

Practice Note: Unhook with “It’s OK”

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on December 14, 2011

One of the important tasks in doing mindfulness or any kind of meditation practice is to step back from, disengage, or get unhooked from being preoccupied with our thinking, feelings, and the events of our life. When we’re preoccupied, we’re kind of lost, or so engaged that we don’t see clearly. Maybe we don’t even see at all, except what we’re churning away in.

When you sit to be quiet and meditate, one of the things that often becomes obvious is the power and strength by which you get hooked or lost for periods of time in thinking about things. Even if you’re mindful of what’s happening, you can sometimes feel that you’re *kind of* mindful and aware, but you’re also very aware of how you’re really hooked and engaged. There’s a drive or compulsion to keep being involved in thinking or feeling certain things. You’re kind of in it, or caught by it, and you know you’re caught when you can’t easily put it down. You keep being pulled away.

So, part of the task of meditation is to somehow step back, disengage, get a bigger perspective, and free ourselves from the compulsion of being driven and caught by things. I want to offer one way to do that. It’s a little statement you can make to yourself when you’re meditating, which hopefully will give you some – I don’t know if distance is the right word – but will unhook you a little bit. It’ll strengthen that part of the mind that can be the observer – that part of the mind that can be cognizant of what’s happening without being entangled with what’s happening.

Part of the function of making this simple statement to yourself is to help with the disentangling. The simple statement is: “It’s OK.” I call it the great American mantra. It’s one of the great contributions America has made to the world’s spiritual traditions. It seems the word “OK” came up in Boston in the 1820s, and since then it’s traveled the world. Most people know what it means now: “It’s OK.” You say it to little kids, to everyone: “It’s OK.”

It isn’t that you’re condoning whatever you’re saying OK to, implying, “This is great.” But, in saying, “It’s OK,” you’re stepping back, taking a wider perspective, and seeing something in a way that you’re not trapped or caught by it. For example, it’s not really OK to spend your time in meditation planning how to get violent revenge on your neighbor, thinking about all the terrible things you could do and how you’re going to do it. It’s not really OK spending all your time in meditation lusting after your neighbor, and planning how that’s going to happen. It’s not really OK. However, you can say “It’s OK,” because in saying that, you’re stepping back and you’re not in it anymore – not trapped or pushed around by it – not necessarily even believing it.

So, in stepping back and creating a wider perspective, saying “It’s OK” in that context becomes OK – not condoning it, but saying “It’s OK,” because this is what human minds do. “Of course, this is a manifestation of life, of things going on, and I see that it is not useful to be involved in this. It’s also not useful to condemn it and try to push it away.” Some ethically safe place is created when we step back or take a bigger perspective. “It’s OK. This is what life is like. This is what goes on.” It’s OK because you’re not hooked any more.

While it’s not OK to get caught in those things, it becomes OK when using the approach of OK-ness. It’s a way of establishing equanimity, becoming equanimous about it, and not being hooked or pushed around by it. It’s quite a powerful thing to tell yourself, “It’s OK.” There’s an ending of conflict, resistance, judgments, or entanglement. This hopefully creates some space and ease. You’re not exactly in opposition to what’s going on, but you also haven’t bought into it either.

For example, a young three- or four-year old kid gets hurt on the nursery school playground, goes to the teacher, and is a little upset or scared. The nursery school teacher says, “It’s OK; it’s OK.” It’s not really OK that the child got hurt, but they’re OK now. “It’s OK” is said in a context of providing safety and reassurance.

So perhaps, you can treat yourself that way – “It’s OK” – and in so doing, disentangle yourself from what you’re caught in. Once you’re disentangled, you can stop saying, “It’s OK” and just be mindfully present for what is.

Thank you.