

Practice Note: Surfing

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on July 6, 2016

An interesting image for being mindful is that of surfing. Sometimes swimming in the ocean, being in the water is great – comfortable, nice, wonderful. Sometimes it is not – it's cold, or there are dangerous things waiting for you under the surface. But if you're up on a surfboard, then you can stay dry and warm and safe. And if you're a good surfer and you catch a wave, you're definitely intimate with the wave and the ocean. You're connected, present and fully there, but you're also not in the water. You're out of the water, but really intimate, involved and very attentive. And you're balanced. But if you're not paying attention, you'll probably fall in.

In the same way, with mindfulness, we're surfing on our experience, and this becomes particularly poignant when we have strong reactions to what is happening around us. There may be challenging things happening, and we have a lot of thoughts and emotions that come up. Generally, when that happens, human beings fall into the water – meaning that we somehow get involved or in the midst of the emotions we have or the thoughts we have, and we're swimming in them. We're in the water, and it washes over us. Sometimes, if you're in the soup of your stuff, and the wave breaks over you, you get drenched. You have to wait a while before that wave passes, and then you can surface again.

But the idea is to be mindful that you're surfing on your experience. You're not avoiding it – there's still an intimacy and connectedness to it, an attunement to what's happening. But you're not in the soup; you're not in the water. Your awareness, your powers of observation, your powers of interest and curiosity are strong enough that you're not in the experience, but you're clearly seeing it and are present, and in that clear awareness, if you're really cruising or able to be more continuous with the experience of being present for what's happening, present for the strong emotions that are coming, present for seeing the mind spinning in thoughts. But to really see it, to be really cognizant of it, awake to the fact that it is happening, like, "Yeah, I'm filled with anger, despair," or whatever it might be. "I have these thoughts spinning and pulling me around" – to see it really clearly, and then to surf on it. You can't push the waves away or stop them, but you can ride the wave. And it can be quite sweet, quite wonderful, when you're able to pull yourself out of the water, out of your soup enough that the awareness is there, but you're riding on it; you're cruising or surfing.

What's nice about this surfing analogy is that, as far as I can tell, it's very, very rare that a surfer doesn't end up falling back into the water. Maybe there's some way of surfing right up to the dock and jumping off, or surfing right up to the really shallow part to jump onto the land. Maybe that happens occasionally, but I don't know if I've ever seen that. Surfers sooner or later fall in. So, sooner or later, you'll probably fall back in. and that's normal. I don't think surfers complain too much about falling back into the water. That's where they live. That's part of the deal. But then they get back on; they get back on the surfboard.

And so you'll fall in. But get back on the mindful board, and paddle to get enough momentum going, and then catch the wave. Then you'll probably have fun.

Thank you.