

Dharmette: Impact Versus Reaction

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on April 17, 2013

In the practice of mindfulness, it is useful to pay attention to the distinction between impact and reaction – the impact, and our response to what happens. The impact is how something affects us. Someone says something, or we hear something, or something happens to us, or we see or think something, or we experience a feeling or emotion – something occurs. And that which occurs has an impact on us – it makes a difference to us. Based on that impact, we then have a response or a reaction. Generally, the word ‘reaction’ refers to something that is more automatic, while ‘response’ is something that is more intentional or conscious.

Still, there are two things: the impact and the response. Someone might poke you in the ribs, and the impact is that it hurts (or you get tickled). The response might be to punch that person out. As far as you are concerned, those two things might happen almost simultaneously. You don’t really experience the impact – you just punch the person out.

But with mindfulness practice, it is possible to tease these two apart – so that we become aware that the impact is one thing, and the response is another. This allows us to have more choice about how we respond to a situation. When we don’t see the difference between the two, there is very little choice, and we just react. We may reflect later about why we did that.

With mindfulness practice, it is helpful to learn how to pause, and take in the experience of the *impact* – to really feel and sense the impact something has on us. This is especially useful when we don’t have to respond right away. If nothing is required immediately, there is a tremendous advantage in taking your time, not responding as quickly as you could – but rather, just take your time and pause, and hang out with the impact. Feel the impact. There might be layers and layers of impact. Then, not only will you have more choice, but also you will begin to be wiser about the nature of the reaction itself. You’ll see what is the impact, and what is the reaction.

Sometimes people assume that a certain reaction or response is the impact. An example might be that you might hate something, or be afraid of something, or love and desire something, and you might think that is the impact. This is desire or aversion. I experience this, and I hate it – and that’s the impact. But if you learn how to linger, stay with the impact, and feel it – you might learn what that impact is actually like. What you might see is that the hate, the fear, the love, the desire are all responses that are being triggered by the initial impact, which is usually fairly simple.

The impact might be that the experience is quite unpleasant. You can feel that unpleasantness. To linger with that is to linger with the unpleasantness. Just take that in. If you learn how to do that, then you might see that the hate or fear was not a reaction to the event outside, but rather was triggered by the unpleasant impact that experience had on you. If you see something really beautiful and you want or love it, what you might see is that sometimes the desire or the liking is not necessarily for the event, the thing, or the person – but rather is about the pleasant sensations of the impact on you.

It is quite amazing how often our emotional reaction is not directly connected to the events around us, but rather goes through these steps in response to the impact of our sensations – not on the event itself.

To see the difference between the impact and the reaction allows you to see how this causal chain works. To linger with the impact permits you to see the layers, the way of processing, and the unfolding of it. If you allow for it and stay with it, this is very different from immediately translating the impact into reaction.

Staying with the impact allows you to develop wisdom and process, and to deal with it and its effect on you – which is different than if you just have some reaction to it. But also, in that pause, you might also have time to reflect on what is the wise response to that impact. It might allow you to get in touch with yourself in a deep way, and to recognize that some of the responses don't come from being grounded in oneself. So, take time to get grounded, and then ask, "How would I like to respond?"

If something unpleasant happens, we might get angry. You might think the anger is from someone saying something [snaps fingers]. You might think that anger is the immediate reaction. But as mindfulness gets stronger, and you track what is going on, you see that what the person said was first experienced as something very unpleasant. Then you see that it was that unpleasantness that triggered an emotional response.

You can learn to linger with the impact – and in a wonderful way, get comfortable with feeling how unpleasant it is. Isn't that great, feeling discomfort in this way? You might have a chance to explore how you really want to respond. What's the wise way to respond to this? Is it wise to be angry? Perhaps it is – in certain circumstances like non-hostile anger. Is it wise to avoid the anger? Or is it wiser to come at this from another angle – to deal with the situation in other ways than being angry?

With the exercise of lingering with the impact, learning to stick with the impact and stay with it, you can learn to really sense and feel the impact things have on you. It could be as simple as the impact of: sounds as you sit, the sun on your skin as you go from the shade into the sun, or what it's like to breathe in meditation. What is the impact like to have tense, shallow breathing when you first sit down? Rather than rushing to the judgments or reactions about that, e.g.: "I should have a different kind of breath. This is terrible. I'm a hopeless meditator" – the training is how you are impacted by this kind of breath.

What is the impact? The breath is shallow when you first sit down, and you notice that you are being impacted by having a particular kind of breath. What is that impact? You might have a deep pleasant breath, and think you are the best meditator on Birch Street. Rather than rush to the conclusion, hang out there, and note what the impact is with that long pleasant breath reverberating through the system. Take time to allow yourself to feel the impact, the reverberation.

This is a very important foundation in mindfulness practice for living wisely. It's one of the reasons that pausing – taking time to feel and savor what is going on – can be very helpful as we go through our lives.

It is quite remarkable all you can discover in your response to this very simple question: "Is it pleasant or unpleasant?" It is humbling for some of us to realize how much of our life is being triggered by reactions to the pleasantness or unpleasantness of the impact, rather than the great sophisticated nature of what we think it's all about.

So learn to stay and notice the simple feeling tone – is it pleasant or unpleasant? Learn how to be comfortable with that. To be open and receptive to feeling it can give lots of insight into your life. Impact and response: two separate things.

I hope that had a good impact on you.