

Practice Note: Noting Subtle Desires

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on June 13, 2012

Mindfulness practice has a lot to do with noticing what's happening. There are many things we can notice. A very useful one is our desires, what we want. For the most part, desires are operating all the time; they can often be subconscious. We might recognize some of our desires, but for many of us, they operate so quickly that we might not notice. For example, it might not have occurred to you to notice your desire to open your eyes when the bell rings at the end of the sitting. There had to have been some desire to open your eyes in order for the eyes to open. Or maybe you shifted your posture as soon as the bell rang. There's some desire around that.

My saying that desires are everywhere might perplex some of you. There may be the desire to better understand this, or a desire to debate it, "Oh that's not true." Desires are operating in many ways. When you do walking meditation outside, there may be shade in one place and sun in another. When you get to the edge of the shady space, you can have a simple desire to turn around in order to stay in the shade, rather than go into the sun. With these kinds of examples, I'm trying to say that desires are operating very subtly all the time. It's not necessarily the big desires, the big three. You can make up your big three, your top desires. When in the grips of one of those desires, you *know* you have desire, you know what you want. A whole range of powerful desires from subtle to gross operates in human beings.

One thing to be sensitive to as you do mindfulness practice is to notice what you want. Notice what you are desiring. There can be desires connected to mindfulness itself. We can want something from the practice. We're trying to do something, or accomplish something. There can be desires operating while practicing which have nothing to do with the practice itself, but rather with making yourself more comfortable, or practicing in such a way that other people see how great you are as a practitioner, or practicing in a way that no one notices you.

When you are distracted, going away from the present moment and becoming lost in thought, you might spend a few moments looking at that distracted thinking, and try to understand the desire behind it. Chances are there's a desire operating: something you want, or something you don't want.

Learning to become more sensitive to how desires operate is a very useful aspect of this practice. One of the hopes or one of the trainings – which is true with all we do – is to try to be very generous toward ourselves with whatever we notice. Be relaxed and open about it. In other words, don't become self-conscious or angry. Don't feel you're a bad Buddhist because now Gil's pointed out that in a single minute, it turns out you have thirty-two desires.

Part of mindfulness training is that, with whatever you notice, try to hold it with equanimity and without judgment.

For those of you who have no desires this morning, just enjoy it. Thank you.