

Introduction to Mindfulness Meditation: Mindfulness of Breath (1 of 6)

Transcribed from a talk by Gil Fronsdal 10/3/07

Welcome to the Insight Meditation Center. My name is Gil Fronsdal and I'm the teacher here, primary teacher. This is going to be a 6 week course in mindfulness practice. During the course we'll focus on mindfulness meditation, but most of the things I'm going to be talking about apply in daily life as well. This is a very important thing to understand, that the line between meditation and daily life is an arbitrary line. And sooner or later people who meditate realize how arbitrary that line is and become interested in how to live in daily life with a kind of integrity a kind of intimacy the kind of freedom there can be in meditation. Why should it only be in meditation that we feel free? Why should it only be in meditation that you feel peaceful or happy or feel like you have a high degree of integrity? The challenge is in how to take the wonderful benefits and conditions that come with meditation and begin to live with that in your life. Not that you have to look like a zombie. Some people associate meditators with being really calm, and the unfortunate thing is that people think I'm kind of calm, so I'm not a good spokesperson for a passionate meditator. So don't use me as the last word on what it looks like to be a lifetime meditator, it's just who I am. The point is not to be, in Buddhism certainly, but also in this practice here, the point is not to become somebody but rather the point is to become free. And to become free means you actually become freer to be who you are. You become free of what's extra. And what we're most concerned about in Buddhism is the extras that add stuff that cause you to suffer or causes your behavior to bring suffering to others. So as you meditate with mindfulness meditation, the causes and conditions for suffering tend to shed and fall off, and what's left is not nothing, what's left is happiness, peace and calm. What's left is greater insight and understanding and wisdom in this life that we are living.

Mindfulness can exist quite well without Buddhism. Buddhism cannot live without mindfulness. And mindfulness is certainly very key to the whole Buddhist enterprise and it's kind of an interesting fact that that's the case because what's required in Buddhism is not a doctrine not a belief but rather is an enhanced capacity to pay attention. When I was small, my mother would regularly tell me: "Gil, pay attention. Pay attention." And mostly I didn't listen to her, which kids are supposed to do, right? So it's my karma as an adult, to be in this tradition where the thing we do is pay attention.

So what we'll do here for the next 6 weeks, I'll teach you some of the basic elements of mindfulness meditation, of using your attention in an enhanced way, in a way that is hopefully useful in your life. The way it's done is systematically, it doesn't have to be done this way, but we do it systematically. Today I'll lay out the basics of the practice, including the very center of it, of meditation, which is the breath, breath meditation. Mindful attention to your breathing.

Next week we'll talk about mindfulness of the body. It turns out that Buddhist spirituality puts a tremendous importance on being an embodied being, on being connected to your body. You wouldn't believe that if you read a lot of the books about Buddhism. They tend to be kind of intellectual. But if you go hang out in practice centers, you find out that the body is really important; getting into your body and being in your body. The third week I'll talk about emotions. Emotions are a big part of our life. We're not expected to leave our emotions behind, but rather to learn how to in a wise way include them in the field of attention. Then the fourth week the subject will be thinking and thinking is a big issue for meditators and some people think you're not supposed to think when you meditate but rather than having that idea, the idea is to learn in a wise way how to pay attention to thinking, so that thinking doesn't get in the way, doesn't cause suffering – doesn't become an obstacle to becoming more peaceful and insightful. The fifth week we are going to talk about the mind. The mind being something separate from thinking. It's a very important week. The last week will be a lot about practicing in daily life. Taking this whole meditation practice to a whole different level to beyond what the instruction has been to that point. So those are the 6 weeks. Most of those weeks there's a handout that we'll put out. It reviews some of the things I say in the class and it also gives you some exercises you can do at home during the week that can enhance this experience here.

So we all can pay attention to some degree, and if you pay a little bit of attention to how you pay attention, what you'll probably discover is that you'll pay attention for a short period of time. At some point you'll either get distracted from what you are paying attention to and go off into future thinking, past thinking into fantasy, or if you stay connected to what you are paying attention, you'll somehow start thinking about it. And you'll think about it in such a way that the thinking pulls you away from the experience. For example, if I'm talking and I say something brilliant or something horrible, you might start thinking about what I've said and not notice I was continuing to talk. Because you are kind of retrospectively thinking about what just happened, what I just said. So you got hung up in a sense with the experience. You pay attention, something happened, somehow you got hooked, got caught, got involved in that experience, so you couldn't pay careful attention to the next thing that happened in the moment. It's a very interesting phenomenon, because that place where we get hung up, get distracted, get pulled away is a very important key to understanding what motivates us, what our values are, what our fears are, what our clings are -- our hooks our buttons, everything.

