

Dharmette: Stability and Constancy

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

In Pāli, the word for impermanence can also be translated as inconstancy or instability. In some traditional circles the emphasis on it tends to be so strong that what is overlooked is the importance of stability or constancy in our lives. I think it is important to recognize that the human heart has a great need for a certain degree of stability and constancy.

You see it in children growing up without stability in their family life: they grow up frightened, closed, angry, and troubled. Without the constancy of contact, of being seen or being heard and loved, then a child will always be looking for that when growing older. But if there is constancy and stability in the home, a child can relax.

Society does a lot better with stability. Societies that are unstable economically, socially, politically can leave individuals deeply troubled. Violence and other kinds of problems can arise in an unstable society. Social stability is also very important for people. Stability of livelihood is very important. To be insecure around one's livelihood can be one of the great challenges of a life. To have emotional stability is very important. When emotions are unstable, you don't know what is going to come hitting you one day or one hour to the next. It can be difficult to want to go out into the world if you don't know what kind of waves of grief, anger, or fear might come. So emotional stability is a very important part of human life.

An important part of Dharma practice is to find a reliable sense of stability to support our ability to meet, confront, and work with our fear of instability or impermanence, and to be able to see that aspect of our life which is inconstant, which is always in flux. For people who don't have some basic psychological stability, it can be very hard to deal with some of the insights that come out of meditation. In our tradition it is important to have insight into impermanence, but this can be very challenging for some people because that is not what their life needs to be about. If their life has so much instability to begin with, then to be told that everything is unstable makes their life even more difficult.

Traditionally in Buddhism, there is emphasis that these deeper insights come in their own time and place in a developmental model of growth. For many people it is helpful to know that meditation practice belongs to a developmental model of maturity. Different insights, understandings, and practices are relevant at different stages of a person's growth. Classically, one of the things that is important is to have some degree of psychological stability in one's practice. It's not that you have to resolve all of your psychological challenges, but there is a basic psychological stability that will be beneficial.

For example, to live by the precepts in such a way that they become a support for practice is essential. It is important to feel stable and at ease around our ethical life – not so that we avoid looking bad, or that we have to feel like we have to be a moral person, but rather to feel from the inside that our commitment to an ethical life is something that supports us. Ethical integrity supports us in that we don't feel remorse, regret, or shame. We can show up in different communities and feel a certain level of dignity and strength because we know we haven't done anything blameworthy. That kind of inner ethical stability is considered very important in this tradition.

There is also stability that comes from learning how to relate to our community and our society in healthy, useful ways. We can feel some confidence in our ability to relate to the world around us. Confidence is a kind of stability. There are several ways in which this tradition talks about cultivating confidence. One way is ethics. Another is the practice of generosity. Not necessarily meaning to give money to people, but instead having the capacity to be generous in relationships with people, and having that as a strength that supports an inner healthy life. And then there is lovingkindness practice, which also can create more stability for us. I say this as a way for you to consider that stability and constancy are very important. Just as a child might need it, your heart might need it as well.

Over many years of practice, one of the things I have found very helpful is the constancy of practice itself. To know that there was no wavering in the commitment that I would practice every day. Actually I didn't practice every day; I practiced six days a week. Initially I was trained at the Zen Center, where they always took Sundays off. I thought that was a good idea. So in my first years, when I was living and practicing alone, I meditated twice

a day for forty minutes, but I never meditated on Sunday. I don't know if every day is the best thing, but I do know that that constancy is a thread or a foundation that supports one's life. It is not required to have a happy life, but this is what I do as a basis of support.

The question I offer you is: To what degree can you be supported by stability or constancy that helps you to go further in the practice? Without that, it is often harder. I think that for some people, having a meditation center like IMC in their community provides a very important reference point. I think it is helpful for a community to have a place in the neighborhood to come back to. It is an important reference point in peoples' lives. We try to create a stable place for people here.

It is possible that by overemphasizing impermanence, our tradition does a disservice for people, because it underemphasizes the importance of stability, constancy, continuity, and commitment. Another thing I have learned is the importance of commitment in one's practice. I think I was lucky in that my first training was in Zen, because it stresses the idea of vows and commitments. When you have something you are committed to, you have the stability to follow through. It's not like I'll get around to it when I feel like it, or if it's a good day, I'll pick it up, or if it's a bad day and I'll pick it up. Or I'll get around to it eventually. Then there is no constancy in the practice.

To have a stable intention that you follow through is very important. Every person will have their own way in practice. There will be variation, but you might want to give some consideration to the role that stability or constancy might have as a foundation for any further mediation or spiritual practice you may do.