

Dharmette: Practice and Sleepiness

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on November 7, 2012

What I'd like to do this morning, instead of giving a talk, is to see if you have any questions about practice, or something relevant to what we're about here, and see if I can respond in some useful way.

Participant: I wonder about meditating and finding yourself nodding off to sleep. What would you recommend?

There are a number of things you could do. I don't know which one you want to do first, but I'll give you a list of things. One is to consider whether you are getting enough sleep. Some people in our culture are more in need of sleep than they are in need of meditation. We're a sleep-deprived culture, so let's consider that.

Another is to look more widely at your life. Is there anything about how you are living your life that might cause you to be sleepy? Some people are very susceptible to sugar surges. I've known people who've had donuts before meditating, and felt really good for about twenty minutes, but then didn't feel good meditating. Or it might be not getting enough exercise. It's useful sometimes to take a look at the bigger picture.

Then there's the question about what to do in meditation itself. In a strict mindfulness practice, you wouldn't do anything about sleepiness, but rather you would be mindful of it. You would turn your attention around, and make that the focal point of attention. What is it like to be sleepy? What happens around your eyes? Your cheeks? What kind of fog brain do you have? Energetically, what's going on? What's happening to your posture? What kind of thinking do you have? Just explore the whole phenomenon of sleepiness. Be mindful of it. Sometimes when you bring mindfulness to it, you wake up and get clear, because you are actually studying it. Even if you don't wake up and get clearer, you are at least addressing the issue.

Part of dealing with sleepiness is to look at your relationship to it, as I talked about earlier. I've had war with my sleepiness in meditation. I can give you gory war stories of my relationship to it, mostly when on long retreats. When I was in Burma, I would get up at two o'clock in the morning, and we wouldn't eat any food after twelve o'clock noon. By four or five o'clock I'd start getting sleepy. In the evening I was really sleepy, and I thought it was a personal failing I was struggling with. I thought I was a terrible meditator. I huffed and puffed, and tried to overcome it – until finally I realized that if you get up at two o'clock in the morning, and you don't eat after twelve o'clock, it's reasonable to get sleepy by five, six, seven, eight o'clock. Then I became much more relaxed about it. I learned that what was useful was not just to be clear and awake. Rather, what was useful was to give the practice the best effort I had available. And while the best available effort didn't look so good, it was still the best effort available. That's what counts – not that you have to always be clear.

There's a lot to look at when you're sleepy: your relationship to sleepiness, what's actually going on physically, emotionally, and psychologically. That doesn't involve changing anything. But you can also change things.

Sleepiness can mean there's an imbalance within us. It can be an imbalance between effort and calm. Some people think meditation is about becoming calm, and so they use meditation to soothe themselves. They stay with the breath, leaning into the breath to soothe themselves and get calm – often because they need to. So it's not a bad thing to do. But if that's what they think meditation is, at some point it gets overdone, and they're soothing themselves right to sleep. They get too calm, and there's not enough effort.

Sometimes, if meditation goes relatively well, they can get complacent. It's all okay, and things get calm and relaxed – and they no longer make any effort. So it's very important to have the right balance of effort and calm. You don't want to have too much calm or too much concentration, if there's not enough effort to balance it. And if you have too much effort, then you might get agitated. Where is that balance?

Sometimes when you're sleepy in meditation, it's useful to bring more energy into the system. There are a variety of ways to do that. One way is to just sit up straight. If you sit in a chair using the backrest, maybe you don't use the backrest when you're sleepy. Instead, you sit up straight, and put more physical effort into the posture, so the physicality is there.

Some people open their eyes if they're sleepy when they meditate, because they are less likely to fall asleep with the eyes open. It also brings more energy, especially if you can get bright (not painfully bright) light shining into the eyes. It's stimulating and keeps you from falling asleep.

Some people will bring in mental energy or effort. There are a number of ways to do this. You can just feel a bit sharper in the mind in order to be present for what's there, and look more carefully. One way to do that is to use mental noting, where you say silently in your mind, using one word, about what it is you are noticing. For example, if you are following the breath, your mental note could be, "In-out." Or you if you hear something, "Hearing." Whatever it might be, you note it. And if you are sleepy, you note it with a little more energy – a little louder in your mind – not much more, just a little bit to overcome the sleepiness.

If sleepiness is a regular, ongoing thing, it can be a form of resistance, or a reaction to something. Boredom, aversion, and fear can all lead to sleepiness: "I don't want to deal with this. I don't want to look at this."

Being overly stimulated by our inner landscape can cause people to fall asleep. It's like little babies who fall asleep if they are overstimulated. Put them in a very loud environment, and they will fall asleep. You see it in meditators sometimes when they have strong emotional releases or repressed memories suddenly coming up. It can be too much for the psyche to handle, and they just fall asleep.

Sometimes turning around, looking at the sleepiness, and asking, "What am I avoiding here?" might reveal what you are avoiding. You see, "Oh! This is what I'm avoiding!" And then you might actually turn and look at it directly, rather than avoiding it.

It's a rich world, this world of falling asleep. It's fun to practice with. It's also a bit of a drag. But it's even worse if you have ideas that your meditation is always supposed to be pristinely clear and alert.

The idea is to practice the best you can with what's happening in the moment. In the end, it might be that learning to be patient and equanimous about being sleepy is an important lesson to learn. I've had to learn that. Late at night on retreats, sitting up, the meditation doesn't look very good. My mind is wandering, I'm sleepy. I was very judgmental of myself, treating it as a terrible thing. I was terrible. But eventually I learned, "I'm just sleepy. That's all. When I sit there, my mind wanders. I'm not so present. Meditation isn't working as well as earlier in the day on the retreats. But it's not a problem; it's just what it is. I will try to be mindful and present for that the best I can."

It's helpful if you can free yourself from your reactions to sleepiness, and to be equanimous with it – but at the same time, not be complacent or overly accepting of it: "Oh, it's all fine, and I'll just drift off."

Make some sense?

Well, that was a long answer. I hope it was okay. Some of you don't have that problem. Maybe that's enough.

I'll tell you one more thing about sleepiness. This is an issue for me mostly on retreats. I don't think I have much experience of sleepiness during meditation in daily life. But sometimes when I'm sleepy in meditation, my mind just won't work to be mindful. I'm falling asleep. Usually my posture slumps. There's no qi – no energy in the system to hold myself upright. Then the primary thing I do is to focus on my posture, and sit up straight again. And then I try to be present. If I kind of drift off, I sit up straight, and I stay there. It takes mindfulness and effort to keep the posture good. It's not like this great beautiful spiritual experience of being with the breath, and floating on a cloud of joy or anything. It's just like, "Gil, keep your back straight. Steady. Keep straight." And I just keep doing it, coming back to that, and coming back again. Then, because I do that, at some point something kicks in. The qi, the energy in the system, the vitality kicks in – and then it's not an issue. I don't have to make any effort anymore to hold myself upright. I'm there, and then my meditation changes.

I've had that experience enough times, that I just take it as part of the process. I don't see it as a problem: "Yeah, that's what's happening now. I don't have the energy or alertness, and I keep slumping. The best thing to do now is just to practice meditation on having good posture."