So one of the things we are trying to do here, is learn to pay attention to seeing what complicates our attention, where we get caught, what makes it difficult. Because the place we get caught is also the place where we are going to feel stress. And as many of you know, this practice that I'm teaching here, mindfulness practice, has been adopted in many clinical settings in this country as stress-reduction, pain and stress management. The people who go to Kaiser, Sequoia, El Camino Hospital, Stanford Hospital, will take these classes, Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction, and they don't use the "B" word, and a lot of people who go there have no clue that the practice they are being taught comes from Buddhism. And that's good. The place we get hung up is often a very important window into understanding how we are most likely to suffer, or how we are more likely to cause problems in our life. So we start paying attention, which we all have the capacity to do. But we get interested in this practice, how is it that our ability to stay calmly connected to the present moment gets somehow disrupted. People who meditate will sometimes think that the disruption is the problem. Disruption sounds like a bad word: "I got disrupted." I got caught. When we do this meditation practice, we try to not judge anything as being bad or inappropriate. Rather we try to fold everything back into the attention. In other words, to notice this. Pay attention. What's going on. Notice this, notice this. "Ah, I just got caught. I heard someone cough, and it reminded me that my friend was sick, and I wondered if I should visit my friend in the hospital, and I wonder how late Kaiser is open, and then I notice, "I'm teaching a class...oh!" So, it's an example of getting pulled in. It was an innocent example, but it could also not be so innocent. And so what we do is rather than saying that shouldn't have happened, I shouldn't have had that train of thought, what we try to do is to fold everything back into the attention. "Oh, look at that, that's what a disruption is like. That's what it's like for the mind to get hooked, get carried away. That's what it's like. That's what it's like."

Do you understand that principle? It is a really important one. People who have been meditating for sometimes 10 years haven't learned this one yet. Haven't learned that there's nothing that doesn't need to happen. There's nothing you should say "that shouldn't happen". Rather, it's one more thing to learn to pay attention to. And if you learn to pay attention well, there is freedom to be found in attention. This is one of those things that I hope you get a key taste for -- at least an intuitive idea for it in the course of these 6 weeks. In paying attention, there is a way of paying attention where you are not caught, trapped, oppressed, influenced, or driven by what's going on, inside or outside yourself. And that gives you a tremendous power to go about your life. If you have the ability not to be pushed around by your inner compulsions or the pressures from the outside. We learn this by learning how to use the attention in a new way. I hope this is one of the things we'll learn as we go along here.

We begin the mindfulness meditation with paying attention to two things, our posture and our breathing. With the idea that it's really helpful to have a good stable posture and also a posture that also expresses an attentive state. It's really great to see, like a little kid, a little toddler, they are in their diapers, you see their naked torso, they've gotten really interested in something, they sit with this erect back, they are so attentive and upright. It's so beautiful to see this energy awake and present. And sometimes you see it in adults. But you see it sometimes really clearly in uncontracted children's bodies.

You can be a meditator and be a couch potato. It's possible. However, your whole meditation experience is improved if you let your body be a support for your attention. So it isn't just a mental thing, that you're trying to

