

# Calmness (5 of 5) The Calm Beyond Conflict

December 10, 2021

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

peace, reactivity, candle flame

**Gil Fronsdal**

In this fifth and last talk on calmness, I'd like to talk about the calmness of peace. The Buddha sometimes used the word "peace" to refer to the goal of Buddhist practice – peacefulness, finding peace, and being at peace in a deep embodied way.

Another perspective or way of looking at the calmness of peace is that it is learning how not to be in conflict with reality. But in Buddhist practice, the way we do that is not to accept everything or go along with how things are. In fact, I hope that Buddhists are not that removed from taking care of the things that need to be cared for in this world.

But peace involves not being in conflict. I think of it this way: our presence – the way that we are attentive, the way that we are aware, and the way the mind is – is not caught in the grip of conflict. The awareness is not shut down. The awareness is not carrying along the baggage of resistance, anger, judgments, or blame. We learn how to receive what is happening without reactivity.

Receiving experience without reactivity does not mean we agree with it or that we accept that it's there. It just means that we meet it without any habitual kind of reactivity of aversion, greed, fear, or something like that. Instead, we meet experience in the calmness of our mind, the openness of our mind, or the receptivity of our mind, so that we're not caught in it, and we're not agitated by it.

If the situation calls upon us to be reflective about experience, to think about it, or to respond to it in some way, because of this non-reactive way of receiving it, experience hopefully gets processed through our wisdom. Then some creative thinking, engagement, and reflection are available to us. More importantly, we can maybe be in touch with some of the best qualities within us when we want to respond. We can stay in touch with our peace and our calm. We can stay in touch with our generosity, our care, our love, or our wisdom. We can stay in touch with some of the deeper values we have that easily get overridden when we're reactive.

If we are really reactive, we can lose touch with a lot of our values and our goodness. The sense of urgency that reactivity comes with will often push aside any interest in staying grounded in ourselves, or in coming back to a deeper connectivity that we have, which we might feel sometimes in meditation. In meditation, that connectedness feels so right, like a home that we come to – this is the place to be. But we sacrifice that because of our reactivity.

So Buddhist practice does involve becoming wise about our reactivity – wise about how we contract, how we constrict, how we resist, how we close down, how we pull away, how we attack, and how we spin out in our thoughts and our concerns. Of course, doing these things is so deeply in our psyche that we can't expect it to stop overnight or quickly. But with mindfulness, we can start to recognize that we are doing it, and recognize that we are in conflict with what is going on. We are struggling with what is going on. We are distressed in some way by what is going on.

Perhaps it is not necessary to be distressed – to have that stress, to be so bothered. It means that we are somehow in conflict with reality. But we can allow our receptivity – the way we receive, are present, take in, and register what's happening – to not be in conflict with anything. That receptivity is willing to receive even terrible things. (I don't mean violence against us.) Our receptivity is willing to receive news and information, whatever people say, spaciously. Then hopefully, we can respond wisely. We can respond from that peaceful place.

I hope that peaceful place is a powerful place. We can respond from a place of strength. Non-reactivity is a powerful vantage point from which to talk to and respond to people, because sometimes people can feel that they have lost their influence on us by being angry or manipulative. There are all kinds of ways that people, maybe unconsciously, try to manipulate us. They want us to be reactive. They want to make us afraid, or they want to make us desirous.

But we can hold our ground peacefully, calmly, with lots of care, love, and friendliness, but without playing the games, or being caught in the games people are playing, or the usual way conflicts go, or the usual reactivity in which we bounce off each other. That is a very powerful place to stand because people have less influence on us. We take our own power back that way. From that place, we can say no. From that place, we can say yes. From that place, we can say, "I'll think about it." From that place, we can say, "You know, I think we need to talk about what's going on." We can respond, but because we're not reactive, people tend to also hear us better. It's a little bit harder for them to be reactive when we're not reactive in our strong response to the situation.

This is all a way of saying that it is possible to trust peace. It's possible to trust calmness, if that calm and peace connect us to a deeper place of non-reactivity and teach us how to have a receptive awareness, so our awareness is not in conflict with anything. Our receptivity – our capacity to recognize and to be present for things – is not reactive. With non-conflict, because we trust the peaceful place, we can trust we will respond wisely and caringly for ourselves from this peaceful place.

In Buddhism, one of the signs or milestones of someone whose practice is maturing is that they begin trusting being peaceful. They trust being non-reactive. They trust the place of warm, vital, meaningful calmness more than they trust reactivity, more than they trust agitation, more than they trust being distressed, anxious, or angry – all the things that pull us into the world of non-calmness.

When we begin trusting that place of peace, we find it is a wellspring of vitality, goodness, responsiveness, creativity, and goodness. It is not a place of being shut down. It is not a place of couch potato calm. One of the metaphors for this kind of deep calm is that of a candle flame that is out of the wind. From a distance, the candle flame looks completely still, but we know that inside it's very dynamic. The flame is calm with a dynamic fire within it. Likewise, when we become calm, there is a wonderful dynamism of freedom within us through which we can respond in the world.

There are different kinds of calmness. There is physical calmness, mental calmness, and calmness from developing concentration in meditation. Then there is a calmness that comes when we start getting a handle on, understanding, and becoming wise about our own reactivity. Then we start learning how not to be reactive, how to not invest in reactivity, and how to trust that the place of peacefulness is a wise and safe place to be. Not only do we experience the calm of peace, but we also start experiencing the calmness of safety, where we discover that we carry the safety with us inside, so we don't require as much safety around us. That is a transformative place to be.

These are all skills that we're developing. This is a gradual process. One of the supports for this whole gradual process is understanding how all this works in us, so we don't continue to believe in things that are unhealthy to believe in. We no longer invest in the ways of being that are unhealthy. Maybe we reduce the investment. We don't put as much energy into it. We are not as committed to the unhealthy ways of being in the world.

This is the calmness of peace, the calmness of not being in conflict with reality. I hope that was clear. I hope that the theme of calmness will support you through this holiday season when people tend to get less calm in one way or another. May you bring that calmness to the people you are with. Thank you.