

Introduction To Mindfulness Meditation: Mindfulness of the Body - (2 of 6)

Transcribed from a Talk by Gil Fronsdal 10/10/07

Last week I talked about breath. If you think of a human being as concentric circles, we start at the center and put the breath at the center. We use the breath to stabilize ourselves at the center and to center ourselves. Centering means training ourselves to be here and now in the present moment instead of being caught up or lost in the mind. When lost in the mind, we have moved out of the present moment into future thinking, past thinking, fantasy thinking, etc.

So we begin with the breath and the breath stabilizes and centers us, bringing us into the present. Then we move out to the next concentric circle, which is our body, our physical experience, our body's experience. Then beyond that are our emotions, and beyond the emotions is the thinking world. Beyond the thinking world is what's called the mind; and beyond the mind is everything else. The idea is to fill in the center so that the center is a full, stable base. When the center is full, it provides stability to the outer edges of the circle. If you live in the outer edges of the circle without a stable center, you are spinning in a very narrow orbit that is fragile and can easily bend and break. You may live in the world of your thinking as some people do. The thinking world is a very fragile world in which to live. It is subject to all kinds of ups and downs that can cause a lot of suffering for people. Thinking that is disembodied and disconnected from the other circles can become unrealistic because it's not grounded. In Buddhist training or mindfulness, the idea is not to stop thinking. The training is for our thinking to become embodied, realistic, and connected. So we start with the breath and then we go into the body.

Today's subject is the body and embodiment, and paying attention to our physical embodied experience. Now one of the marvelous things about the body is that it is always in the present moment. Our thoughts and our mind might be somewhere else, but the body is always here and now. So part of the task of meditation practice is to bring the body and mind together so they are in the same place at the same time; so they are working together harmoniously; and so they are not at odds with each other, or going at cross purposes. When you meditate, it is not a matter of bringing your body to the mind, it's a matter of bringing your mind to your body, so the two can be together in harmony. If you are sitting here and thinking about what you are going to do tomorrow, then your body is here but your mind is in tomorrow. If you're sitting here and thinking about what's on television tonight at home, then you're here in the present but your mind is in another place. It's really important for the purpose of mindfulness meditation to bring the body and mind in harmony. In Buddhist circles they talk about unification—bringing the mind and body into unity. So in meditation we train the mind to come and be in the same place as the body.

The body is an important help in this process because if you are connected to the body you are in the present moment. Now, any time we do mindfulness meditation, which is this very simple practice of noticing, we bring our attention to the experience, living that experience, and registering what's here. If you are with your breathing it's not only being with your breath—breath in breath out breath in—it is also letting the experience of breathing be registered in that experience. You are taking in the sensations of that experience in a deeper, fuller way. It's like you are on the beach on a nice sunny day, you're on the edge of the ocean, and you stand there and take in the breeze, the smell of the ocean, the sight. You really register the experience; you take it in. So, in the same way, you sit with your breath and take in the fullness of the experience of breathing in.

Now what's often confused with mindfulness is commentary, judgment, or an evaluation of the experience. I like this example about an experience I had many years ago. I was teaching a meditation retreat with some other meditation teachers, two of who loved watching football. What they really

loved was watching the 49ers back when they were winning. So sometimes, when there was a break in the schedule, the teachers would go into the teachers' room and watch the 49ers game—three guys, three Buddhist teachers, watching the 49ers game. And when there was a commercial the guy with the remote would push the mute button. One time after the commercial, the game started, but the guy with the remote did not push the button to get the sounds back. Since he was a teacher of attention and mindfulness, I figured he knew what he was doing. So for a few minutes we watched the game without sound. We saw guys lined up facing each other and then they'd fall down. We saw a guy running past the fallen guys and we were happy for him. He crossed the line then we saw a guy come out of the back and tackle him, and "Oh, too bad he didn't make it!" Then after awhile my friend pressed the button and the sound came back on. It really struck me how different the experience was of watching the game without the sound and watching the game with the sound. With the sound, it was a lot more exciting. I got pulled into the game much more. With the sportscaster's commentary it wasn't just a guy making it past some lines, it was "Oh my, he's on the 30! He's on the 20! OH NO!" With his excitement and the sound of the fans I got pulled into the game. Normally, when I watch football I wouldn't separate the experience of the game from the commentator. They were just one whole. It's the same with canned laughter. The jokes may not be funny but because of the canned laughter we get pulled in. The same as with mood music. You may be looking at a beautiful, pastoral scene in the woods. It looks very happy but then you hear the ominous mood music and, "Oh no!" you're frightened just looking at the scene. So the scene is what it is but the mood music affects your experience of what it is. The commentator affects the experience of watching the football game. There is nothing wrong with that. That's part of the fun of football. But the same phenomenon happens in our own minds. We take the commentary in our minds to be integral to the experience we're having. The commentary influences the experience. So we might be in some benign situation and someone walks in. We might have a judgment about that person—that person is lousy—and so the commentary goes on. Even if it's just a flip of judgment with no basis, the commentary affects the way we see the person. So the person and commentary have become entangled. The same goes for judgment about ourselves. We may follow a few breaths and then the mind wanders off. Then there may be commentary, "I'm a bad meditator, I wonder if I should be doing Sufi dancing." So the commentary might not be so friendly, it might be critical. Then we can get frustrated. We don't separate the fact that the breath is very simple and that we have gotten distracted. We've gotten complicated with judgment and evaluation. Unfortunately no one yet has discovered a mute button for the mind so it is not easy to stop making the commentary and judgment. One very important aspect of mindfulness meditation is learning to recognize the commenting, judging, evaluating mind and becoming able to tease apart the commentary from the actual experience. This is crucial both for mindfulness meditation and, from the Buddhist point of view, for the purpose of discovering our freedom. So to distinguish between what's happening and our interpretation of it; what's happening and our judgments about it; what's happening and the meaning we assign to it.

