

Practice Note: The Intentionality of Attention

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on March 13, 2013

One of the obvious tools we use in mindfulness practice is the faculty of attention or awareness. There are many facets to awareness and attention. One is the aspect of intentionality, of having an intention to pay attention. For example, with sound, first there is the noticing of the sound; and then, in order to stay with the sound, there is a slight intention to keep the attention there. Some people say that they turn their attention toward the sound in order to take it in more fully, more receptively. Or, if you are following your breath, then there is an intention to bring your attention to your breath. Or, if you are with your breath for a while, and then there is a sensation in your body like a knee hurting, you will bring your attention to the knee. You might be aware that the knee hurts; but then you decide to focus on that knee, to have some intention to feel in a fuller, more detailed attention to that knee. But even though you're not aware of it, it's not intentional yet.

This aspect of mindfulness practice is the intentionality of attention. So you might focus a little today on the quality of that intention. Be curious to see how it works. How do you utilize it? What is the quality of that intention? Is the intention reluctant, hesitant, resentful? Do you not use any intentional aspect, but rather allow the mind to wander freely? Are you content just to be casually aware of what happens to come your way without looking at anything carefully?

When you have intention to pay attention, does that come along with baggage – extra stuff such as “I have to do a good job” or “Something is wrong and I have to fix it” or “I better look good as a good practitioner – I have to really bore down into it, and get into this thing really tight and strict”? Or “Well, it's all ok; I'll kind of get around to it”?

What is the quality of that intention to be attentive? So I offer that to you today as a topic of curiosity, hopefully of delightful interest. It's one aspect that's always going to be there, so, be curious. Don't approach this as if there is a right way and a wrong way, but more as a curious way: how is it for you? If you do that, noticing intention with attention, and you're curious to look at it with more care, then you are practicing mindfulness. You are in the present moment. And so it's a way of being engaged.