

Mindfulness of the Heart - Gil Fronsdal

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So many years ago, I was involved in Zen practice. And some of that, some of the teachings, some of it still lives in me and comes through. And this week, what came through for me was a phrase, a Zen phrase, that is kind of like an interesting phrase to carry with you as a mirror, as a question mark, as a part of exploration. And the phrase is six words: “the one who is not busy.” And the answer is not your neighbor down the street who's retired. You know, done. Pass that test.

The idea is that the phrase is a mirror for yourself. And maybe it can be rephrased: what is it in you that is not busy? Even if you're busy, even if you're doing a lot of things, is there a refuge? Is there a spot? Is there a location? Is there a place that goes with you where you feel, oh, that's the place that's not busy? What's the place that's not busy inside of you?

Do you carry with you a presence? Do you carry with you a form of awareness, attention, that has a certain kind of peace in it, or quiet in it, or stillness in it, that is kind of a wonderful ballast, a wonderful reference point, a wonderful source of stability in the midst of all the changing, challenging things we might be doing in our life? What is that place inside of you that's not busy? What's the place inside of you which is calm that you carry with you?

And one of the reasons this, I think this is a very important kind of, can be a very important kind of reference point, is that if our inner life is not calm, if our inner life is anxious, agitated, or shut down in some big way, then our inner life is not going to be able to help itself. And maybe we won't be able to help others. The Buddha said that if you want to be calm, the food, the nourishment for calm, is calm itself, which may be irritating. But the idea being that if you feel a need for tranquility, go find tranquility.

You can have, there's calm people to be with. There are calm places people go to. There's calm activities that we might choose to do that calm us down, maybe even meditation. And

to do things that are calm situations helps. If we don't do that, it may be not useful for us or for the world, the way that we're agitated and anxious and kind of spinning around all the time.

And now in meditation too, sometimes meditation is not, for some people, it's not the best thing to do, oddly enough, to get calm. And sometimes the introspection of meditation, being self-conscious in meditation about what's going on inside, it just stirs us up even more. And it's not so calming, right? But can it be? Is there some way to understand and look deeply inside of yourself?

So meditation is a phenomenally useful place to step out of the ways we're spinning in our mind, step out of the ways we're disconnected, step out of the ways that we are agitated in a way that's not helpful. So one of the interesting things to see in meditation is, or a reference point, or kind of a metaphor, or analogy would be, I've seen two people come together where they were both agitated, both maybe anxious, and by the time they're spending time together, they're both even more agitated than they were when they started. They were just kind of feeding it in each other and spinning each other in the anxiety. I mean, there's a lot of things to be afraid of in the world. Let's go through the list. And I'm anxious we're not going to name it all. So let's get on with it.

But I've seen that, you know, that people agitate each other sometimes in a way... And I've seen the opposite. I've seen someone calm the other people just by their calm, their way of being there quiet and still and available, listening, people finally coming to settle. So the same thing inside of ourselves. If the whole inner landscape, our mental landscape, is agitated, and we're trying to use that inner life to be mindful, and then because the mindfulness, the awareness, is completely kind of entangled with the inner agitation, it's not separate from it, the very effort to be mindful is agitated itself.

And so you're aware that you're agitated, but the very way that you're aware is agitated itself. So the two are just kind of bouncing off each other. It's kind of like, the analogy I like is that if what you're paying attention to is agitated and the awareness is agitated, they kind of touch each other and bounce off just like this. And they kind of recoil, they bounce off, and the contact is not very nice. You know, like, give me a break, you know, no wonder I want to get away. And it just keeps everything going.

Like, I see sometimes dogs on leashes with their people. We live on a street with a lot of dog walkers. And sometimes the people talk, the dog parents, whatever they're called now, are talking, and the dogs are growling and ferocious and trying to get at each other. But, you know, they're not giving up. Sometimes the people will say, "Calm down, it's okay," but it

doesn't seem to help.

The only thing that helps is that finally they finish their conversation and they take them away, and then the dogs calm down. But as long as they're there with each other, it just activates it. It can be that way inside of ourselves. And we touch something which is agitated with an agitated mind, and it's not a very good contact. Of course you don't want to be mindful. Of course you don't want to meditate. It's just not pleasant. It's just kind of difficult. Yeah.

