

Dharmette: Responding from the Heart

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on January 4, 2017

This morning I mentioned that it's possible to practice mindfulness as a technique from the control tower, where you're the agent who's applying mindfulness on your life. Or it's possible to practice it from the inside out, where you let the awareness – the mindfulness – emerge. Mostly what we have to do is to be present and get out of the way. We get out of the way for awareness to operate.

The human being – the human mind, the mentality, the heart – is very powerful. It has tremendous capacities to operate if you leave it alone. Some practice could be understood as learning to get out of your own way. Really letting go of the distractions, letting go of preoccupations to allow some deeper thing to operate. One of those deeper things is awareness itself – mindfulness itself. Where it emerges, rather than something that you do.

I said earlier that “to be alive is to be mindful.” When someone says they don't want to be mindful, to me it's similar to saying, “I don't want to be alive.” The two are completely connected. In a similar way, I could say the same thing about love. Love – in terms of *mettā*, loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic, appreciative joy, equanimity – the *brahmavihāras* – these are also part of this powerful capacity of our human inner life – the heart, the mind – that wants to operate, and wants to be there if you give it a chance.

If you can get out of the way enough, I think that awareness will just be there. Something like love will be there as well. You may not be able to predict the exact form it takes. To say “I'm going to be loving,” and do it from the control tower as a technique, as a thing you're supposed to do, might be ok. But I still remember this one time in college, where I was going to be really loving and kind to this woman in the library. So I talked to her, and I think she probably was disgusted. Afterwards, I thought, “Wow, that was pretty saccharine, or forced.”

It's possible to be in the control tower and overdo it. Perhaps sometimes some of you have felt oppressed by people's kindness coming in that way. It's also possible to mostly get out of the way of the heart's resonance – the heart's ability to have empathy – and to see what arises from that. In different situations, there might be very different flavors or aspects of love that might come. This idea is to get out of the way, and respect and see what arises in different circumstances. I think this is quite powerful – as opposed to having preconceived ideas of how it should be, how it's supposed to be. There's nothing necessarily wrong with having ideas – it doesn't have to be as bad as me in the library – but sometimes it can be quite inspiring to think, “Oh, this is what I want to do here,” and then apply it.

The thing that most people don't appreciate enough is how the practice can support us in getting out of the way. How we can learn to drop the distractions, the preoccupations? Drop the busyness of the mind, the need to be in the control tower that makes things happen, and that judges, compares, measures ourselves, tries to prove ourselves, and defend ourselves? All this stuff we do that covers over these wonderful, quite beautiful and profound capacities deep down inside of us.

As we start this new year, I would like to suggest that a wonderful capacity that we all have is to love. To be able to meet each other, and walk through the world with other people, and see them with our kindness, our sense of mutual support, knowing we're in this life together. It's a hard life. For many, many people, it's difficult to be in this life. There are so many challenges. Everyone is going to be challenged sooner or later, if they haven't been already. There are going to be major challenges that come along. People know that they're going to die, they're going to be sick. If you could meet people in some of the challenges they're up against, and if you don't cover over your response with fear or distress or responsibility for it, I think it would melt your heart. In that melting, your love, your kindness, your compassion, your care would pour forth.

The same thing goes for ourselves. As we go through our life, there are all kinds of challenges. Chances are relatively high that all of us are going to run into some kind of challenge this coming year. How do we get out of the way of the heart's response? Can we somehow discover where the heart's deepest response can unfold and arise? Can we be responsive to whatever the challenge might be? Chances are that what will come out of that will be love, compassion, kindness, support. Something like that.

Just as mindfulness, or awareness, is a natural capacity that will flow out of you if you get out of the way, so will love. Maybe there's no real sharp difference between being aware and being loving or having love. Maybe the two are inseparable. Two sides of the same hand. I kind of feel that way. I don't really see a sharp division between awareness and love in all its different forms. Except maybe for romantic love, which is a bit more complicated. We use the word 'love' in so many ways in English, but the *brahmavihāras* are such a beautiful thing.

If you are interested in love and what are called the *brahmavihāras* – the four divine abodes in Buddhism – if you're interested in this capacity of your heart, it's a wonderful thing to make love a theme for your life, and to read about it, learn about it, touch into it, explore it, talk to friends about it. Learn from yourself.

- What have you learned about love over your lifetime to date?
- What is your relationship to it, and how can you touch into it?
- How does it work for you?
- Are you interested in it?
- Does it have any value for you?
- Does it have more value than some of the alternatives that you give yourself over to?
- Do you have more confidence in love?
- Or do you have more confidence in greed, hate, fear, or...food? [laughter] That touched a nerve!

Reflect on it, and live with it. It's a beautiful thing, a worthwhile thing. To have that somehow interwoven into our practice of mindfulness makes the mindfulness practice so much richer and more alive and, I think, more realistic.

May it be that this year your awareness and your love are inseparable from each other. They go together.