

Dharmette: Healing Inner Division

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on September 12, 2012

Some years ago, I learned that in the rules Buddhist monks follow, they're allowed to defend themselves if attacked. I was surprised because of the idea that they are supposed to be non-violent, and that means not doing anything. However, what they're allowed to do is block or push back if someone attacks them. They are not allowed to have weapons, so that limits how much they can do. But if someone is going to hit them, they can put up their hand to block the hit. They are not allowed to hit back, but they can defend themselves in that way. If someone tries to push them off a cliff, they can push back to prevent being pushed off.

It seems pretty basic and instinctual to defend oneself in that way. But there is an additional caveat, which is that they're allowed to strike or block as long as they do it with loving-kindness. That is a higher level of requirement. How many of us could say we can do that? The training for monastics then is to cultivate and develop their loving-kindness to such a degree that they can be relaxed, open, peaceful, and secure enough that they won't have hate or anger when involved in self-defense.

I think it's natural for people to want to defend themselves. When something wrong is going on in the world, it's natural to want to do something about it. We have to be very careful, however, not to use the approaches we may have for living in the everyday external world when we are dealing with our internal world. In the external world, if your dishes are dirty, you clean them. If your house is a mess, you clean it up. If there's a big storm in your neighborhood, you go out and help clean up so that the cars can get by. If a neighbor breaks her foot, you take her a meal. You do things. This idea of doing and taking care is often appropriate in the external world.

However, for our inner world, that same idea can sometimes lead to additional suffering, because the inner world may be less amenable to being fixed in the same way. The inner world works best if it's whole. If you start dividing yourself against yourself, it doesn't work so well. If some part of you is the problem, and some part of you is the judge of the problem, it's very easy for the two to be at war or at odds with each other. If you have the idea, "This is thing inside me is not acceptable," then a part of you is judging. The idea of fixing, changing, and defending in the internal world lends itself too easily to a kind of inner divide – the absence of being whole.

In our Buddhist scene, one reason it's fairly popular to emphasize acceptance as an important part of practice is to heal that divide. It's not 100% popular – some people don't like this overly accepting Buddhist attitude of holding ourselves as whole rather than divided. But a lot of people have found that when you can turn towards your inner life, and meet it with some kind of acceptance, some kind of 'okayness,' a number of things can happen. "It's okay, I'll just be here, show up and be present in a loving, open, kind way."

Not being against, not fighting, not fixing things quickly, makes space for things to happen. One is that whatever the issue is, it begins to soften. Maybe it can entirely dissolve the divide between right and wrong, good and bad, one self versus another self. That can be very profound. Some people's primary suffering is that they are trying to fix that divide. They don't realize that the divide is *theirs*, so they're always trying to fix the other side of the divide – not realizing that the divide itself is the problem. The problem is not what's on the other side. And acceptance begins to heal the divide.

There seems to be a natural intelligence, a natural wisdom inside. People describe it in different ways. Another thing that can happen when you accept rather than try to fix is that this natural process in which the inner life can unfold probably has more wisdom to it than you would ever figure out. So, if you are on one side of the divide deciding, "This is what has to happen," as if you are wise and all-knowing about the intricacies of your psychology, life, and heart, chances are you have only a minuscule picture of all that is going on.

An analogy I like is when you have a wound or a cut. The process of healing that cut is phenomenally complex. The antibodies, the hormones, the cellular and the neurological stuff all get marshaled together to heal that cut. It's a very complex physiological process. My guess is that – even if we knew everything that is required – none of us have the intelligence to really orchestrate that healing. But it can be orchestrated inside – the system knows how to do it. I believe that's true with our heart in the same way. Our heart is probably more complex than we can track and take care of ourselves. There's something very respectful of our physiology about just keeping

the wound clean, and letting the system take care of itself. In the same way, there's something respectful of our heart, our inner life, if we kind of keep it clean and allow some inner healing, unfolding, or inner growth to happen on its own.

What is that that needs to happen? We don't know what's going to happen, but the willingness to trust the unfolding is something a lot of people have discovered through doing "accepting mindfulness" – being present, accepting, and turning towards what's here. The inner life needs something different from us than what the outer life may need. Acceptance in the inner life doesn't mean that you have to automatically be accepting of everything in your external life. Not everything should be accepted.

But in meditation practice, or quiet times, or at various points in your life, it's a really profound thing to spend time with yourself and not be at odds with yourself in any way. Instead, open to who you are as if it's okay – as if it's completely fine – and then make space for whatever it is. In this way, you allow for the unfolding and healing of this deeper discovery because it can show itself and unfold as it wishes.

Part of the wisdom of this is that sometimes when you turn towards the inner life, accept it, hold it, and are present for it, what unfolds is not very endearing. It doesn't look particularly wonderful. However, what's unfolding inside sometimes is what needs to happen. The great difficulty can be the challenges of the backlog needing to surface. Put yourself in a situation where it's safe and appropriate to allow that to arise. Continue getting out of the way, and trust the process. Hold it with acceptance, which is not naïve – not sinking into it, not believing it, but just holding it in acceptance where you are the adult. And, as the adult, you can hold it all and be with it all as it is. I hope you will try this.

It's a little bit like aikido or judo where you go with the force of your opponent. You kind of accept it, take it, see where it goes, and use it – not fight it. It's the same with our inner life. I've done this with my thinking mind. There are times in my practice where, rather than letting go of my thoughts and distractions when I'm meditating, I notice I'm distracted, and think, "I'll go along, and just keep thinking." It's like I sidle up next to it, go along with it – not fighting or blocking it, or saying it is wrong. Then when we are there together, I bring my thinking mind back to the present moment. That works much better for me than, "I can't do this. This is wrong, and I have to let go and come back. Gil, what are you doing?"

I hope this gives you a flavor, a sense, of something that might be called "acceptance practice," or "receptive practice," or "open practice."