay attention to particular things, and that is what the mind usually does. It's always involved in some kind of thought or concern. Sometimes we then direct our attention to a place we choose. We bring our attention to our breathing as a corrective to the mind being preoccupied and caught up. We bring it to the breath, and stay there, and come back.

But sometimes it's interesting to look at the nature of the awareness or the attention itself. Rather than noticing what we pay attention to, we notice the awareness itself. It's like having a flashlight. You can have a flashlight in the dark, and you can be looking at what the light is shining on. It helps you find something. But you could also look at the light of the flashlight. Is it strong? Is it dim? Does it cast a broad light? Is it very narrow like a laser? Is it flickering? Is it solid? What's the quality of the light? In the same way, it's possible to look at the nature of awareness, how we're paying attention, and the kind of attention we're using.

Attention is very changeable. We pay attention in many different ways. Our attention can have a very broad view of things. Or it can be narrow. We can pay attention to precise details. We can be hesitant or flickering with our attention. We can be solid, and really there in paying attention. Awareness can regularly be hijacked by our thoughts when we're not so aware. Or we can have awareness stronger than our thinking. We can know that we're aware. We can be aware of something, and there can be a knowing of that awareness and of how we're aware.

People are usually preoccupied with what they're thinking about or aware of. Sometimes it is interesting to back away from many of the things we're aware of, and notice something about the awareness itself, and maybe experiment a little. Can you open up the awareness and make it really big, almost as big as the room? It's wide and spacious, and everything happens within it. Or is it stabilizing to make the attention very narrow and precise, like going right into some little point in your belly? Just feel the movements of the belly as you breathe, and hook in there, stay there, and don't let it wander away.

Is it possible to make the attention more stable or receptive, so the awareness feels receptive, like whatever happens is okay? I can hold anything, and anything that happens, I could just let it come.

Or can the awareness be a kind of guard, like a guard at the edge of a gate that can stay there, relaxed, but doesn't let anything come in or out through the gate unless it's okay. So it means that your attention is there, and as a thought or feeling arises, it says, "No, you don't have to pick that up. You don't have to get involved in that. Just let it be." So sometimes it's very receptive, and sometimes it says, "No, I'm here and am not going anywhere, thank you. That thought is not going to go anywhere." You're just going to let it be, and drop it.

So if this makes sense to you, it might be interesting to see if you can notice something about the quality of attention and awareness itself. How it is for you this morning?