

Dharmette: Q&A – Habits, Anxiety, Mental Decline

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdaal on May 1, 2013

My preference or intuition is to try to respond to some of the questions you might have. If you don't have any questions, then we will figure out something else for these fifteen minutes. What is on your minds about practice?

Participant 1: I am looking at some circumstances, things I need to do. I am thinking about how I feel about them, and why I feel that way. I have habits about them, and I think the habits are who I am. I need to go to New York next week to take care of some things, but there are other issues around it. I am comfortable enough now with ignoring the habits, or breaking the habits. I am not exactly sure what I am trying to ask here. I sort of know what I want to do, and think is the right thing to do. There is some discomfort. There are some fears, but they aren't really as strong as they might have been a year ago. I don't know if I can tease a question out of this.

Gil: What is the question?

Participant 1: I guess to make it a question, I can say that I don't want to just react, and say that this is a habit I am going to do one way or the opposite way. I want to do this skillfully, and am looking for the means, or how to place myself in the circumstances.

Gil: I can appreciate this. One of the great supports is always to be honest. So to be honest to yourself as best as you can be. To other people around you, you can be honest and say, "I have this habit; I have this reaction; I have this response around certain things, and the pressure is building up. This is what is happening again." Just lay it out on the table for yourself. The more fully you can acknowledge it to yourself, the better. Write it down in a journal in big letters. It's happening – just describe it. There is something very powerful about being honest. If other people are involved in the whole scene, and you trust them enough, tell them know what is happening for you. Sometimes that kind of honesty shifts your relationship to it, and gives you clarity about what is going on. That is one thing.

Another thing that occurs to me is that meditation practice is very helpful and important. One of the functions of meditation practice is to be the place where you put down your habits fully and thoroughly. Then you have a reference point for what it is like not to have the habit active. The more fully you can put down your habits in meditation, like thinking and reacting in this way, the more this will highlight how it is when you are stuck in the habit.

Then you can begin to have more choice. Even more, you can come to zero in meditation. The more you can become simple in meditation, the more you can just be. You have to let go of a lot, and so the muscle of letting go becomes stronger. Then when you come up against real life situations where habits kick in, you have more ability to let go, and that's what is called for.

Those are my answers to the question.

Participant 2: Speaking to this question, I find that if I try to go against the stream – my habits are more obsessive-compulsive than anything, so I try not to dot those i's and cross those t's, and be less impulsive. This brings up some anxiety. When I am meditating, if I can relive that in this very relaxed situation, it helps.

Gil: It helps to relieve the anxiety?

Participant 2: Yeah – provoke it by imagining a situation.

Gil: So when you provoke the anxiety, but don't act compulsively, how does evoking that anxiety benefit you?

Participant 2: Doing it in a relaxed situation is sort of like desensitizing a phobia.

Gil: Ah, great. So, later when out in life again, the anxiety might come up, but you are familiar with it, less likely to be tripped up by it.

Participant 2: Yeah, this is sort of a relaxation response.

Gil: So rather than taking the habit as a given, you are looking behind the habit, behind the conditioning to see the emotions and feelings that might be the soil out of which it grows. Then you are bringing your attention to that, settling something, and deconditioning yourself. Great. Lovely.

Participant 3: I think my question may dovetail onto this a little. In terms of being aware of my habits, I am pretty good if the stakes aren't too high, but when the stakes become high, the anxiety kicks in, and then I want to control things. So those seem to be the places to look at and let go.

Gil: So you are saying that when the stakes are high, there's more anxiety and the habits kick in more. And when the stakes are higher, the anxiety is higher, and those are the important places to bring into your practice. Perfect. Yes!

Participant 3: How do you do that? [laughter]

Gil: How do you do it? Here is a little mantra that you could say to yourself, and see what that stirs up or highlights. The mantra is: "When there is a lot at stake, repeat to yourself a few times: "There is nothing at stake."" See what happens. Is there protest? What do you mean there is nothing at stake? There is a lot at stake. Well, what is really at stake? What is behind the stake? Listen to your protests, your arguments, and say it again, "There is nothing at stake." What is the wisdom of that stake? There might be things at stake, but maybe that is only one side of the coin. Maybe there's another side of the coin – the nothing-at-stake side. So try that mantra. See what it does for you. Look for situations where there is a lot at stake so you can use the mantra.

Participant 1: I just started a book study group this week. The book is titled *I Am That*. One of the mantras the author uses that seemed to bring him to some level of liberation is "I am not that." When looking at everything – my habits, my perceptions, the traffic, whatever it is – instead of responding in the usual way, you just acknowledge, "Okay, I am not really that traffic. I'm really not this conflict (or whatever it is that might be coming up)." I am working with that. It is kind of a comforting thing to hold onto, going about the day.

Gil: Beautiful, a lovely thing.

Participant 4: I have a practical question I want to ask your advice on. I have a grandfather who is having some safety challenges driving. He lives in a state where legally he is allowed to drive until the age of 100. So I am the person in the family responsible for having some kind of compassionate conversation with him about our concerns. I am afraid I might come across too strong, and end up hurting his feelings. I just want to ask your advice.

Gil: So you are the grandchild? His kids are no longer alive?

Participant 4: Actually they are alive, but they have had their own difficulties in having this conversation. My grandfather hit a cyclist. Fortunately, no one was hurt, but my grandfather wasn't aware, and did not choose to stop. It feels like I need to be a bit more stern now.

Gil: If he continued after hitting a cyclist, then it is very serious. In most states it is hit-and-run. Wouldn't the police or the court system get interested in an old man's mental state? Can you talk to the police? They might have an important role.

A relative of mine needed to stop driving, and it was a doctor who said what had to happen. A doctor can give written orders through the court or the DMV. There may be other, non-family ways of doing this. Some people are eager to offer ideas after it is over.

In terms of how to have that conversation, I had a conversation like this with a family member recently. The person agreed, but didn't believe it was necessary. He kept saying, "I am only doing it for you." It takes a lot of skill to have these conversations. You have to know the person well: what is effective with them, what is meaningful. Then make the point in a caring, compassionate way, but also a way that is clear. I wish you luck with that. It is not easy.