

Practice Note: Noting Background Attitudes

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on February 8, 2012

Something interesting to be mindful or conscious of all the time is your attitude. Generally when we enter into and act in the world, there's some kind of attitude operating. Sometimes that attitude is obvious. We know it, and we even warn our friends [laughs], "I'm grumpy today so stay out of my way." Sometimes what's going on is not obvious. Sometimes it might take years to discover that there is an underlying, fundamental, background attitude through which we always see the world, and always understand ourselves.

Whether it's obvious or not so obvious, take a few moments periodically, to look back at yourself and say, "What's the attitude with which I am seeing, hearing, smelling? What's the attitude within which I'm thinking? What's the mood? What's the orientation? What's the concern? What's the emotional background that everything's operating under?" That background mood or attitude can cast a big impact on how you think, how you see, and how you understand things. That attitude can skew you so that you misunderstand, because you're always seeing through the filter of the attitude.

One of the more common background attitudes people carry is an attitude of fear – the world is a frightening place. I always have to be on the lookout for where the dangers are, or how to make myself safe. Another background attitude is that I need to prove myself, so that I can hold myself up and be someone. Yet another is that the more pleasure I can get, the more successful I'll be. So I'm always wanting, and looking for what I can get. What's here for me?

The background attitude almost always is referring everything back to some idea or image about who we are, who we think we are, or who we don't want to be. This constant self-referencing is an attitude that there's something here to build up, defend, apologize for, protect, or hide.

It might be interesting in a very simple way, without a lot of analysis or wondering or probing, just to periodically turn around, look back at yourself, and ask the question: What attitude is here? If it's obvious, great; take that into account. If it's not obvious and nothing pops up, then go back to your breathing, and ask again later to see what comes up.