

Dharmette: A Still, Quiet Place Within

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on December 7, 2011

One of the ideas that is sometimes associated with meditation is that of cultivating a still, quiet place within. I think it's useful to consider that a big part of what drives our mental activity is desire, intention, wanting something, or not wanting something. If you look at most of the things you're thinking about on a regular basis, behind that thinking is probably some wish, desire or intention – something we want to accomplish or that's important to us. If you're thinking about the same topic a lot, then your mind is directed in that direction.

Or if you come into a new place you're unfamiliar with, and you feel some worry about being in this new place, then your attention is going to be directed towards surveying the environment, looking around, and seeing what's going on. Your mind is more outwardly directed. Or if you're sitting in meditation, and you have an itch you've never had before, then your mind might start thinking that it certainly must be skin cancer. And then it's going to be hard for your mind not to be leaning towards that itch or concern – it's directed in a certain way.

Often the mind or the attention is directed towards something. We may not be conscious that we're doing it. We think that we're trying to be with our breathing. That's the plan for meditation, to be with the breath perhaps. But the mind is already directed towards something else. And because it's not so conscious that the mind is directed towards this thing that's interesting or important, you easily get pulled into that world over and over again. Perhaps you can let go of what you're thinking about, but the mind is still directed toward this particular thing, and so the thoughts will just keep falling in that direction over and over again.

That's a long way of saying that the mind is often directed in some way, focusing on something consciously or subconsciously. When you meditate, sometimes it can be helpful not just to decide you're going to be with the breath, but in a deeper, broader way, to direct your attention internally towards a still, quiet place within. That way, your mind is not directed outwardly into the future, or into things that are more external, or disembodied like virtual thinking. Imagine that your eyes – rather than gazing outward – are gazing downward and inward towards the stillness inside yourself. You're listening inwards to the quiet within. There might be chatter there, but you listen to the quiet part of it.

As you turn inwards, you might notice what parts of your body are being activated or energized. We often are involved in activities or carry a lot of tension in parts of our body that are habitually used and activated in some way. You might find within yourself that there is much more energy in your upper chest because of some concern you have. Or you might see that the inner world is swelling upward into your head with energies when you have a lot of mental activity going on there.

As you turn towards the still, quiet place within, you might notice what parts of your system are not quiet and not still. Then, in the service of stillness and quiet, it might be possible to relax or soften those. You might not have a lot of success. Don't set your standards too high, but try to relax the places that are activated or tense. See if you can come back, relax, and soften into that still quiet place within. Then once you get a little bit closer to that stiller, more peaceful place here and now, it becomes an encouragement to be here, now, and to tune into and direct yourself to that part which is still and quiet. I would suggest that there's always such a part of you. Mostly we overlook it, because we have all these other important things to think about and be concerned about – all these other things that we tend to give priority to.

For example, if you're feeling tense, you can feel uncomfortable in your shoulders, forehead, jaw, or wherever. It's very easy for the mind to become preoccupied with that and prioritize it as an important topic for the focus of your attention. The mind is directed towards it.

But what happens if you prioritize the still, quiet place within, to give that slightly more value or importance than the place of tension? Who said that the places of discomfort should be our major preoccupation or concern in what's going on?

Perhaps there are times when this idea of turning inward intentionally to a still, quiet place within will help you to arrive, settle and be present, more fully here. Perhaps that quiet, still place within can be a nurturing, supportive

place – one that is meaningful, sacred, wonderful, or nourishing. Once you're a little more in touch with that place, then, with that as a foundation or background, it might be easier to stay with your breath, and be more mindful of what's happening in the present moment.

So, if this idea seems to be something you can relate to, you might try as you begin your meditation, or after a little while of settling down, to intentionally turn yourself inward to the still, quiet place within. Then relax whatever seems to be around the edges, and surrender yourself. Give yourself over to the still, quiet place within – as a shelter from the storm. May it be a place where you feel comforted, safe, and supported.

Those are my thoughts this morning.

Participant 1: How do you know you're in a still, quiet place within?

Gil: How do you know you're in a still, quiet place within? Either you know it or you don't. I wouldn't worry about it. If you can't feel, sense, or tune into an inner quiet place, then don't worry about it. Don't make that a reason to be more anxious. Don't worry about it, and do your practice as you usually do it. But if it's accessible, it can be a support.

Sometimes though, it can be an escape. Occasionally there are people who have an ability to go to an inner quiet place, and they use it to run away from their life. Every time there is a challenge, they go there and they never really look at what's going on. So it can be overdone, but I think that generally, most people don't avail themselves enough of that quiet place. It may be more useful to encourage people to go there than it is to point out when it's overdone.

Participant 2: I mainly want to say thank you. I just find this so valuable. I want to test my understanding a little bit here. It's not an either-or, where we're either disturbed or peaceful?

Gil: No, it's a matter of degree.

Participant 2: It's a matter of degree, and we have the ability to direct our attention towards the still quiet just as much as towards disturbances that may be going on.

Gil: And some people have the habit of only being interested in the disturbances.

Participant 2: Right. I think I have a sense that if there is a disturbance going on, then I better pay attention to it. That's the healing thing to do – to be in touch with my feelings, and try to find out what they are – but not always.

Gil: Not always. Often the instruction we give here is to pay attention to what's predominant. But sometimes it's not so helpful to go towards what's disturbing, because it just keeps us more agitated. Sometimes finding that place of inner stability, peace, steadiness, stillness, and quiet, and establishing some connection to that first, that gives us a different perspective from which to look at how we're disturbed. Then we're probably not going to be as entangled or caught by it. And maybe we can have a more balanced perspective, from which to actually look at it in a nonreactive, noninvolved way.

Participant 2: Thank you.