

Practice Note: Thinking in the Present Moment

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on May 23, 2012

I think that all of you are probably well aware that if you sit down to try and be in the present moment, or sit down to be present for something as simple as your breathing, a common experience is that the mind has other ideas for you. The mind will wander off in thoughts about other concerns. Some people get frustrated at this, because they are trying to be present with the breath, but the mind keeps going off somewhere else. When you do mindfulness practice, it's best – although it's not always easy – if you can not get distressed or disturbed by this. Realize instead that this is a common thing. It isn't that you are accepting just letting the mind wander off, but you don't have to be opposed to it.

When you are doing mindfulness practice and your mind wanders off into something, it can be interesting not to turn away from it or let go of it right away – to not just come back to breathing, or to what you think your idea of the present moment is – but rather, to take a few moments to realize that your thinking is happening in the present moment. Just see that this is happening in the present. I'm thinking about the future. Thinking about the future is what is happening in the present moment. In that way you are present, right? You are present for what is happening in the present, which is that you are thinking about the future.

First, see it as a present moment phenomenon. Then, in the simplest, most obvious way accessible to you, simply recognize what it is that has caught your attention, and that pulls your mind in that direction. Just a very simple acknowledgement, "Oh, so this is what I'm interested in; this is what the mind is interested in. It is different from what I want to do."

Recognize what is in the present moment, even though part of it may be the future or the past, or a fantasy. Then simply acknowledge what you're concerned about. Then, only after you do those two things, come back to the present moment and to your breathing. Make sense? Or if you are doing walking meditation, then come back to the walking. See what this is like.

If this can work, then more careful monitoring and recognizing of what's happening is included as part of your practice.