mentally attend to, but you put yourself in a posture where your body is more likely to be attentive. So, I'll talk about that a little more in a moment. And then we use the breathing. And the breathing has a wonderful quality of being continuous. Pretty much we're always breathing, so there is always something to connect to. There is a rhythm to breathing. It flows in and out. It comes and goes. It's actually easier for the mind to pay careful attention to something that is changing in a very subtle and quiet way. If you fixate your eyes and don't let your eyes move very well, you can't see very well. In order for the eyes to see well, the eyes have to actually move a little bit. They are actually constantly shifting and moving. There is something really wonderful that happens when you follow the breathing that has a nice rhythm to it. You are watching, following the change that goes on with the breath. The breathing is also closely tied to our emotional life and our psychological life and our energetic life, and so much of how we live is affected by and affects our breathing. For example, if you get afraid, your breathing can sometimes get constricted and tight. If you are really relaxed and happy, it gets to be more relaxed and fluid. If you're nervous about something you might breathe faster. If you relax, you might breathe more slowly. There's all these different ways that the breathing shifts. Partly to give you more or less oxygen, depending what you need. If you are attacked by a lion, you need a lot of oxygen, so the breathing knows what to do. So if you are running a lot, you are hyperventilating a little bit. So, the breathing is very closely tied and so as a person tends to connect to the breathing with their attention and to follow the breath, one breath after the other, there is a reciprocal relation with our attention and the breath, and it tends to create a calming effect on us. It's not always the case, but it tends to have a calming effect. Most people who follow the breathing and get into it will find that they become much more calm and peaceful than they were before. It's very nice and helpful to become calm and peaceful, but in the mindfulness meditation, we don't hold that up as the great goal to become peaceful. The goal is to pay attention. So, if you get more agitated as you meditate which sometimes happens, remember the goal is "let me pay attention to this, let me fold back this into the meditation. Let me do mindfulness of agitation." It might be really helpful sometimes, for example, there might be something you haven't looked at very carefully in your life ever that you've been holding at a distance, and as you sit trying to relax in meditation, you lower your guard. So some of you don't want to lower your guard in meditation. You lower your guard, and when you lower your guard, this thing bubbles up. And then "Oh no, now I have to look at it." And then you get agitated. "But I'm meditating, I want to be calm". And then you're more agitated because you're judging yourself. Just fold it in. "Oh, now I get to pay attention to what it's like to get agitated."

So the breath is calming. It's also, because it's continuous, going back and forth, it's a wonderful place to train yourself to be in the present moment. And the trick for this mindfulness meditation is how to keep yourself in the present. And you will all find out pretty soon when we meditate, how difficult it is to stay in the present moment. The mind has a mind of its own. It will take you away. We are trying to train the mind to stay in the present so we can offer careful attention to what is going on in the present. And from a Buddhist point of view all the wisdom, all the insight, all the enlightenment that you need to have in your life, will be found, will only be found, when you are able to stay in the present. If you're not in the present, you're not going to find it. It's not going to be there. So the breath is a place we train yourself to calm down enough to settle the mind, to concentrate the mind enough, so that the mind can begin to stay present in the present moment. So breath meditation has a lot of functions. It's very beneficial. I consider to be the foundation, and from that foundation, then we expand the attention beyond that, eventually to include all of our life. So we'll start very narrow, just the breathing, this week. Then next week, the body, then emotions, kind of like we're expanding out and out, and by the end of the course I hope you have some sense on how to bring this wonderful capacity of attention, this clear non-reactive non-judgmental attention to all aspects of your life. That's the goal.

I'm going to talk a little about meditation posture. For sitting meditation there are basically two primary postures that people tend to use. One is sitting on the floor, in a so-called cross-legged position, and the other is in a chair. You are welcome to sit in either one. There are some little advantages, some small advantages to sitting on the floor, but it's fine to sit in a chair. In the iconography of Buddhism they have this idea that far in the future there's going to be the next Buddha, and they have statues of this next Buddha, and he's always sitting in a chair. So it's really fine to sit in a chair.

Now we'll talk a little about both, sitting on a chair and on the floor. The most important thing about posture is to have an alert spine. Sit in a way that your spine is alert, upright. You don't want to be so upright that you're tense, but you want to sit upright so that there's a sense of alertness. And also in such a way that you're not going to cause long term problems. If you stoop over a lot, mediating this way, most people, especially those who have a sedentary life, will find that their back will go out at some point. It's really good to train yourself to sit with a good upright back posture, both for the chair and for the floor. One of the ways we do that on the floor, is classically we sit on a round cushion, it's called in Japanese a "zafu", and the idea is to sit on the front third of it, so you are sitting on the forward edge, so you let your pelvis tilt forward. With your pelvis forward, it helps the knees come down, and it creates a little curve in the lower part of your back. You don't want to overarch. Maybe slightly more than the natural curve. A little sense of strength there in the lower back, and what you want to do is to try ideally to have both knees on the floor, and your butt on the cushion. It's easier to get your knees down if you are elevated. If your hips are really tight, then sitting really high helps. You can get two cushions or build up a whole throne, in order to get your knees down. If you can't get your knees down for any reason, then you can also prop it up with a cushion or sweater under your knee. And if you have that nice tripod of the three points, your knees and your butt it creates a nice stable base for holding the rest of your torso upright. It's nice to have that low center of gravity and that wide base for sitting. You don't tend to have that in a chair, that's one of the advantages of sitting this way.

