

Dharmette: Holding the Quail

Gil Fronsdal

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Oh, after that short little Dharma words I gave this morning about birds, birds had been in my mind. And there are other teachings about birds and the suttas. And also offer one of them that's been meaningful for me, maybe a few of them. Okay. One is the idea, if you want to pick up the example in the suttas, is a quail, maybe an injured quail and bring it to safety, you have to hold it just the right way because if you hold it too tight, you'll crush it. But if you hold it too loose, it'll flop out of your hands and fall on the ground.

So you have to hold it kind of... clearly, a little bit firmly, but it has to be really soft, really, no way you're going to hurt it. And you don't want to make the bird anxious because you're pressing too much, but just enough to keep it safe in your hand. And that's used for an analogy for how to be mindful. So not too firm and not too loose. So what is that? I can't tell you.

I can just tell you the principle, not too firm, not too loose. And it's up to you to find out what the right way. Because maybe what you have is not a little quail. Maybe you have this, you know, a big falcon that you have to take to the vet. And, you know, not too firm, not too loose for the big falcon might be firmer to keep it safe than, you know, a little quail. Or is it a butterfly that you found that you want to take to safety?

You know, how, you know, that's really loose then. So depending on what's going on, you have to kind of find that just the right midpoint for what's going on. So to meet yourself, whatever is going on, so that you're present for it, clearly present. You're not distracted, you're not lost, you're not attacking it, you're not pushing it away, you're not clinging to it, but clearly present in a way that respects something, cares for it. And I like this association of mindfulness with care, like they're caring for the little bird, for mindfulness to be a form of care. And I love the word care because it frees us from requiring it to be love or compassion.

I like love and compassion. Kindness. It's all very good things. You know, always. When should you become loving? Always.

But it's kind of a high bar to be able to do it all the time. But care maybe is more accessible and more ordinary and more simple. and less complicated. So to have mindfulness always be a form of care. And in the teachings of the Buddha, the word that I'm translating as care is, it gets associated with one other emotion as a kind of companion or a precursor for it or something. And that's respect.

So the kind of care that comes from respect. What is it? What kind of respect... evokes care for what you're respecting. And so to have respect and care for what's happening in you. So if you find yourself hurt, hold that hurt in that gentle way like a little quail.

And with care, with tenderness, but with real presence, not too loose, but not too firm. And if you try to be too caring... It might be too much for it. You have to just allow it to be there with respect. If you have a lot of anger, maybe that's the falcon. Maybe you have to hold it closer.

Maybe you have to get closer and really kind of be present in a stronger way because otherwise the anger might take over. But you don't want to do so much that you're hurting the anger. It's out of respect and care for it. It's okay. I love this. I've heard now a few times this kind of story.

One of them was of, I think it was a woman or a couple or something, who adopted a small boy from abroad, who apparently had a very, very difficult life as an orphan. A lot of abuse, a lot of violence, all that. And so they received this, they received, that's the right word, but they adopted him when he was maybe four or something. And he was already a problem full of anger and rage and just biting and hitting and screaming. So what the adopted mother did was just to some point was just grabbed the kid and just held him. So he couldn't really move and held him tight because she was still much bigger than the four-year-old.

And slowly, slowly the kid relaxed. Slowly the kid relaxed and then eventually could rest into her chest and soften and let go. That that little kid needed to be held tightly for something to be able to let go. So I don't know about your anger that you carry. What's the right way of holding it? Is it like a quail?

Is it like a falcon? Is it like something that is, well, only relaxed if it's held firmly, clearly, with some limits to how far it could go? Or is it something that needs a lot of softness? Yeah. But the idea is to hold it with respect, to hold it with a care, so that the motivation for whatever way you're holding it tightly or loosely is clearly with respect for what's going on. If there's

fear, what's the right way for you to hold fear?

Is it tight? Is it loose? What ways can you care for it? Can you respect fear? You know, that one of the things I like to teach a lot with fear is our task is to help the fear feel safe. And I imagine this mother that was holding the kid tightly.

Maybe it was providing a sense of safety that kid had never experienced before. But in order for that to register, this stronger holding needed to happen so that kid would finally give up something that resisted feeling how safe it could be there with this new mother. Yeah. So what this requires, what I'm trying to say today, is for you to understand, to discover, to explore, to have the question, what's the right way of attending to whatever is happening here? What's needed here? And if I'm going to be present for this, what is the kind of caring attention that's needed?

Is it so loose that's like you give it infinite space? Right? Or is it so kind of close in and firm that something can relax because it needs to get the firmness? One of the surprises for me of being a new parent, relatively new, when my son was, I don't know, I can't remember how old he was, but let's say he was two years old. And probably, as a parent, I probably erred on this, probably, I keep going to pretend it wasn't there. I erred on the side of just being very accepting and loving and making space and not being strict or firm and angry or something.

And so it was kind of maybe a little bit too permissive. But in any case, we had this son who was, in retrospect, the interpretation of it was that he didn't feel safe until he knew the limits of his life, how far he could go. So he would push against the limits to find out where that safety was. So he was pushing against his behavior beyond whatever he thought, you know, he was going up against the edge. And what I had to learn was to say, no, to say, no, you can't do that in a clear enough way that he got the message. And it was remarkable, the effect sometimes it had.

At first, he would look at me like I was just the most horrible person. Like the look would be like, oh. And then, but it lasted like half a second. And then he would relax, and he'd be happy, and he'd just be playing happily. Now he was safe. He knew what the limits were.

He knew with the domain, which he could be. So sometimes that's the case for our own hearts and minds. We have these strong reactions, and it needs to have limits. It needs to say no. It needs to be firm. Here, no.

And I've done that sometimes in meditation with this thinking mind. where I said, okay, enough, stop. You reached the limit. No. And lo and behold, that made a difference in my mind. I needed to hear that for myself.

And I've done it. It didn't work. So, you know, you have to kind of always adapting, always trying to look and see, what is needed here? What's needed now? What's needed now? And so I leave you with this analogy from the Buddha of holding the quail.

Not too hard, not too tight, not too loose. And it's your job to figure out whatever you're present for what the right balance is that is needed at any given time. And in the process of doing that and finding that and discovering what that might be like, even if you get it wrong, It is an expression of care and respect for all of who you are, for all your feelings, all your emotions, all what's going on. And it might be in the bigger picture. You didn't get it right in terms of how to be mindful, but it didn't matter because what was conveyed was care and respect. May you care and respect for everything that comes up in this practice and make room for it. So thank you.