

Dharmette: Notice What is Absent

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on February 20, 2013

The teachings of mindfulness are often given with the emphasis on being present for what is happening, to notice what is happening. Giving instructions that way tends to overemphasize what is happening, as opposed to what is not happening. Sometimes in practice it is useful to notice what is not happening as well as what is happening. If you look at the instructions the Buddha gave for mindfulness practice, it included noticing both what is present and what is absent. There is learning and value in noting the absence of some things.

We can be focused a lot on our concerns. The mind can focus on one concern and then when that's finished, it moves on to the next concern. Then sometimes, by noticing that something is no longer present, we can notice what we are like when it's no longer there. We can notice what has shifted and not shifted. This is particularly true, not so much with the outer world, as with our inner world. We have certain ways of being – certain emotions and tendencies. Mindfulness practitioners might spend a lot of time paying close attention to their emotions, understanding what it is like to be present for the emotion. But then when it is gone, they just go on to the next thing. But there is information to gain from noticing when something is no longer there.

In the mindfulness teachings the Buddha gave, he said to notice the five hindrances, and notice when they are not present. So notice when there is strong desire; and when it has gone away, take some time to recognize what it is like to have that absence. If there is strong aversion, anger or ill will, certainly notice what that is like – but then notice how you are when it has passed. And do the same for the other hindrances: sloth and torpor, restlessness and regret, and doubt.

When you notice that something not there, a number of things happen then. You can explore in your mind and body what is now absent and what is present, now that the hindrance is gone. If you are consumed with anger – and if anger is a common phenomenon in your life – it might go away by accident one day, and then you can spend some time getting to know what that absence is like. You might feel that you are not so contracted, that your thoughts are not spinning so much. You recognize what is different when you're angry as opposed to when you're not angry. There's learning there. Then the next time you're angry, you have some point of comparison – not to judge yourself by, but as a highlight. Now you see the contraction, which before you could not see because of being so caught up in the anger. But now that you can see what it's like not to be contracted, you can see the contraction.

To take time to recognize, acknowledge and appreciate what it is like when we are not troubled by something anymore is a valuable part of the practice. Because things pass away with time, sooner or later, you're not going to be troubled by something anymore. Even if you get distracted, it has passed temporarily. So you can notice: "What's this like now?"

The more you can become aware of this difference, the more you'll see the benefits as well. One benefit is that in the absence of a troubling state – if that feels pleasant or enjoyable in some way – then recognizing what that's like can make it more appealing to let go of things you are troubled by or attached to. If you have some place to go that feels nice, then letting go is not letting go into nothing. It's letting go into something that feels nice, and this helps you to be not so contracted. Rather, you can let go into that nice feeling of being uncontracted. There's something attractive there. The mind will tend to go where it is more interested and where it feels nice.

Another benefit is that the more we become sensitive to seeing the contrast between states of suffering and states free of suffering, and the more we are attuned to seeing that difference between the two, then we might see we have a choice when we're holding or attached to our concerns. This is harder to see if we are just lost in our suffering. But by seeing that there is a

difference, then sometimes we can see how we are contributing to what we're holding onto – and so it's easier to let go.

Also, seeing a greater contrast leads some people to find it less interesting to suffer. Some get really interested in their suffering and become fascinated by it. There are a few people who find it very strategic to suffer. It is their way of controlling the world. I have met people who are clearly trying to take control of other people by being really good at their suffering – being victims of their suffering so the world has to accommodate them and organize around them because everything is so hard for them. So the contrast is useful.

Another helpful thing in noticing the absence of things is noticing positive states as well. Or on the other hand, you might be suffering or feeling kind of neutral, and you can ask yourself what happened to the good feeling you had earlier. That well-being you had is no longer here now. That's interesting. Or in the absence of that, what's happening now that that suffering is no longer there?

For example, I was confident this morning, and now the confidence is gone. Let me take a moment to look back and reflect on this. What happened there? Reflect, rather than just not noticing and being upset. Instead, "Now I will be present for what is. I'll be present for 'upsetness.'" That is valuable. It might also be valuable to notice the shift in the course of the morning. I was confident in the morning, and now I'm not. What is that about? What does it feel like not to be confident? What is going on for me that the confidence is no longer there? To explore it, get to know it – that might be valuable.

The idea of the absence of something being an important area of mindfulness is not equal in time with what is here, with what you're present for. But it can be useful to take some time to notice what is absent. Sometimes by noticing when something is absent, it might highlight something that you're overlooking. For example, maybe you are caught up in doing your tasks, and the confidence you felt in the morning is no longer here. You could just focus on feeling what it's like to be caught up in your tasks, or you might notice the absence of confidence and consider, "What is going on here that I don't feel so confident?" Then you might notice that you are feeling discouraged because there are so many daily life tasks you always have to do. So then you notice the discouragement in a way you hadn't before. Maybe it was a mild, small thing that then became significant.

So, from time to time, especially if something has been going on for a while – a recurrent theme or some strong state, emotion, or way of being – once it's gone, don't just rush off to the next thing. Instead, give yourself a little time to recognize the absence of that state, whether it's a pleasant or unpleasant state. Once it's gone, take some time to recognize what it's like that it's no longer there, see what you can learn from the contrast, from the absence, and what else might be useful to pay attention to in the present moment now that – whatever that might be – is no longer there.

