

Practice Note: Impermanence and Stability

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on January 23, 2013

There is a significant interplay in practice between impermanence and stability. The tradition puts a lot of emphasis on the insight into impermanence, yet at the same time, this insight is supported by an inner sense of stability. Without some stability, it is actually impossible to really see deeply into the instability of this world. There are a variety of ways in which stability comes into the practice. One of them is through our confidence – a certain kind of healthy inner stillness within which we allow things to happen.

I am reminded of the analogy of a train. Although the train might be hurtling through the countryside at tremendous speed, you might be sitting quietly, and not even realize that the train is moving, because you might be in conversation, or reading a book. Or you could be sitting in the train at the station, and you look out the window and think that your train is moving; but, in fact, the train across the platform was the one moving. The reference point was the moving train, not the still platform. Sometimes when you are on the train, you don't realize what is going on. But if you stand on the platform, or in the countryside watching, not only do you see the speed of the train, and see what is moving, but you might also discover how long the train is. But when you are in your particular compartment, you might not really realize how long the train is.

This practice provides us a platform from which we can see the movements of our mind, and of our life, which are harder to see when we are in the middle of them. We misunderstand what goes on sometimes when we are in our own train. Sometimes we may not realize we are in a train because of the drama within the train. It is important to understand that in the practice, we are trying to find a way to not be involved in the personal dramas of our life. They're important, and are to be respected. But we are trying to provide a different vantage point from which to see them – a vantage point that has some stability or stillness.

As you practice today, you might consider if there is some way you could step off your train. Rather see that the thoughts, feelings, and concerns you may have as you practice are just trains that you are on, and you can't see very accurately if you are involved in your concerns – thinking about them, trying to solve them, fantasizing about them. But rather if you come back to your breath, back to your body, back to your steps as you do the walking, it's like taking a step out on the platform, or off the train, so that you are not so caught in it. It's helpful to see what is going on – your feelings, or the movements of the mind – from a place of stillness or stability.

If this makes some sense for you, maybe you can make it a reference point or challenge for the day.