

Dharmette: Self-referential Thinking

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on May 4, 2011

I'd like to read you one of the stories in my little book, if I may:

One evening the Abbess declared that the next day every monk and nun was prohibited from using the words "I, me, mine and myself" unless it was required for answering a direct question from someone else.

The next morning was chaotic. Feeling as if they were learning to walk all over again, the monastics kept tripping over their words and stumbling in all their interpersonal interactions.

By the afternoon some were humbled, confused and dismayed to learn how frequently their impulses to speak as well as their thinking were self-referential.

By the evening, the predominant atmosphere in the monastery was one of relief as the monks and nuns realized that they had survived an entire day without initiating any self-focused discussion.

And as they laid themselves down to sleep, each person was amazed at how clear and at ease their mind had become.

When I wrote this story, I was inspired by my experience of being in a Zen monastery in Japan. I knew a little bit of Japanese when I started there, but not much. I had some Japanese language books that I was trying to study. But once I was in the monastery, I focused not so much on reading the language books, but rather I plunged in with whatever Japanese I knew, and tried to speak with the other monks. After a while it became very clear that I spoke Japanese like an American would speak English, and they spoke Japanese like they were Japanese, of course. The big difference is that in Japanese you almost never use personal pronouns, because they are understood by the context. So if I want to say, "We're going to go," in Japanese I would just say, "Going". I wouldn't say "we" because the context of we is understood. And in order to say, "Now it is time for me to speak or to give a talk," in Japanese I would say, "Now is the time for the talk."

Because my Japanese wasn't very good, I would start pretty much every sentence with the word "I." The Japanese word for "I" is a three-syllable word that requires a preposition after it. So you need to say four syllables for "I," which in Japanese is "watashi wa." So I would start all my sentences with "watashi wa," and literally I'm saying "as for me." After a while what I was doing stood out, and I saw how different it was from how everybody else in the monastery spoke. They never said, "as for me, me, or I" because that was understood in the context. It didn't feel comfortable. It felt like it wasn't necessary. It was like all this focus on me.

In English when we speak, we often use the word "I" very innocently. It comes off our tongues easily. We tend to use pronouns much more because that's how English is set up grammatically. You state the subject of the sentence. But in Japanese the subject of the sentence is often implied or assumed. So in Japan I became conscious of how often I spoke that way. I became conscious of: "Why is it so important to say things in reference to myself? What I think? What I believe? What my experience is? What I want?" I saw how often the way I was talking – and more importantly how I was thinking – was self-referential. It was humbling, and I was shocked to see it all.

It's one thing to see it, but it's something else to change it. There were two things that helped a lot to lessen the degree of self-referential focus in my mind. One was in essence to see how uncomfortable it was to think that way. There's a kind of stress, strain or agitation that comes with a fair amount of this self-referential thinking. "What's in it for me? I need to make myself safe. I need to prove myself. I need to plan ahead. I need to do this and that." If you really pay attention, you can see the strain of that, or how uncomfortable it is to do that. When I started seeing how uncomfortable it was, it became easier to want to let go of it. I couldn't necessarily let go of it automatically, but this certainly made it a lot easier. Who would want to do this? Who would want to keep irritating themselves?

The other thing that really helped was to begin having a sense of well-being that was an alternative to thinking about myself, planning around myself, building myself up, and proving myself to others. A lot of my thoughts were self-apologetic. I tried to defend myself and explain why I was okay to everyone, at least in my mind. But as I started to feel a sense of well-being inside, that wasn't needed anymore. The sense of well-being was a place to rest, and was a reference point for how to be. For me the sense of well-being arose very directly in connection

to meditation. Meditating was the way I discovered experiences of well-being and peace, which previously I had had very little experience of. I had certainly not experienced this in any way that I could tap into it regularly. As I got more settled, concentrated and calm through meditation, this sense of inner peace and well-being became an important reference point for me. Then it was easier to not go into those kind of self-referential thoughts as much.

I still refer to myself regularly enough, like I'm doing right now. Some of it I hope is just an innocent way of communicating. If I look at how I use the word "I," I still see sometimes that there are things I need to work on or practice with – how I'm caught by certain identities, ways of being seen, or trying to get something I want.

Tuning into the words "I, me, myself and mine" has proven to be a very useful window into seeing something important within me. Probably, this may be true for many of you as well. I think that for many people, one of the primary forms of suffering arises out of all the self-referential ways in which we think. More often than not, we take it for granted. They say a fish doesn't see the water it swims in. Human beings don't see the self that drowns in all those thoughts [laughter]. So turning around and looking at that, and becoming conscious of it can be very educational and helpful, I believe.

You might use this monastery example where the monks and nuns were told not to use the words "I, me, myself and mine" for one whole day. You might see if in some appropriate context, you can experiment with that and actually do that as a practice. Unless someone asks you a direct question that requires you to use those words, don't initiate a conversation with the words "I, me, myself and mine." If it's not really necessary don't use them at all. But don't be so weird that people think you're weird – like, "What's going on with you, you're sounding weird." Hopefully no one else will notice you're doing this. If you start making these convoluted grammatical sentences, "As for this person here is arising within the mind a certain kind of thought" [laughter]. They'll get sick of you really quickly. Talk normally.

So within reason, try it for a day: avoiding the use of "I, me, myself and mine." See what that teaches you about yourself. See what it teaches about the impulse to use those words, where it comes from, and why you say these words. Chances are you'll learn a lot about yourself from that process. And it would be great if you learn something about an alternative to coming from "I, me, myself and mine." So have fun. Perhaps from that experiment, at the end of the day you'll feel surprisingly clear and relaxed as you go to sleep.