Here is a meaning-making story I like. Sylvia Boorstein is a teacher at Spirit Rock. Many years ago she decided she would do a personal retreat at the San Francisco Zen Center. She'd spend a few days there. She called up the office, and they said, "The guest manager's not here right now. He'll call you back." So the guest manager called her back and she wasn't home. He left a message saying: "This is the guest manager, call me and we'll book your room." So she called back the Zen Center and the office stated the guest manager wasn't in. So Sylvia said, "I think this means I'm supposed to come." And the Zen Student at the office said, "No, I think it just means Robert isn't in." She was making meaning out of it, and it was just that he wasn't in, very simple.

The movement toward meaning: you need to separate that out and try to stay really simple. You might still be making commentary and judgment, but see it as that and don't be fooled by it. Don't think that's the real picture. Realize there is a difference between what's happening and the judgments about

what's happening; what's happening and the thinking about what's happening. At least, in principle, understand that mindfulness meditation is choosing to not live in the thinking mind and the commentary and judgment but instead to live in the awareness and the attention to what is happening. This is a principle you understand. There is a choice being made in mindfulness meditation. You are not saying, "Don't think." We're saying don't live there, don't get swept away in those thoughts, let the attention be open and soft and relaxed. Have a silent awareness like you would, if looking at a sunset at the beach. You don't think about the sunset; you take it in; thinking about it is not the sunset. There is not much discursive thought that goes into watching the sunset. So we're not living in the thoughts, but we're taking in the actual experience.

So this is true with our body. It is very important in meditation to learn to separate out the immediate experience from the interpretation; the judgment; the commentary. This in theory makes meditation very simple; it just simply is what is here, simply what the experience is. And we're not getting involved in the world of thinking and meaning-making and judgment and analysis and getting very complicated very quickly. It's very simple.

So a few more words before we meditate. Our bodies are very important parts of who we are, parts of the human experience. There are certainly plenty of people who are disconnected from their bodies. Some people are that way because of their professions. Perhaps they spend their whole work time thinking a lot, at the computer perhaps. And because of years and years of habit they are not so connected to their bodies. Some people may disconnect from their bodies for psychological reasons. To be in their bodies means to feel all their feelings and they don't want to feel all their feelings. Perhaps there was trauma early in their lives and so they disconnected, and they don't want to touch into that part of their life. Mindfulness works a lot better if you are connected to your body. So, for many people, it's a slow training to reawaken the body, to rediscover the body. The ability to sense what exists in the body becomes stronger and more heightened as we do this meditation practice. Becoming present here and now is not just something we do with the mind—it helps a lot if you show up with your body, and to think about that when you sit down to meditate. You're not just checking out of your body in order to have some kind of strange, mental, spiritual experience. You want to sit down and pay attention, and sit in a way in which you show up with your body. Your body is a tremendous support for the practice of attention and awareness. If you show up in your body you can sense the fullness of being in your body and feel – "Here I am." You feel solid, connected, rooted.

There's a visualization that's done in meditation circles where you visualize yourself as a mountain. It works well if you sit cross-legged: the kind of rooted, solid, "Here," "Here you are." And the mind might wander away to other times and other places, and the idea is not just to come back and pay attention to here, but to come back and feel "here," connected here, rooted here, to feel present here, and to feel in your body here. It is a slow process for many people, but over the months and years as you do meditation, you will probably find that your body will become more and more awake, and more and more the source of intelligence, understanding, love, and compassion. Many of the best qualities of the human being come through being embodied and if we're not embodied it is hard to have some of the best of what is human come through us.