I recommend for sitting on the floor that you don't sit cross-legged, technically you don't cross your legs, but rather, it's called "tailor fashion" or "Burmese fashion", so that your legs are sitting one in front of the other, so they are not actually crossed. It's more comfortable. It can be more comfortable for people to sit full lotus or half-lotus. There are some advantages to sitting in the lotuses, but for most people it's not realistic, because their hips and knees are not flexible enough. Most people who are not used to this, it takes a while for the body to stretch out, to get comfortable with it. It's well worth doing.

If you're sitting on a chair, the recommendation is that you definitely don't cross your legs. Both feet flat on the ground parallel to each other, so both the soles of the feet are firmly planted on the ground or a cushion if you need the support. The trick is to not have your knees higher than your hips, because then it tends to push out the lower part of your back and you get a strain there. Ideally your knees would be a little lower than your hips. Or maybe parallel to your hips. Some people do like to have their legs out sideways because it tends to give them a wider base and more support. You are welcome to do that as well.

If you are sitting on the floor, there are some alternative ways of sitting which are nice. One way of sitting is using a bench. There are wooden benches you can slip under your thighs and slip your legs underneath, so it's like sitting on your knees. Another way of sitting is to take a round cushion, but place it upright and put it between your ankles. It gives you a low center of gravity. Some people can't sit cross-legged, this may work for them.

Having the back straight is really important. One way to help you do that, both on the floor and the chair. You take your hands on either side of your hips and push yourself up off the chair or cushion as hard as you can, and as you let go of your arms, let your shoulders roll a bit back. You probably find yourself sitting straighter now. Your chest will be more open, shoulders perhaps hanging a little more. That's a good probably more erect and alert posture than you had before. If you are sitting in a chair the recommendation is, that if you can, don't use the back rest. People have all kinds of conditions in the back that require them to use a backrest, and it's find to do that. But there is a variety of reasons for that. One is that you are more likely when you use a backrest to lean into it and relax too much and fall asleep. Another reason is a little more subtle. In Buddhism we are trying to develop a certain type of ability to be self-reliant, and there is a connection between our physical body and our emotional life. It's easier to discover how to be self-reliant emotionally and psychologically if you're self-reliant physically. If you are relying on something when you are meditating, it's a small thing, a subtle thing, but it can be a little harder to discover the self-reliance you are looking for. If you need to use a back rest what's preferred is to use the support as low down as your back will allow. So have the pillow really low down so your low back is supported and so the upper back is free. As low as you can with your back. Some people have to use the whole back, and that's fine.

One of the people who teaches at our center, did meditation mostly lying down, due to various injuries they have had. So it's fine to do it laying down on your back as well. There are just more challenges with falling asleep that goes on there.

So, sit up straight and put the hands anywhere where both hands are doing the same thing and they are comfortable. The classic Buddhist meditation posture for hands is together in front of you just below the belly button, floating, not resting on anything, but floating, with the thumb tips touching lightly. That's a classic way of doing it. Many people will do it with their hands on their knees or thighs. I usually meditate like this now. The hands pointing up or down, doesn't matter. What does matter is that sometimes, if you have your hands resting on your ankles, all the way down, or you have your hands too far forward on your thighs or your knees, it sometimes pulls the shoulders forward and can actually over time create a strain. It also pulls you down, people tend to slouch more easily. So it's possible to get a cushion (or towel, or sweater) and put it on top of your ankles, so your hands are held up higher. Or simply you can pull your hands in from your knee.

The ancient texts and meditation manuals all talk about how important it is to have your head squarely on top of your shoulders. Where else would it be? However, it's very easy for people, for their heads to pull forward, their chins to stick up, or sometimes it tips to the side. The idea is to keep it straight. The ancients talked about lining up your ears with your shoulders. That's how it should be. Not forward. Also, there is the idea in Buddhism, that if your chin goes up, it's usually a sign that you are lost in thought, and if you pull your chin down a bit, it actually controls the wandering mind a little bit.

So there is also this idea that it's good to tuck your chin back and down a little bit when you meditate. You can get the same effect, by opening up space between your top vertebrae and the skull. I actually like that open space rather than pulled down. It puts the head in the same position.