And ideally, one thing begins to calm, so that the thing that's agitated meets that calm, meets the thing that's still or quiet. And with the analogy of the hands and the fingers, as things calm down, this beautiful and very profound thing can happen, is that the hands come together flat. And this is pleasant. This is warm, soft, tender, to have the flat of the hands touch each other as opposed to having the fingertips strike each other.

And so the same thing happens within us, is that something within us, the awareness that knows, that is present, and whatever we're aware of, until even the idea of a subject and object distinction begins to fall away in this intimate contact where things come together calmly together here. So, to know this idea, to notice how is it that you're being aware, how is it you're being mindful in meditation? Are you bringing with you your agitation? Are you bringing with you your anxiety? And bouncing off and kind of like, it's more like you're poking at things or you're holding back and just being upset?

Or sometimes what's happening inside is something inside of us is closed. And so it's not that the agitation is meeting agitation, but agitation is meeting something that is closed, and it's equally unpleasant bouncing off of. And that is not so useful either. And there too, is there something that's not busy, something that's calm, that can come and just hold what is closed? Hold it with the idea as long as it needs to be held, as long as we care for it. And then slowly maybe something begins to open and relax because of that support, because of that calm presence that's there.

So the idea of the one who is not busy, the place that's not busy... And can you discover what that is in you? Is it a place or is it everywhere? Is it in the nature of kind of a global feeling of awareness, or is it some inner place of knowing or stillness from which it seems to be the core where awareness comes from or presence comes from? Or maybe there's just a place inside for you that feels like this is the deepest place, the deepest home I have.

And maybe just a square millimeter in size, but even that is meaningful. Maybe that's more important, to stay in touch with that, than to stay in touch with the square mile of agitation that you have. That's the place. You know that place. What is that place?

Can you feel your way when you sit down to meditate, for example? Where is it calmest in you? And you might notice, sometimes you start to meditate, this strong pull into the place of agitation. Agitation, anxiety can have a lot of authority over us. It can be assertive. It can feel like this is the end of the world if I don't pay attention to it.

This is where everything gets pulled, the mind gets pulled into the allure of this person, you know, of fear, of agitation, of doing, of fulfilling, of to-do lists, and being in a hurry. And to recognize that, not as a problem, not as something to be agitated even more about, not as something to be aversive to, but, you know, kind of maybe feel sorry for yourself, have compassion, care. Something different is needed here. What is that different thing? Can I find where I can know calmly, to have a calm awareness of agitation, calm awareness of being not calm? Is that possible?

And there's a few ways that can be done in mindfulness meditation. One is some people will use what's called mental notes. They'll use a one-word note, a word that represents what we're paying attention to. So if you're hearing a sound, you might use the word "hearing." If you're paying attention to the breathing, the inhale, you might just say quietly the word "in" or "out."

Or the classic way we were taught in Burma was, as the belly goes out, to say "rising." Belly goes back in, say "falling." If there's sadness, say "sadness." If there's anger, say "anger." If there's agitation, say "agitation." There's a number of things that happens there with those mental notes.

The mental note is not the thing that's being noted, and it can create a little bit of distance, a little bit of freedom from it. But also what's very effective is that you can pay attention to how you say the mental note. I've noticed myself when I first started doing this, sometimes I was in a hurry to say it. Like I had to say it quickly and get on with it. And it was like a checklist approach to mindfulness.

You know, I'd say, done with that, and then I can daydream and come back. Or sometimes I had the idea it was like I had to do as many as possible. The more notes per minute, the better. So it was kind of like rapid fire. Or sometimes it was the bazooka approach. If I just kind of named it really powerfully, it would blow it out of existence. Yeah.

All kinds of strange things I saw. I could see that in the noting, I could tell that I had these deeper attitudes that weren't useful. So, and I also learned to adjust how I note, to note spaciously, to note calmly. Oh, anger. Anxious. Oh, look at this guy. Oh, hurry. I'm in a hurry. Wow.

You know, somehow this inner landscape where you have some choice, try to shift it. Imagine that you've come into a library, or imagine you come to IMC on a Sunday morning and everyone's already meditating. So, okay, I should be a little bit quiet. And so something in you gets quiet and slow. So sometimes when you use mental noting, that is a great tool. If you note calmly, then things begin to... You're meeting with bringing some calmness into it.