GUIDED MEDITATION:

So that's the introduction to the body. Let's do some meditation. So with your body, establish a posture that expresses alertness and physical presence, and that offers a modicum of ease as well. Take some time getting into your body. I did many years of Zen training and something I noticed is that the longer someone was a Zen Student, the more time they took preparing their posture for meditation. They would rock back and forth, forward and back, and get everything lined up. They were careful of the shoulders, feel the spine, and get their hands just right. The longer you meditate, the more you know

about the details of your body, and so you get the details all just right.

Gently close your eyes. It's helpful in the beginning of the meditation session to take a few long, slow, deep breaths. And part of the function of this is to enter into your body through feeling the massage and the movement of your breathing. As you exhale, allow yourself to relax. Let go. Let go of the thoughts and concerns of the day. Take a few long slow deep breaths to remind yourself of your body. Here's this body, where you are going to live during these minutes of meditation. And then let your breath return to normal, making no effort to breathe a special way. And perhaps again as you exhale, you can soften some of your body. Maybe it is easy to soften. Send a softening to the muscles of your face. Perhaps you can let your mouth drop open briefly, softening your jaw, and then letting the teeth float together again. It will be helpful to soften the shoulders, the shoulder blades, to soften the chest, and also to soften the belly, letting the belly hang forward a little bit. And here and now, become aware of your body, broadly and globally as you can, sensing its aliveness, vitality, warmth, pulsing, pressure, vibration, energy. You might be aware of uncomfortable sensations in your body. See if you can be very simple with these. Without commentary or judgments or assigning meaning to their presence, just let them be there and become aware of the body in a broad expansive way, not focusing on any particular area of discomfort.

Then within the body, as part of the body, become aware of how the body experiences breathing. You might feel the movements of the chest, the ribcage, the belly, and the diaphragm. You might be aware of the sensations of air going into the nostrils. Whatever way you can feel the physical sensations connected to breathing, you feel the rhythm, the alternation that comes with breathing in and out. Centering yourself on those sensations, let your awareness take them in. Be careful not to be caught by any commentary you have, but rather stay living with the immediacy of the sensations of breathing. There is no need to make any commentary or judgments about the mind wandering off in thought. As soon as you notice that's happened, begin again sensing your breathing. Try to be very simple and begin again. Then as you begin again with your breathing, do so with a sense that you're going to hang in there, breathing in and breathing out, one breath after the other. Let go of your thoughts in favor of hanging, absorbing, taking in the body's physical experience of breathing. You are inside the sensations of breathing, inside the breathing, feeling it, sensing it, experiencing it. Some people find it helpful to very quietly, very softly, whisper in the mind. Label the in-breath "in", the out-breath "out", or the rising of the chest or belly as "rising," the falling as "falling". It helps you stay connected.

Notice if you're getting caught up in commentary. If you are, see if you can disentangle yourself in favor of being present for the experience of breathing. If anything is happening that is making it difficult to be with the breathing, be relaxed about that. Notice what that is, notice it without commentary without judgment, just this is how it is. A simple acknowledgment—and maybe it's easier to come back and be with the breathing if you acknowledge the difficulty.

Now stop paying attention to your breathing. Let go of any effort to be with your breath; instead turn your attention to the strongest physical sensation in your body. It doesn't have to be so strong, but it could be very strong. It doesn't matter what it is—it could be pleasant; it could be unpleasant. In a very soft, relaxed way, bring your attention to, take in, and be present for whatever is the strongest physical sensation in your body. If it disappears while you're watching it, being present for it, then find the next one. And as you do this, stay present for your physical experience. Notice if there is any tendency to commentary, judgment, meaning-making. To the best of your ability, separate the two out, put aside the commentary and let yourself feel more fully, sense more fully, the sensation in your body. Notice what might happen to it as you are present for it. Feel the strongest sensation in your body from beneath, from the top, the front, the back. Feel it and sense it almost like you can do it from different directions. Not so much watching it with the mind as sensing it from within the body. Let it come into

awareness. And for the last minute of the sitting come back again to your breathing and then hang, hang in there with the rhythm of your breathing. And then to end the meditation it can be helpful to take a few long, slow, deep breaths to fully reconnect with your body. When you feel ready you can open your eyes.