In our tradition here, we instruct people to meditate with their eyes closed. It's not necessary to have the eyes closed. There are teachers in our tradition who do sometimes teach to meditate with the eyes open, and often when people are really sleepy we tell them to meditate with their eyes open. But we recommend the eyes closed.

But if you've done other meditation practices before that involve the eyes open, and you're more comfortable that way, please do that.

The mouth is kept closed. It is said that it is helpful to have the tongue resting lightly against the palate at the top of the mouth. That's the basic elements of posture.

Questions:

***Question:** I heard that it makes a difference for men and women which hand is on top, having to do with the Ying and Yang.*

Gil: You're welcome to do that. Classically in India, the left hand was on the bottom, and in Zen they switched it so the left hand is on top. I think it's one hand is supposed to be compassion, the other wisdom – a theory like that. I learned in the Zen tradition to have the left hand on top, but there was never any differentiation in Zen between men and women. But if you find a difference, you're welcome.

***Question:** Do you meditate with the lights on or keep them off?*

Gil: Both ways are fine. If you're really sleepy, sometimes sitting in front of a light can be really helpful even with your eyes closed. Having a lot of light coming in can stimulate and keep you awake. If it's really dark, it may be easier to fall asleep. You can experiment and see what works best for you. There's no hard and fast rule.

Guided Meditation:

So, you got the basic posture, now we'll do a guided meditation. Either on your cushion or a chair. Get yourself in what feels like a stable and alert posture, and hopefully feels somewhat relaxed. So there is a balance between being alert and relaxed. This balance is an important issue. Gently close your eyes. Please remember that the most basic thing we're doing is simply noticing, knowing, what is happening in the present moment. It's really simple. Before you have any ideas about getting concentrated or being peaceful or making something happen – just noticing. So you might take a moment now just notice how you are, what's going on for you, what your own immediate experience, your lived experience is, here and now.

Silence.

And as you pay attention to here and now, how easy is it to stay here and now? Are you operating on any ideas that something is supposed to happen? Trying to accomplish something, more than just notice.

In order to help us settle in and get connected to the present moment, it's often helpful at the beginning of a meditation session to take a few long slow deep breaths. Breathing in deeply, and then as you exhale, relax in your body. Letting go whatever tension you can easily let go.

Now allow your breathing to return to normal. For this mindfulness meditation we are not making any effort at all to breathe in any special way. If you've learned yogic breathing or any other kind of special breathing techniques, we don't breathe as a technique. We just let ourselves breathe whatever way we are. Also, at the beginning, it can be helpful to briefly scan through your body, to see if there are any places where you can relax some of the muscles in your body. It might be possible to soften your forehead, your eyes. It might be possible to soften your jaw. Some people find it helpful to drop their mouth open for a moment and then float their teeth back together again. Float the lips back together, and that can loosen up the jaw a little bit. A number of people carry tension in their shoulders. Even if it's not possible to relax the shoulders, maybe there can be a softening around any tension there is in your shoulders. Perhaps you are able to soften a little bit in the chest. And also it can be helpful to relax your belly. Keep your stomach soft, your belly maybe hangs lower a little bit.

So first, breathing in deeply, and second you are breathing normally, and just scanning the body and softening whatever you can that's easy to soften. And then next, see if you can get a global awareness of your body. Don't try too hard, just whatever broad awareness of your body that you can establish, letting your attention wander around your body, kind of from the inside, feeling it, sensing it. Feeling the contact of your body against your chair or cushion.

Then within your body, as part of your bodily experience, become aware of how your body experiences breathing. How does your body know that you are breathing or feel that you are breathing. What happens in your body as you breathe? What moves, what changes, what shifts?

Some people can feel the movement of their belly going up and down, rising and falling, or their chest rising and falling, the rib cage expanding and contracting. Some people can feel the air coming in and out of the nostrils. If you have trouble finding your breath, or connecting to the experience of breathing, you can put your hand perhaps on your diaphragm or belly, and then perhaps feel the movement there.

39:22

So wherever you feel your breathing most predominantly in your body, let that be your home base. You're going to try to cultivate your ability to stay in the present moment for the experience of breathing in that place. Feeling the shifts and changes, the in breath and the out breath.

There might be a variety of things that might make it difficult for you to stay continuous with the breathing. Be relaxed about that. The idea is to just know what is happening. Know "I'm easily distracted. I'm easily concerned about other things." Just know that. The mind so easily just wanders off in thought. The moment you notice that happens, then gently, smilingly, bring your attention back to your breathing. Take your

awareness and attention and enter the experience of breathing, as if it's something you can deeply trust. A good place to be.

