

Dharmette: Receptive to Details

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on January 11, 2017

In Zen practice, there's a little saying used to describe the practice: "attention to detail." A lot of Zen practice is about paying attention to the details of the moment or of the situation. What I have in mind in bringing this up is that people's involvement in Buddhism, or maybe Buddhism itself, has all kinds of problems. One problem is that Buddhism is one of the world's great religions, and it's easy to have these *big* ideas about what it's all about: enlightenment, compassion for the world, saving the world – all kinds of wonderful ideals and big things. In the process of having these big ideas, you miss the details. You miss the moment that you're in; you don't see what's here. You push people aside as you're eager to save the world. "There are people in my way!"

Sometimes people also come to Buddhism with significant challenges in their lives. But the challenges are so big that it also encourages looking at the big picture, which is so huge, like a mountain that has to be moved. When you do this, you don't look at the details – this moment here. It can certainly be valuable to look at the big picture and big ideals, but often we miss something. We miss the moment. We miss the details of how we're living here and now. In many ways, it's the small details that are the building blocks for our 'big' life. The small details make a big difference over time. So spend time caring about the details.

When I was a Zen practitioner, I was deeply moved by some of the other practitioners I knew. Not by the fact that they were enlightened or anything big that had happened to them, but by the way they picked up a teacup. Wow – they were so present, so 'there,' with so little self-conscious 'selfing' going on. Just a teacup. Did I come to Zen to learn how to drink tea? I came for big, important reasons. Zen is a big, important religion. It has grand ideas and ideals. If someone had said, "Go to Zen and learn how to drink tea," I probably wouldn't have gone. But I was so inspired by seeing how someone picked up a teacup or walked across the temple courtyard. Just how they walked. I'd never seen anyone just walk without trying to get someplace, or without any other ulterior ideas or purposes. They just walked. Even in walking meditation you're doing something, but this person was just walking. Not to go someplace, but just there. I thought, "Wow, that's pretty impressive."

It's not just Zen. A famous American Catholic monk by the name of Thomas Merton spent years living in a monastery. Once someone asked him, "What have you learned in all your years in the monastery?" He was one of the great teachers in the 20th century in America, a very important person. What did he learn? He wrote books – lots of books. What did he learn that was so important? He said, "I learned how to open and close doors." Someone might say, "What?! I'm involved in Christianity, or Buddhism, and there're big things to do. There's communion with God; there's enlightenment; there're all these big things. I mean, 'Doors?' That seems pretty ridiculous."

How many people would go to a one-day retreat here at IMC on how to open and close doors? All day it's going to be about that. I don't know if people would come. I might be alone teaching it. But if I held a workshop on the Buddhist idea of enlightenment, it would be packed. But none of those people would be learning how to open and close doors.

Attention to detail actually makes a difference – how you encounter the door. Are you there for it? Are you present for it? Is the door just something that's in the way of important things, and you just want to get by it? Doors don't count for anything. They're not valuable or don't have any role in your life. There's no sense of self to acquire from a door. The door's not going to show you how great you are, or explain to you how it's just a delusion to be caught up in ideas of greatness. The door's not going to humble you – it's just there. But can you learn from the door? Can you really be there for the door – for this activity? Attention to detail.

And if we do that throughout the day, and really show up for our life, for what's actually happening, we're going to spend less time in fantasy. Less time in abstractions. We're going to be present to see the genesis of our reactions, responses, and thoughts. Present for how we're living our life.

If you're really there for that door as you open it and when you step through it, you might be so present that you notice your response and reaction to what's on the other side. Because you see the response and reaction, you have some choice of what to do – whether to act on it or not. Someone might be on the other side of that door,

and your first response is fear. You realize that you're often afraid of people, but you see the fear arise because you're really there for the door and there for the fear. You say, "Oh, that's interesting. I don't think I need to go down that path of fear. I'm afraid, but usually I get swept away into it and then I cower. I sneak away before anybody sees me. But now I see the fear and I have a choice of how to be with it." That's attention to detail.

The other thing I think we all do – I've certainly done it – is to look at the big picture for big solutions. "I have a big problem, and I need to find a solution to this big problem." That's reasonable. It's reasonable to find solutions to our difficulties and challenges. But sometimes by looking for the big solutions, we miss the attention to detail of this moment here. In this moment, you might actually notice that you're stressed, that your shoulders are tense. But paying attention to detail, you could say, "I still have a big problem, but I can relax my shoulders." Or you might say, "No, I can't. My big problem is so important. It's more important than my shoulders. Don't tell me about my shoulders. What I have to do is so important." Why can't you look for the important solutions for your life with relaxed shoulders? By the end of the day, you might not have a solution. Are you better off going through the day with relaxed shoulders or tense shoulders? If you know that by the end of the day you're not going to have the answer, maybe you'd be more willing to go through the day with relaxed shoulders. You're still trying to solve the problem. Unless you think tense shoulders are going to make it more likely that you'll figure it all out. Maybe there are some things you will never solve. But would you rather solve them with tense shoulders or relaxed shoulders? With a tense belly or a relaxed belly? Would you rather not solve them while being present for the door? For the tea? For your friend? For this life? Or would you rather not solve your problems while not being present for all of these things?

There's something very powerful about attention to detail. Attending to it, being careful with it. For the purposes of the practice we teach here, it's good to pay attention to the details of how you tense up. How you contract or tighten up. Notice it. Pay attention to detail. Don't be mesmerized by the 'big' Buddhism, the big problems, the big things, to the extent that you're overlooking the little details of tension, holding, and contraction.

If you pay attention to your distractions, they create the foundation – they're the building blocks to actually create better conditions for yourself, so that you're in a better, more useful place to address the big issues of your life or the big issues of Buddhism. Whatever issue it may be, paying attention to detail creates the conditions for solving it. If you have big issues in your life, big challenges, or big dreams about what the Buddhist practice is going to do for you, ideally you want to make yourself into a person who is changeable. You want to be willing to be changed. Spirituality – Buddhism – is not about understanding everything so everyone else changes or behaves properly around you. In the process of practice, we have to be willing to be changed by the solutions that come along. There has to be a shift. It's not just a matter of understanding something and then everything will fall into place.

How do you create the conditions so that you are able to be changed by the solutions that come? It turns out attention to detail is helpful. As you go through your life, you stay relaxed, open, present, and you're really here – because who knows? You might have really big problems – huge challenges of life and death. You might have really big spiritual concerns, a dark night of the soul, where it's really time for something to happen. And, lo and behold, it's possible that the solutions could be given to you tomorrow: the perfect solution on a silver platter. It's going to make everything else in your life fall into place. It's there – maybe tomorrow – waiting for you.

But, you're too busy being tense, running around, too distracted to notice it. And you miss it because you haven't learned how to be really present, in the moment, for this time, this detail, here and now. We never know what gift is waiting for us, but it really helps to have the kind of presence and attention where you're there in the moment. You're receptive, ready, and you can receive it, take it in, and notice it. Who knows? If you pay attention to the door as you open and close it, it might be written there. Or it might be written on your heart as you open and close the door. Attention to detail.

One of the ways we'll do that here at IMC is by cleaning the place. Attention to detail. So, for those of you who can stay, it's very much appreciated.