Some people don't use noting, but there is a knowing, a cognitive knowing is going on, a recognition of what's happening. Can you adjust that recognition, that knowing, so there's a calm knowing, calmly knowing sound, calmly knowing the breath? Some people, their primary way of being mindful is not knowing, but it's feeling, sensing. And so can you sense calmly? Is there something inside of you that allows you to take time? Okay, let me sense this well. Let me feel it now.

Sometimes I view a moment of mindfulness as the beginning rather than the end of a process, the beginning of a journey. So if I notice that I'm breathing in, then I might say "in," or I might just notice it. But then I say, okay, now that I notice it, I haven't done, that's not, the job's not over. You know, thank you, I did my job, I'm mindful, I notice it. I'll just wait around until the out-breath comes and know that.

And I've done that, you know, and I note my in-breath at the beginning. And then there's a few, you know, a second or moments long enough to get into some interesting thought. And then I forget to notice the out-breath. Okay. But to see it as a beginning, notice the beginning of the in-breath, and then stay there to notice that journey. What happens with that breath or that experience?

To hear a sound. Don't just notice the sound and be done with it, but rather know sound. And then what is it like to experience that sound? What happens? How does that receive? How is that registered? What shifts and changes as I listen to the sound?

So these are all ways of beginning to shift so we can introduce some degree of calm, calm awareness, calm attention into the field. And what I'm suggesting is to some degree you have a choice. You're not the victim of your agitation, that everything has to go along with it. There might be some place that you answer the question, who is it that's not busy? Who is it that's not in a hurry? What is it that's not agitated?

It's something that you... It's not like you have to go look for it inside of you. You have to enact it. You have to contribute with a choice. The choice of a certain kind of interaction. The interaction of how to be aware, how to note, how to be present.

Maybe the interaction of what you do with your posture. Is there some way of having a calm posture that allows you to stay still and not move your body? Sitting and meditating, tapping your knees with your fingers probably means that there's an inner agitation that's taken over. It's not really going to calm you. But if you notice you're tapping your fingers against your knees, stop. Be still. Be quiet.

Something I've done with agitation. I remember once, the first time I did this, I had so much fun. I was restless. I was really restless. And so I got really interested in the restlessness in my body. And I imagined the restlessness was a ping-pong ball that was just flying, bouncing off the walls inside of my body.

And just that idea allowed me to be really still and to watch. And the watching was not restless. The watching was just fascinating. There's a lot of energy in there. Wow, it's just like bouncing off like crazy. Boy, do I feel like I want to bolt.

But it was all being held by this wide-open body of space and this curiosity. What is this? This is fascinating. And that was what allowed it all to settle. It took about half an hour, but that was a half an hour well spent.

And I could see that from time to time during that half an hour, there was this pull to get involved in the restlessness, to believe it, to get involved in the restless thoughts. But I said, no, no, just watch, just watch, just watch, see it, see it, see it. And then it quieted down and settled. So, to introduce into your, if you're agitated, if it should ever happen accidentally, then introduce yourself. Or find inside of you, where is the one who is calm? Where is the one who is not busy?

And if you can't find someplace inside that's a refuge of calm, something inside that's a ballast, a support for stillness, can you then use your capacity for choice to choose a way of being that introduces some modicum of calm inside? And maybe it's the way that you note, that you're aware. Maybe it's the way you feel. Maybe it's the way you hold the experience. I'm just going to hold it, the way you're present for your experience. Let's offer a calm presence.

Maybe it's your choice to do loving-kindness. Maybe what's really needed when there's a lot of agitation is compassion or kindness. And so we have a practice of loving-kindness. Can you race through loving-kindness because you have more important things to do? No. Not if what you want to do is let the loving-kindness be a calming influence on your agitation, on your anxiety.

Then do the loving-kindness slowly, calmly, peacefully. Introduce calm. And if this is some-

thing you can't do for yourself, and if meditation is not the place for it, then there are other ways. Go for a walk. Go for a walk in a calm place. Find a place in a grove of trees that's nice. Go for a walk with a calm friend.

Take a shower. Take a nap. Listen to calm music. Maybe read a book that takes you out of it all a bit so that you kind of get into a different mood and state of mind. Because sometimes there's wise distraction that's useful to do.

