

Practice Note: Selective Attention

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on November 28, 2012

This morning it might be useful to consider the fact that most people, most of the time, have selective attention. There's often an unconscious process by which we select what we're going to focus on. There are hundreds of thousands of things you could focus on in the present moment, and even more if you are paying attention to things elsewhere – at other times and places. There's a lot you can notice, and somehow the mind has choices or priorities about what it will pay attention to, what's important, what's significant.

For a variety of reasons, people will select different things out of the environment. Some of you, while sitting here, might have been quite aware of the sounds of traffic, or of the rain, and that was selected. Some of you may hardly have been aware of that at all. Perhaps your inner dialogue was the most selected area of your experience, so your mind tended to go that inner dialogue. For some of you, perhaps it was strong sensations in the body that seemed to say, "Obviously I should pay attention there." It's interesting to watch.

There's pain in the knee, and your attention is drawn there. Occasionally I've had the experience of paying attention to something like the pain in my knee, and thinking, "This is hard. How can I manage any longer?" Then after a while, I see that I haven't noticed it for some time, because I've been involved in some really juicy thought. My mind was pulled into this thought, and it seemed so important, that I completely lost track of my pain until unfortunately, I woke up from my thinking, and noticed the pain was still there.

The point is we often select out of the environment. Some people select their bodily experiences because their body takes priority. For some people it's their mental world. For others, it's their emotional or interpersonal, interrelational world. We're sitting here in a group of people. But for some of you, when you close your eyes, you completely forget that there are other people here. Others of you close your eyes, and have a more heightened awareness that there is a group you are sitting with.

We select out of the situation something to focus on, to pay attention to. To recognize and begin questioning that selection process is important: "Now I'm paying attention to this. Is this the best place for my attention? Is this the obvious place where I should be paying attention? If I am involved in consciously choosing what to pay attention to, where would I like my attention to go in the present moment? Are there more useful places to go to?" Perhaps there are. Maybe there are more meaningful or significant places to bring your attention to than where it goes by itself.

It was raining today. For me, one effect the sound and the feeling of rain is that it helps me to feel more widely aware of my body. Maybe it's the slightly different atmospheric pressure, or the sound. I don't know exactly why I feel that way. When I'm meditating and it rains, I find it helpful to drop in and open up to the experience of my body more than I usually would. It's a global feeling. "What does it feel like here?" I'm quite capable of having my attention go someplace else. But maybe those other places are not as useful as having a doorway to feel more connected to the present moment through my body. To relax and feel that global sense is nurturing, meaningful, and connecting.

Is there something in the present moment that is nurturing, meaningful, significant, or helpful that you can select out of your environment to help you *want* to be here in the present moment more fully? For different people it's different things. So, as you go through this day today, ask yourself that question.

What are you selecting on your own? What is your mind selecting to focus on? Is it required that you focus on what you happen to be focusing on? Are there more useful and meaningful things to select out of the environment? And are there things you can select that help put you more in the present moment in ways that are nurturing, nourishing, meaningful, or supportive – rather than just letting your mind go where it wants on its own?

You might reflect on this in the walking meditation. How can I be here? What can you select out of this experience that would help you present and nourished by this, rather than struggling with it? How can you relax into the present moment? What would help you relax, have ease, settle in here? What, in the wide range of experience, would help that?

It's not meant to deny what you are doing already, or push it away. I like to think of it as expanding – realizing that there's more going on than you thought. Perhaps you can take in part of that greater range in a way that's useful for you.

I hope you enjoy your morning.