

Attitudes (1 of 5) From Desire to Contentment

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Gil Fronsdal

Good morning everyone and welcome to this Monday morning in California. I feel that on this day in November just before Thanksgiving, here in the United States we have kind of turned a corner into a new season. So with Thanksgiving coming up, I thought it might be nice to spend a week at the beginning of this winter season focusing on the topic of attitude.

There was a time when I taught the introduction to mindfulness meditation, which is normally a five-week program. For a few years, I did six weeks where the fifth week focused on mindfulness of attitude. Attitude is very important because it's the lens through which we see the world, understand the world, and behave in the world. It's often invisible because generally, you're focusing on what you're seeing. You might not be paying any attention to the fact that you're straining, or that you're afraid and you're looking for safety, or that you are thinking that in order to have a good time and be safe or comfortable, there has to be pleasure. If we're looking for where it's pleasant, that is an attitude or belief behind how we see, how we talk, and how we live.

Those attitudes can be quite deep and subconscious – we are often not conscious of them. I discovered one attitude in particular when I started my meditation practice in monasteries. At some point, I realized that no matter what I was experiencing, the attitude I had towards all of it was that it was not the real thing. If I was calm, it wasn't the real calm. If I was present, it wasn't the real way of being present. If I was breathing, it wasn't the true way that you're supposed to breathe when you meditate.

I didn't know that I had this belief. It was very, very quiet in the back of the mind. But it brought a kind of discontent and dissatisfaction and a feeling of inadequacy, which I carried with me in everything I was doing. I was so grateful when I saw it because I realized, "This is a little bit ridiculous." So then I tried for a while to switch the belief to, "If it's happening to me, it *is* the real thing." That kind of loosened things up and broke up the strength of this attitude that I carried with me for so long.

So become aware of attitude. There are two categories of attitude we can have, depending on the source from which they come. One is an attitude that is from reactivity and maybe from a certain kind of conceit. The other arises out of a kind of non-activity – out of a deep ability to not always be busy, not be racing around, not doing, not feeling like we have to accomplish something or fix something or understand something. Instead, we allow a deep rest to happen.

Today I'd like to suggest that one attitude that can be pervasive in some people's lives is desire. They are always wanting something. Some people can want without even having anything particular in mind. It's just a habit of wanting, the desire to have something. Wherever they go, they're on the lookout: "What is it I might want in this situation? What do I want to get? What do I want to do, or have, or receive?" There's always wanting.

Some of the wanting can come from a feeling of lack, inadequacy, or scarcity. I spent a period in my early twenties being very poor and not having enough food. For a while after that period, I became a little bit of a neurotic eater. I was always looking for food and wanting food and eating a lot to make up for it. This wanting was very powerful until I started meditating and settled something deep inside of me.

Sometimes desire or greed is expressed in how we use our eyes, where the eyes are searching, scanning, and maybe kind of coming out of their sockets as if we're straining to figure out, "What is it that I want and how do I get it?" I've had that happen when I went to bookstores when I was younger. I loved the idea of buying books

when I was poor but I couldn't afford them. I was in the bookstore just to look at all the titles of books that I wanted to buy, buy, buy, buy. But I wasn't going to buy any so I would leave the bookstore exhausted and with a headache. So sometimes the desire is in our eyes, or we lean forward in our posture, or we kind of tense up from the desire.

We can begin by becoming sensitive to a pervasive attitude, a manner, or a mood of desire that might underlie a lot of our behavior and ways of thinking. If you track what you're thinking about throughout the day, how much is motivated by desire and wanting something different? As I said, some of that can be born from discontent, from a belief that there's not enough. Or we're afraid. Or we want to prove ourselves. Or we want to be approved of by other people. All kinds of things can be behind that desire. But they're all activities of the surface mind. As we meditate we have a way to quiet that surface mind so that the doing and going are absent.

I'd like to propose contentment as an alternative to this constant desire. This means being content with what you have, content with your basic requisites being met, a roof over your house, and the clothes on your body. You're safe and cared for. This contentment is not a belief or something you have to do or talk yourself into. It's a contentment that comes from the mind being quiet enough so that it's not operating from desire and feelings of lack, which are activated, reactive states.

This quietness, this contentment that is almost a non-doing arises out of a deep settledness. You have to stay settled or return to settledness to feel this deep contentment. Losing your contentment doesn't mean you have to do more to become content. It's more like an undoing. You realize that contentment is possible – not necessarily being content with everything but having an ongoing contented attitude or mood. That's what we're talking about this week.

Even though you might be discontented with politics or something, the ongoing attitude with which you see and understand the world and yourself is through a lens of contentment. There's a pervasive mood of contentment that is the background for how you think, speak, and go about the day.

I'd like to propose that that sense of contentment arises when we're not activated with other attitudes, beliefs, or ways of thinking that are critical, divisive, or fracturing, or that take away our overall sense of wholeness. We often find ourselves operating from the belief that something's wrong with us or we are a problem. We all have problems and ways in which we are not perfect. But it is completely unnecessary to operate with that belief as a pervasive attitude, carrying it with us and telling ourselves the same story.

We need to find some way to settle that and step away from it enough so that we don't believe it, so that a different attitude supports us, feeds us, and benefits us rather than undermining us. Even if some of the stories about you are true and you have some kind of quirk that's difficult, do not use that as the basis for a pervasive attitude that you carry with you all the time. That's unnecessary. There are ways of being honest and clear and practical about the quirks we have without them becoming a pervasive view that something's wrong with us and we're a problem for the world or something like that.

Today I'd like to suggest, if you're interested, that you kind of ride through the day investigating your attitude toward desire and contentment. How does desire work for you? How pervasive is it? How much are you caught in the world of desire? Are you wanting things? Is there a kind of contentment that is not just an action (which is not so interesting) but rather a settling into contentment? This is a kind of opening up and relaxing into a place where there's a sense of wholeness rather than a divided, fractured sense of self. In that wholeness, there's less to do, less to prove. From that can come contentment. Out of that contentment can come a very different way to operate in the world, leading you to speak and act and be a fully engaged citizen from a beneficial attitude.

Spend some time appreciating what pervasive attitudes you carry with you and consider whether they need to be 24/7. Do they need to be always operating and always the view through which you see things? If it's a reactive attitude or an undermining attitude, is there an alternative? For today I suggest you look at desires and contentment. See if there is a way to be content and still take care of what you need. Take care of what needs to happen, but from contentment rather than from an attitude of desire or greed.

Thank you. May seeing the difference between these two kinds of attitudes support your deep well-being.