

Dharmette: Past and Future in Buddhist Practice

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on March 4, 2015

When many people encounter Buddhism here in the west, they often pick up a few simple thoughts or ideas and think that that's the whole thing. For example, they might think we are supposed to be mindful in the present moment – and that's all you are allowed to do, with no concern whatsoever about the past or the future. Just be present.

Some people might hear the idea that we are supposed to let go of attachments, of clinging. They think that's all they are supposed to do – let go. They hear this wonderful Buddhist word: attachment. In Buddhist English, attachment is bad. Heaven forbid. But that's the local idiom of Buddhist culture. It's a synonym for clinging, grasping, addiction, things like that. But in popular English, attachment has other meanings. So then people think: well, I'm not supposed to be attached. I'll just ignore my kid.

If you ever hear yourself reducing Buddhism to one simple little sound bite, and you think that's all it is, and in so doing you find yourself turning away or closing the door to what's going on in part of your life, watch out! It will probably come back and bite you.

As some of you know, over the last thirty years or so the word mindfulness has become more and more popular in English. You could probably do a graph: uses of "mindfulness" in popular American culture. It has probably gone up dramatically. I don't know if it's exponential growth, but it's certainly growing fast. It used to be that mindfulness was strongly connected to Buddhism. But now Buddhism has been left in the dust with the use of that word. It's been adopted. There's even a member of the U.S. Congress who has written a book on mindfulness.

But this emphasis on mindfulness, as wonderful as it is, also can be reductionistic. It leaves out that Buddhism is actually meant encompass our whole life – to include everything as part of it, to practice with. How do you practice? How do you include everything? Not to reduce it to just one simple thing – to just be mindful. I feel bad sometimes when people listen to me for a long time, and they think all they are allowed to do is to be mindful of their experience. To think that sums it all up. Mindfulness is great. But to limit it to that ...

This thing about being in the present moment, I've seen that also in Buddhist America. That the present moment sometimes is held up as the god of the Buddhist world. As though this is the ultimate – the most sacred – just now. Everything is going to be okay if you can just be here and now.

Traditionally in Buddhism, your past is important, and your future is important. And if you don't take your past or your future into account in a healthy way, you leave out a big part of who you really are, what your situation is all about. When you meditate, you want to be in the present moment – but also to have some way of including the past, but not to be caught up in the past. In a bigger way of encompassing our lives, we want to take into account where we come from: our backgrounds, where our ancestors come from, the whole picture of conditioning, and causes and effects that brought us to where we are now.

We also need some sense of the imaginary future. The future is always a prediction, always an imagination. But to take it into account can be valuable. To think ahead, plan ahead, imagine – is part of our life. I am beginning to imagine trying to visualize when I am going to have time to do my taxes. I better spend a little bit of time thinking ahead, because April 15th is going to show up and that's going to be the present moment. That's going to be a very full one if I don't plan ahead. So, past and future are important parts of an overall wise life.

I want to talk a little bit about the past and the future in a particular way. One of the roles of the past in Buddhist practice is to focus on our past so we can learn from it how to go into the future. In terms of the past and the future, the emphasis in Buddhist practice is on the future – looking ahead – how you can do better – how you can practice – how you can improve yourself, or improve this world. Buddhism tends to be forward looking, but you don't want to ignore the past. You want to learn from the past.

For example, some of you might have regrets or struggles about what happened in the past. It might be a

burden for you. You might be held down by that, preoccupied with it. If you've made mistakes in the past, the idea is not to ignore them, but to learn from them. Not to be burdened by them, but to see how you can do better in the future. When you see how you can do better in the future, you can be inspired by that, or hopeful, or positive. "Yes! I'm going to try to do better." Rather than, "Oh no. What did I do yesterday? Oh no. What a terrible person I am. There's no hope."

Rather than being pulled down by the past, look at it just enough to get some idea of how you can do better. Then be inspired by the possibility of doing better. "I'll do better this afternoon. Now I know what I can try to do. Now I know what the practice is. I might not be able to do better. But I know what I want to do. I want to try. I'm going to try to be kinder to my neighbors. I'm going to try to be a little bit kinder to myself. I'm going to try to be more present in those difficult situations where I lose my mindfulness." We can be inspired by the possibility of this kind of growth in the Dharma.

So we look at the past to learn from the past, not to be weighed down by it. We look to the future, not to be afraid of it, or caught up in desires about it, but rather, to have a vision of what's possible, and to be inspired to act on that – to be different; to live differently; to make a difference in the world for ourselves and for others.

The junction between the past and the future is the present. The present has a very important role in our lives. That is really where our lives occur. What is in the past is no longer occurring. What is in the future hasn't occurred yet. Here is where it really occurs. This is where you can make a difference.

You can make a difference here and now by having a vision, an intention, a sense of being inspired by what's possible. Without that possibility of being inspired by what's possible – if all we have is just about being present and having no desires – that's a great way of becoming depressed.

So, those are my thoughts.