BACK TO TALK:

So the usual instructions for mindfulness meditation recommend that you use the breathing as the center, the default; grounding yourself and centering yourself in the experience of breathing. There are some people for whom the breath is not so useful. For these people there are other objects that can be used for grounding and the centering. But the breath is pretty good. The point of mindfulness meditation is not to live in your breathing all the time but to learn how to bring a wise, freeing, and liberating attention to all aspects of our lives. And the way we do this in meditation practice is by choosing to bring our attention to, and to center ourselves on, the breath. The emphasis is placed on the breathing until another experience becomes more compelling or more predominant.

When another experience becomes more compelling, we let go of the breath and bring our silent non-discursive attention to that experience. So this week here we are going to do that for the body. So if a sensation in your body becomes stronger than the sensation of breathing, you can let go of the breath and let your attention settle into that physical experience in your body that's more compelling. Sometimes it can be pleasant, sometimes it can be unpleasant. For beginners there certainly can be discomfort. When people first start meditating, they're not used to holding their meditation posture. It can take awhile—some weeks, some months—for the body to work out its kinks—where it's not aligned, or it's tight, or not strong enough. The idea then is to bring the attention to whatever is most compelling. Over time different things will speak up, different things will want your attention, will become compelling. And the theory behind this in mindfulness meditation is if you don't have an agenda for what you pay attention to, there is some priority to the breath but you're not locked to it, then the full spectrum of what of your life will eventually reveal itself to you by becoming compelling: the things you need to look at and work through and to resolve will come up in their own time. You can be very relaxed. You don't have to be in a hurry expecting things to happen. Over time, emotions come up, thoughts come up, body sensations come up. A lot of things will come up and get worked through. In traditional Buddhism they call it a purification process, a clearing process, or an emptying process. So there has to be a willingness to let go of the breath and open up to the wider spectrum of what's going on.

So for this week, if the body becomes more compelling or more predominant than your breathing, just let go of your breathing. Let your attention center itself on that part of your body with the strong sensation. And again, separate out the commentary and just stay with the immediacy of that experience. The immediate experience is often much more simple than the commentary. Stay with the simplicity of it. And then hang in with it. Get to know it better. Feel it more fully. See if you can enter into the experience more fully and sense and be present for it. If entering into more fully is too much, then imagine that you're taking a bird's-eye view of it. Still stay present for the experience, but imagine like you're a bird up in the sky watching from a distance. For some experiences that's the way you stay present because if you get too close to it, it might feel too intense. You're still staying present but with a bird's-eye view, making it possible to be there with it. You can adjust the distance you have.

The idea is to be present for an experience as long as it is predominant. What we're doing is training our mindfulness. And since mindfulness can be trained on anything, we're training it on a strong sensation in the body. If there's an idea that this strong sensation shouldn't be there, that's commentary. If you have the idea that you need to get rid of this, that's a comment. If you have the idea, "If only this wasn't here then I could really meditate," that's a comment. You don't have to

believe any of those comments. You don't have to get involved in the commentary. You develop a tremendous amount of personal power if you learn how not to get caught in and believe those thoughts. Our thinking mind will say, "Wait a minute, I'm the one's whose in charge, aren't I?" But you'll have tremendous power if you don't believe in those thoughts. You're not going to discard all of your thinking, once and for all, but having the ability not to be pulled automatically into the thinking world gives you a lot of power, so try to keep it really simple. Enter into the world of the sensations in your body. It can be helpful to label them using mental notes. So if you feel an itch, name it, "itch, itch." If it stays for a long time, then the thought arises "It's been there too long," that's a comment. Go back to the itch, the simplicity of your itch "itch, itch." And the mental label, "itch," is a very soft little nudge to stay there, relaxed and present to that experience. Don't run away; don't get caught up in commentary—stay with the simplicity of the itch.

Some of the sensations might be uncomfortable; there might be pain. Pain is very interesting. Physiologists, psychologists, and researchers of pain have found out that pain is not a singular, unitary thing; it's a composite. The experience of pain is made up of many signals that come together. Together they make the notion of pain. So the signal for the body—from the nerves—is not enough to create the idea of pain. Sometimes there are associations, memories, meaning-making, projection, fear, or anxiety. A number of people have pointed out that they might be in physical pain until they get a diagnosis, and then the pain seems to go away. So the psychological factor comes into play sometimes. It's interesting to be present for pain and be able to tease apart the commentary, the judgments, the reactions, and the emotions from the pain itself. Many people find that when they can do that, the pain is not so bad. What makes pain difficult are all the secondary reactions to it. Mindfulness training is very simple and soft. It actually is learning not to get caught up in the flow of the comments that can run our lives. So stay there. The more you stay there, the more you can tease apart the subtler and subtler comments, reactions, and feelings that might be connected to pain. As long as we hold ourselves at a distance from pain—"That pain, I don't want to look at it, I don't want to feel it, get it away from me"—we feel it as a singular thing. But if you relax and soften and go into the pain and feel, then it tends to break up and you see it made up of a variety of different sensations. It might be pulling, twisting, tearing, burning, or vibrating. You might also find that if you get really close to the pain, the pain is not constant. It's actually turning itself on and off. It's not all in the same place, it's moving around; it might just be moving a centimeter, but it's moving and pulsing and sparking. And when you see it sparking, vibrating, pulsing, moving, it's a little bit harder for the mind to get caught up in—"Oh no, this is permanent, it's constant."

