

Dharmette: Working with I-dent-ification

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on March 29, 2017

I want to talk today about identification. But first I'll ask you for your patience, because sometimes my mind likes to do funny things with words. So, when I look at the word 'identity,' I see the 'I-dent' [laughter] – as though we're whole to begin with, but then we get dented. We get dented with the 'I.' And the idea is to go back to being whole, rather than focusing only on the dent. As if the dent were the whole thing – as if we *are* the dent.

So we 'i-dent-ify.' We dent ourselves with ideas of our roles, of who we should be, of how we're supposed to be. We can dent ourselves with almost kind of an idea. If you say, 'I am X,' and you fill in the blank, chances are that you are denting yourself. It's not automatic – it's not required – to dent yourself. There are innocent ways of saying "I am" something, but there is often a preoccupation with the dent, with the hole that's made in the whole – the gap or dent.

One difficulty with identification is when it causes suffering. We take the identity as the whole, rather than just a dent in the whole. If we see ourselves as whole, as complete, then any of the things we would normally identify with can be seen as *part* of the whole, but not the whole. In this play on words, if we see it as complete, as the whole, inevitably we end up dropping the 'w' so that we're in this hole. We fall into the hole, as opposed to being the whole. I think they're pronounced the same way in English, aren't they? My poor English!

It's fine to have emotions and feelings. It's fine to have roles. It's fine to be a person in all the different ways we can be a person. But what happens when we dent ourselves with it – when we make a hole that we fall into, as opposed to seeing it as a part of the whole?

In our society it's very sad when other people do the identification for you, and we go round denting each other. We see someone as their role, or as some aspect of who they are, and we hold them to being that role: "That's the kind of person they are." And we limit them that way.

Sometimes we live under the struggle of how other people have dented us – made us less than we are. Some people don't have a strong experience of what it's like to be whole because no one saw them that way when they were growing up. They were always seen in a particular way, like being the role of a family member – to always be a son, or a daughter, or a parent in people's eyes. These certainly are roles that are relevant, but if we *only* see a person that way, if we're only seen that way, then we're limited. We're not being seen as whole, as complete. We need to be careful of the ways in which we human beings latch onto ideas, roles, feelings, thoughts, the body, ways our bodies are, and then "who I am." The way we are becomes a dent. Then we have fallen into the hole. The dent is made, and causes a tremendous amount of suffering.

In a sense, part of the task in moving towards freedom is to become whole again. That means that we don't have to reject anything. We don't have to push any of the dents away.

As you know, there are car body shops where they fix the dents in cars, but sometimes it's not even that interesting to fix the dents. In our society one of the things people identify with too much is perfectionism – that you're only going to be a good person if you're 'dentless' – if you're completely without flaws, problems, or difficulties. I don't think that's so helpful.

How can we be whole? How can we see the complete picture in some way – in a way that we're also accepting the dents, the challenges, and the difficulties we have? Being identified with needing to be perfect is to make a big dent. In fact, that's probably the dent that you'll never undo [laughter].

Here, mindfulness, awareness practice, can be helpful. There is something powerful about so clearly noticing, recognizing, how we're identified with something. When we notice it so clearly, so fully, we can see it from some part of ourselves that's bigger than the place of identification.

Some people identify strongly with an aspect of themselves. I've known people who identify with psychological attitudes and feel incapable of doing many things. Right now I'm reading a book called *Hillbilly Elegy*. Some of

you may have read it. The author talks about how he grew up with a certain self-image. In his case, that only changed when he went into the military, where he discovered how capable he was. It turns out that he's smart, but he grew up thinking that he's not really capable of managing on his own. He was taught this strong identity by his close family and culture. But then he learned to step away from that identity. He was bigger than that; he was capable.

There's something about the clear recognition of mindfulness that pulls us out of the mud. It pulls us out of where we're stuck, and the fact that we can see it makes a huge difference. The task is: how do we see it fully, completely, so that we're not in the dent, not caught in it anymore? Part of the art and the work of mindfulness is not just to be mindful and say, "Oh, I recognize that it's there." You can recognize that something's there, but still be mired in it, still be caught up in it. Just because you're mindful doesn't mean that you're not caught. But what it does mean is that you can use the power of attention and recognition to see it so strongly and fully that you're recognizing from some place inside that is not identifying with what you're caught in. That can be very liberating, very helpful.

For people who use mental noting, one way to do it, which is a little bit ridiculous – the word play on I-dent is perhaps ridiculous – is to say your mental notes about what's happening really loudly. Maybe you can even add some wonderful expressions. For example, if you're really identified with your anger, don't just say, "anger, I'm angry, I'm angry, angry." You can use colorful words, "I AM ^%\$%^ ANGRY! Boy oh boy! [laughter] I'm colorfully angry [laughter]. There is a lot of color today. Boy! This is quite something! I wonder if there's anyone as angry as me today? I really have it going. This is amazing! This is like looking into the Grand Canyon. It's a wonder of nature to look at me being so angry!" You can talk to yourself in such a way that after a while you're not quite in it, not caught anymore. By doing that kind of self-talk – admitting to yourself so strongly that you're angry in all kinds of creative ways – your thoughts are no longer hijacked by your identification with the anger. You'll know that you've succeeded if you smile – if there's a little glimmer, a little crack of light, a smile: "This is ridiculous!"

The idea is to become independent of what you identify with. To step back, but not to push it away. Not to have it go away, but rather you realize that you're much more than that. There's something more going on. We're not 'it.' 'It' is a part of us, but we're something else.

Another really powerful thing to do – for those who can do it – is to drop into the body and really feel physically what it's like to identify with what's going on. Some people find that if they drop into the physicality of the experience, it's harder to identify with those thought-stories, which are the glue for identification. There's something very simple about direct bodily experience and feeling. The more fully we can enter into and *feel* what's happening physically, the more removed we are from the glue that keeps us bound to it. But part of the cost of that is to really feel fully what's there, which can be tricky too.

In addition to mental noting, self-talk, and feeling it in the body, finding ways to get calm is another fantastic way to realize that there's more going on than what we're identified with. Part of Buddhist wisdom comes from developing calm and settledness in meditation. This field of calmness or well-being shows us that there's a lot more going on than the tight, narrow world of what we're caught in and identifying with. So try to have some modicum of calm, and then look at what's going on for you. Look at your identifications from the perspective of calm. Being calm helps us realize that there's more to the whole picture.

The good news, I think, is that all of us are greater and more wonderful than anything we identify with. And if you identify with being whole, I can reassure you that's just one more dent. You're greater and more wonderful than any identity you build around the whole, because, with awareness, you can always step away from it and see it as well. With awareness, you can always step back and see the bigger picture. There's always more than any definition you may have of what it is. And to be able to rest in a place of no definition, no identity, is phenomenally healing and helpful.

So don't fall into your dents.