So the one who is not busy... Who's that for you? Or the place that's not busy? What reference point do you have for this idea? So with that, maybe some of you will want to share a little bit about it. So in about, we'll take about, you know, maybe five, seven minutes.

He had this concept that I would not have thought about in a million years. And he told me, "Try to add randomness to your day." Randomness? Yes. And so I would like you to comment, because it just sounds so right, on the relationship between mindfulness and randomness in that context.

Uh-huh. Mindful descent? Randomness. I love the idea. Make room for the unexpected. Make room for something new. Make room for what you don't know. Yeah, I think that's very nice.

I live a life that's often surprised. Maybe it has to do with randomness. I don't use that word for myself much, but I just delight how often I'm surprised in my day. All kinds of things come that I didn't expect, that I didn't know about, and really? Wow, that too? That's just part of the day? And so I kind of, so this idea of just being surprised a lot. So maybe that's a flip side of randomness, is to be surprised?

Yes, I mean, I'm realizing that in my day, I'm very structured, and I feel a lot of things in the day. But... I was thinking, okay, I take five minutes or three minutes breath journey or something, and that's kind of like enough. But the idea of having, let's say I work from 8 to 10, and at 10, I have this randomness moment. Follow me here. It's not, it's not, it's not, it's not having a random timer. I'm still keeping my structure, but within that structure I really like the idea of doing something that was unexpected instead of my to-do list.

Nice. Very nice. Love it. Yes.

Hi, so I don't live here, but I'm part of the online *saṅgha*. And so I got to spend some time with Jan and Barry and stuff like that. And while I've been visiting here, I'm about to go on retreat with Matthew and then with you later on. So I'm feeling a lot of tenderness right now because in Alaska where I live, there's not really like *saṅgha*. Right. And what helps me feel calm and safe, what helps me feel calm and safe, is *saṅgha* like this.

And in Alaska, in Anchorage, I don't know where I can quite find that. It feels wonderful online. Wonderful. I'm so glad for the offerings you guys have online. But it's not quite the same as in person.

Yeah, I agree. That's a little bit too loud here for me. So, yeah, I agree. It's more difficult alone. It's hard not to have a community. It's a great support having *saṅgha*.

And, I mean, it's been a great support in my life to have *saṅgha* and community. And it's hard to imagine how much I've benefited from the *Dharma* without the community around me. So I can understand that. But I also know that it's a great practice to do it alone, too. And some of the most profound experiences I had in the *Dharma* were found when alone.

And then the task was, for me, was how can I bring this sense of intimacy, this sense of integrity, into my community life, into the world? The question that I literally had for many years was, "How can I be alone with others?" It might not sound nice, but it sounds worse than it actually was. But that was the question. How could I be with others and have this inner integrity, this inner wholeness that allowed me to be there fully in the way I was before? I couldn't be.

So anyway, so I wish you well. I'm so glad you came, and come back. And maybe you'll start a sitting group up there.

I just wanted to add up. Can you hear me? Hi. I once asked that question to Gil when I came to the area new, that I was looking for *saṅgha*. And one of the things that really changed my perspective was your answer: "Morgan, everyone is your *saṅgha*." And that was so profound to me that it just changed how I viewed my role and my experience, my own practice.

Fantastic. Everyone is your *saṅgha*. Yes, it's true. Maybe this can be the last one over there.

When we talk about randomness, what we discussed in our group was more structure. More structure. Yeah. So, in my practice, and I think one person also said that if our mind is kind of agitated, when you start meditation, start counting. And I do start counting from zero to ten, down to ten, and do that three times.

And obviously, your mind wanders, you know, when you count to five, your mind is on something. Sometimes you're counting but thinking of things.

Yes, yes. And then you're disciplined by, you know, like punishing. Basically, you start from zero again. And you keep doing that. Over time, you really get to 30, then you're really, really calm.

Great, yes. Fantastic. Yeah. I counted to 10 for years and years in meditation. That's how I

was taught to do Zen practice. And there, too, I learned that how I counted was important. So I would count in a calm way.

Mm-hmm. As if I had all the time in the world. And actually, I would just, in a relaxed way, it wasn't a checklist, you know, one. I would count my breath, but I would count my exhale. And the sound of the count would fill the whole exhale, like in my mind. One. So almost like a mantra. Two. Anyway, that's what I did.

Thank you. Okay. Well, thank you very much. And...