

Dharmette: Q&A

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on January 25, 2012

Rather than giving a talk this morning, I'd like to see if there are any questions or topics you would like to raise, and I will try to answer, respond, discuss.

Questioner 1: *Do you have any suggestions for mindfulness in the context of a difficult marital relationship? I'm seeing it as a huge opportunity, but it's very challenging.*

Gil: Maybe you need to divide up the marital circumstance into smaller pieces. What are the different areas of your marital life, your family life, that could use different kinds of attention?

For example, how are you personally with your emotions and feelings? How are you caring for yourself in it? Do you have friends to talk to? Do you meditate in a way that helps you to settle? Do you have some way of tracking yourself well? Do you go underneath the surface of your usual thoughts to see what your intentions and values are? So, do you have the personal side taken care of the best you can?

Then the other side is to ask if you understand your partner well enough? Have you taken the time to really understand or dig deeper into this other person to see their beliefs, emotions, needs and values?

Sometimes people in the middle of a marital conflict or interpersonal conflict can't see beyond the conflict itself. They keep bouncing off the conflict. There may be more going on here. Step back to better understand, not only yourself, but also the other person. Sometimes the more dramatic the conflict is, the more important it is to understand the other person. Often that is what people don't do.

Then there is the area of the communication between the two of you. Independent of the conflict, what is the nature of the your communication?

What is the nature of your relationship? What is its history? Why have you come together? What do you find valuable in the relationship? What do you find difficult? Independent of the conflict, understand the nature of the relationship. There are people who find themselves in conflict, but then they step back and see that the conflict makes sense because years ago they made a choice, and now it is playing out. They have to take some responsibility.

Then how do you communicate? Do you have open communication? How do you communicate around the conflict you are in now? Do you have any ground rules for how to talk? If there aren't any, maybe it's time to set some.

In terms of mindfulness practice, I think of mindfulness as honesty out loud. Is there a way to practice mindfulness out loud that is not offensive? Not attacking anyone, but just saying, "This is what I am feeling. I'm afraid. I'm angry."

Does the other person listen? Do you have any hope of having a conversation? If not, if you don't feel that the two of you can have a productive conversation around your conflict, then sometimes you need to get help. Marital counseling is often recommended. Get a third party in the room to bring more safety and stability into the conversation.

That is my attempt to try to divide up the pie. All of these aspects of the marital pie need to be addressed and looked at. And then you bring mindfulness to it. You bring your attention and care and focus. You try to have some non-reactive attention to what is going on in these different

areas, so that you can learn from them.

And then, in terms of your practice, what do you see as the opportunity for your practice in addressing this? Is this an opportunity for you, or is it just an unrelenting drag that you wish you didn't have? This is what occurs to me now. Do you want to ask something further?

Questioner 1: *The biggest piece of the pie for me now is how to be compassionate. I feel that I understand a lot of what is going on for him, but I find myself responding in a way that is angry or frustrated, and I have to deal with it. There's a large historical wound that is two generations old. He may have chosen it, but we are dealing with it because it comes up in our relationship. Can I bring compassion to that instead of frustration?*

Gil: That's beautiful. I support that. When I hear someone like you talking about this, what I hear is separation. He has the problem, two generations of this problem. "And I am angry with him for this problem, but I'll try to have compassion for his problem." Yes, compassion is useful. Maybe that's a growing edge for you to have that, but I hear the separation and wonder what is being left out. My bias would be to say that it's not him.

Once you marry someone, then in a close committed relationship, you are a system. You are in the system together. You chose him. Something about you as well got involved here. The fact that you are with someone who has two generations of family problems is not an accident. I think it is useful not to see it as an accident. What is it about you?

When you spoke about having compassion for him, what popped up in my mind was, "What about compassion for yourself?" Not just in the abstract, but, "What is it in you that needs compassion?"

Hopefully this gives you something useful to think about or explore. And if it's not useful, then leave it here.

Questioner 2: *Do you have a choice about when you are going to be together with some people that you were once connected to, like family people, but you don't want to be so connected to them anymore?*

Gil: I think the question is, "Do you have a choice to pick and choose some people? And sometimes is it appropriate to make the decision to not be connected with them anymore?" The generic answer is yes, sometimes it is appropriate to choose. I say 'generic' because I don't have enough of the details. There are so many different kinds of circumstances.

If I went to someone and said, "There's someone in my family that I don't want to deal with for a while. I think I'd like maybe six months to a year break to find myself, because it's so difficult." Then you might say, "Oh, poor Gil, he probably should do that." But then you hear that it's my two kids. I don't have a choice if it's my kids. I'm committed, and it would be very damaging to them if I took off for six months.

But I have distant cousins I hardly ever talk to. If one of them were a really difficult relationship for me, because they were always angry and in conflict, and every time I went to see them, there was always a lot of anger going on and I'm worn down, then I might say that I need to take a break from this person until I can regain some strength and stability in myself. I am not obligated to spend time with them just because they are my cousin. Pulling back might be useful. And there may be friends like that as well.

One criterion is to ask, "Is useful or helpful to be involved with this person? Or is it unhelpful and damaging?" And then you find your way. Hopefully, behind every decision like this is a lot of care and compassion for everybody concerned. I've known people to make these decisions in a selfish

way, just for their own sake, without any care for the other person. Then there are people who never think about themselves, but only about the other person. That is damaging too. It's good to consider everyone in the picture in deciding how to act wisely.

For some people, it might be the wisest thing to say, "This is not working for me. I am having trouble. I have my own issues. I need to take a break from certain kinds of relationships. Don't take it personally." Maybe that discussion can happen, if it's a good friend willing to have such a conversation.

There are so many interpersonal dynamics that come into play. Part of the role of mindfulness practice and mindfulness meditation is to help us in a few ways. We want to get settled and calm, so that when we are exploring we are not doing it with an agitated mind that can't see clearly. Another way is to help us to be mindful of what our intentions are. What are the beliefs and values that inform how we make the decision? It's amazing how we can spend days and weeks of our lives and never see what lies underneath, what drives us. Mindfulness can help us settle enough to see the underlying issues in order to make wiser decisions.