Try to notice, be alert enough to notice, when you wander off in thought, then soft and relax back to the breath. When you connect to the breathing again, stay with it, do it with some sense of determination to hang in there with the breathing, so you can hang in there with the rhythm of many in-breaths and out-breaths in a row.

You might have various concerns or issues that are vying for attention.. See if you can let them be in the background. In the foreground, you are just tuning in to the breath. Being with the breath. Being with the rhythm of breathing in and out. Being with the physical experience of breathing. Perhaps as you do that, just being with it, is a little calming or settling.

Some people find it helpful to very very softly in the mind label the in-breath "in", the out-breath "out", or as their chest or belly rises to say "rising" or as it falls, say "falling". Just a very quiet whisper in the mind that just encourages you to hang in there, stay present, instead of getting distracted.

We'll sit for two more minutes, in these last couple of minutes see if you can stay connected to the breath, to the breathing.

And then just as it's useful to take a few minutes to settle into meditation, it's useful to take a little bit of time to come out of it. A simple way to do this is to take a few deep breaths again. Feel your body as you breathe in deeply, and then when you're ready you can open your eyes.

BELL.

Back to Talk:

49:00

I like to emphasize that mindfulness of breathing, breath meditation, works when it doesn't work. It works in a sense, if you can stay with your breath. You might say that it didn't work because I couldn't stay with my breathing. When it doesn't work, when the primary thing we're doing, remember, is not stay with the breath, but to pay attention. So when it doesn't work, when you can't stay with the breath, then you are supposed to notice what it is that is making it difficult. What's going on. You are concerned about something, you're thinking about something, you are feeling something, something is going on. You notice what that is. And if you notice what is making it difficult to be present, you are doing the practice. There are 3 options, either you are present, or you are not present, in which case you don't have any problem. And then the 3rd option is that you are present enough to know what's challenging you to be present. In this practice we don't treat that as a problem, we just say "let me notice this." So if you go to a mountain stream, a very shallow pure clean mountain stream, it's possible that you look at the water and you don't see it moving. But if you put a stick vertically into the water, and a little wake gets formed by the current. You see that in fact it's moving. You need to have a reference point to see the current moving – same thing with the mind. It needs to have a reference point to see itself clearly, and the breathing is that reference point. And some of you will learn, and very soon will learn, that your mind is just out of control. And you are lucky if you got two breaths in a row. The mind is just all over. What breath? And some people are so caught up in their thoughts so easily that they didn't even hear that I gave instructions during the sitting. All kinds of things. Or there might be strong emotions that come along, or strong sensations in the body. All kinds of things might come along. But especially with the mind, the movements of the mind, the movements of feelings. Some of the things you feel and think might be pretty obvious to yourself. But as you do this meditation practice, what you'll start doing is uncovering a lot of stuff about yourself that you didn't really know. One of the things, for example, that people will learn if they try to stay with the breath, try to have a reference point, they will learn how busy the mind is. People say "I didn't know the mind was so active, that my mind was wandering off so much, I didn't know my mind was caught up in so many concerns. I didn't know until I tried to have that reference point of the breath.

So, learning that, being attentive to that is good, it's part of the practice. That's why I say breath meditation works when it doesn't work. Isn't it great to do something you can't fail at?

So, what kind of experiences did some of you have, these last 15 minutes of sitting together? Do you want to share anything, comments or questions?

53:30

Q & A :

***Comment:** This is the first time since a car accident a couple of years ago, that I could sit down and not get caught by the little tensions in my back, and in the past, when I get caught, I also contract more and it would spiral out, and here for the first time I could sit down and be with my breath, and trust the breath, and my back was fine, it wasn't a concern.*

Gil: I'm very happy to hear that, thank you.

***Question:** I was sleepy, is there anything I can do?*

Gil: Anybody who meditates sooner or later will start experiencing the falling asleep in meditation. People who are new to meditation, it sometimes happens because most people's habit is that when you close your eyes for any length of time it means you're going to go to sleep, so that your habits kick in. It can take a while to overcome those. The other thing is that it's said that a lot of Americans are sleep deprived, and there are a lot of people, probably a lot of you, who probably need to sleep more than you need to meditate. So, you could open your eyes. That's one thing. You can arouse more physical and more mental energy to keep yourself more alert. Some people who are really sleepy in meditation, find that if they stand do standing meditation, do the same meditation practice but standing. That tends to keep one more awake or alert. Anyone here is welcome to stand, you don't have to do it sitting, if you feel you need that energy. Sleepiness is part of the territory you have to work with. Opening your eyes can help.

***Question:** I was relieved when I heard there was 2 more minutes, even though I was enjoying the experience. I'm trying to stay focused. Is this something we need to practice, do you have suggestions of how we can build up over time?*

Gil: This 6 week course works best if you go home now and meditate every day. After the course you may do whatever you want. You can do whatever you want now also. But it just works better, because it actually builds. If you go home and try to put this to practice, you get some experience with it. What you'll learn over the course of the week will actually be a foundation for next week. It's easier to pay attention to your body if you have the ability to pay attention to your breath. It's easier to pay attention to your emotions if you have an ability to pay attention to your body. It's easier to pay attention to your thoughts if you are able to pay attention to your emotions. It's easier to pay attention to your mind if you have the ability to pay attention to your thoughts. So it builds. The more familiarity you can get during the week.

So I'd encourage you this first week to meditate 20 minutes every day. If you're new to meditation do 20 minutes. If you're not new to meditation, you can do more if you'd like. Next week I'll suggest 25 minutes, and the week after 30 minutes. We'll level off there. Then afterwards you can decide to go back if you want.

Many people find that it's most useful to meditate early in the morning. Before the day begins, before a lot of society wakes up. Your phone is likely to ring. It's an ancient tradition to get up early in the morning and meditate. Some people find for whatever reason that late afternoon or early or late evening works better for them. Find what works best for you. But also consider that when you sit down to meditate that you are really

going to keep the meditation time. Because there are all kinds of important things that will pop up...it seems like "I should do that instead... It might occur to you that it's necessary, at this moment, to defrost the freezer. The idea is when you sit down to do your 20 minutes, you don't want to be disturbed. It's also useful to designate some part – if you can, if you have a big enough home – some corner of your bedroom or some place that you designate as a meditation place. That not much else happens there if possible. So that the association you have of that place, is meditating there. The power of association can be very helpful. For the same reason it's also said it's not useful to meditate in your bed, because there are other associations there. It's also helpful to wear loose fitting clothes. If you have a tight belt it's useful to undo your belt before you meditate.

Some people want to know how do you keep time, for the length of time. It's not so useful to have a clock and keep opening your eyes and checking. Some type of timing system is good. There's a lot of electronic timers now, even a kitchen timer, as long as it doesn't tick a lot. (You can place it in a drawer.) Even some phones have timers on them. Some people have recorded and done a digital recorder of 20 minutes of silence and then run a bell at the end, so you plug in your tape or meditation CD and play the silence... I think on the IMC website, you can download on your computer a meditation timer or you can play it so it will ring.

Question: *Do you recommend music or something?*

Gil: No. It's certainly wonderful to meditate to music. But the idea is something very different we are trying to do here with this practice. To discover how to enter a present moment state, attentive, with clarity and calm, without being helped. You can be helped, but then you have a crutch. We're trying to find out how to do it ourselves, and what that requires of you is to really learn yourself really well. If you are using something else as a prop to help you, you actually bypass that self-learning that has to happen, that allows you some spiritual depth. Some people like guided meditation, and it's fine to use them some, but in the long term you are aiming at a situation where you are just relying on yourself. Now after you've done your 20 minutes of meditation with us this way, then you're welcome to do 20 more minutes with music.

Question: *I found myself using a mental prop. Someone in the past mentioned counting my breaths. It really helped me stay on the breath, but is that cheating?*

Gil: It's allowed. We consider that more of a concentration practice. I did it for years, breath counting. This is what I was taught in Zen. It's a great practice. I think of it as more of a concentration practice than an attention practice. However, I teach it to some people when their minds are really out of control. The counting can really help ground a person, anchor a person. You're welcome to do it. The usual way to do it is to count 1 to 10. Each breath gets a count of 1. And then, when you get to ten, you start all over again. If you lose count in the process, don't try to figure out where you are, just go back to one. If you get to 12 or 13, it's a sign that your mindfulness has slipped. Instead of counting, what our tradition uses, is mental noting or label. A simple "in-out", "rising-falling". An idle mind will get in trouble. The mind kind of wants to think. It's kind of hard to stop the mind from thinking and getting caught by your thoughts. What we can do, it's a little technique, is to use a very very subtle primitive kind of thought. A name or a label, so that the thinking mind is engaged. So that it feels it has a place in life. So, it's helpful, it's encouraging you to stay there. Stay there. Pay attention there. So with the breathing it could be "in" as you breath in, "out" as you breath out. It's very soft, super soft. Almost like you're doing nothing at all. Like a little puff that's encouraging you to stay there. Experience the in breath, experience the out breath. Some people prefer, the way I was taught in Asia, the label "rising-falling". As the belly or chest rises or falls. That way the thinking mind is not idle, it's engaged in the process of helping you. Some people find that helpful.

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Gil: (rephrases question). There are a lot of physical ailments that come from or are strengthened by stress. Stress finds the weak link in the system. Wherever your weak link, the stomach or heart, stress doesn't cause the problem, but it's the weak link. Something like meditation which can relax and let go a lot of stress, can stop that stress. Some ailments can get a lot better with meditation. Some heart conditions...there's no guarantee. I'm not a doctor. But more than that, as a person really gets settled into the present moment and develops some

concentration in the present moment, not only are we not producing stress, but actually doing the opposite, starting to produce all kinds of chemicals, energies, and emotions, that are actually healing in and of themselves. They are very helpful, good energies. There's joy, there's rapture, a deep sense of peace, a good energy that brings us closer to the body – that can be healing and helpful. But there's no way of knowing if meditation is going to help any individual for their particular issues. In terms of the breathing, when we do mindfulness meditation, mostly we just trust the way we are breathing. If it's shallow and fast, we just tune in to that. This is what I'm now learning to pay attention to – to a fast and shallow breath, this is what it's like. As opposed to shifting and changing it. I think of attention, awareness, like giving something room to unfold.

If you go into an elevator, a small elevator, meant for two people, and four really big ugly disgusting people with ketchup down their shirts, stinking, squeeze in there, and you're as high as their bellybuttons. You probably feel claustrophobic and you're happy to get out of the elevator. And now, if you go into a huge cathedral, and the 5 of you, and they are spread out evenly among this huge cathedral, then it's easy to love all humanity, because you're not being oppressed by them so closely. The same way with the mind. If the mind is riding things really close, or there is too much input coming in all at once, the mind is busy and active and concerned, so attached, so clinging, claustrophobic, it can feel very uncomfortable. As we develop awareness the attention is like making more room in the mind. Awareness or attention can have the sense of being spacious. The more centered you are, the more grounded you are in attention or awareness, the bigger this mental space is in your mind. So you have more space for the stuff in your mind, and then you have a much different relationship to all the stuff than if you are claustrophobic in the mind, it's crowded in there with all the stuff. As we make room in the mind, some of the mental and physical structures in the mind that need to unravel, unfold, or evolve in some way, have the space to do so. Some of the things that happen will unwind. Sometimes, giving space or awareness to what's going on, just noticing and giving space, allowing it to be there, it's kind of like pulling the cork from a bathtub full of water, the water will drain out, certain tensions will just drain out. Other things will grow and develop in that space – beautiful qualities: wisdom, clarity, integrity, patience, concentration. A lot of things will develop and grow in that space. Bringing awareness and attention to what's going on, learning to be relaxed in that attention, so that you relax what's there, even if what's there is uncomfortable. Being relaxed in how you pay attention to the discomfort, in a sense it creates a space. What I think a lot of meditators learn, you learn to trust the innate wisdom, the innate intelligence that can unfold towards health. Almost as if there is an innate movement towards health. Even if you're dying, people who die who meditate, will find that the spiritual life, the meditative life, can actually move people as they are dying, to a certain kind of wholeness. So you might not cure the illness, but you become whole. So if you are going to die, it's nice to die whole, not fragmented. There seems to be an innate intelligence that moves towards wholeness. A lot of it has to do with getting out of the way, and meditation is one of those ways that helps. But you can't get out of the way and not be present. You have to get out of the way and be present. Have to be present, and then you get out of the way. Pay attention and be relaxed about what you pay attention to. Include everything in your attention, and then be relaxed about what's there.

It takes a while to get the hang of this. Thank you for coming. Next week we'll talk about how to include the body, which includes to some degree talking about physical discomfort.

Thank you.