So a new world opens up to many experiences when you bring this careful mindfulness to them and you drop below the commentary and concepts you have about them. So if you relate to pain as just pain, you are probably relating through a concept, and all the associations you have to that concept. But if you experience the sensations, they may still be uncomfortable, but the experience might be more one of twisting, pressure, tension, and a variety of particular sensations. The same thing is true for pleasant sensations. You might go ahead and feel a pleasant sensation and be present for it.

We also include sounds in physical sensations. Sounds are not meant to be seen as intrusions for mindfulness meditations; they're to be included with it. Now when people do concentration meditation, which is a different style of meditation, there are things which are considered to be distractions. In concentration meditation, you try to concentrate on one object, so something can take you away from that. However, in mindfulness meditation we're not locking onto one thing; we're not locking on the breath; we're ready to open the awareness to what is happening. So if a sound becomes predominant, then we do sound meditation. If your neighbor's dog is barking, you don't have to be angry—thinking, "That's disturbing my meditation!" The dog barking becomes your meditation. What we do then is turn the attention to the listening— "hearing, hearing." We take in the vibration, the

sense, the feelings, the whole experience of listening to the dog barking.

My teacher in Burma, a great meditation master, was a fighter kind of guy. He probably should have been in a boxing ring. He could be intimidating. He'd raise an eyebrow and we all thought, "Oh, no!" When he was a young monk learning to meditate and on his first time meditation retreat, he had a roommate. The roommate, another monk in his room, was lazy. My teacher was self-righteous and heroic. He was going to sit there and meditate and get enlightened. So he would sit up in bed late at night and meditate. His roommate would go to bed early, and the roommate snored. This was a problem until my teacher understood that he had to include the snoring as part of the meditation. So he turned his attention to the snoring and did snoring meditation. And my teacher said, that this was his entryway to deep meditation. The snoring became the object for his deep concentrated, deep mindfulness. It opened up. He had to drop his commentary, reactions, and self-righteousness and just be there with the simplicity of the snoring. What's beautiful about this is that with mindfulness meditation, we don't talk about distractions. There aren't any distractions, just something else to include in the awareness. So for now because we're trying to keep it simple this first couple of weeks: breath, body, and sounds. Try to stay with your breath as best you can. If a strong sensation arises in your body that is more compelling than your breath, then let go of the breath and turn to that, like we did in that last meditation. If strong, compelling sounds arise, be relaxed, include those. Every time you take in something new, every time you say "Oh that's compelling, let me take that in," try to see if you can meet that experience with a sense of ease, and relaxation. Don't be alarmed. Don't pounce on it—"Okay now I'm going to take in this experience!" Be as you would if you were standing at the beach and taking in the breeze. Do it in a soft way. Even if part of you is upset that the knee hurts, see if you can train yourself to meet this with a little bit of softness.

So it might be nice to hear from a few of you about what's happening in meditation. We did 20 minutes. At the end when I asked you to turn your attention to the most compelling, strong sensation in your body and you brought that into your awareness, what happened to you? What happened to your meditation? What was that like? Anybody like to share?

QUESTIONS:

Student 1: *"I hadn't noticed it until tonight, but when you asked us to stop focusing on the breathing, I was very surprised by how my pulse rate, or blood flowing in my body became so powerful. I was very surprised by it, and I had to go back to my breathing because it was disturbing for me at the beginning. But I can feel my blood pulsing."*

Gil: "That happens, yes, for a variety of reasons. Thank you."

Student 2: *"I had a meditation teacher who once said 'I used to think that my mind was the most important part of myself until I realized who was telling me that.' And so in my meditation I've always been struggling between my mind and my breath for spaciousness. And so coming to the body this time I can't believe I'd forgotten about the body. That was really grounding for me, and it wasn't so much about 'breath, breath' which is important, but just to be able to feel the sensations of the body. It makes so much sense and is so powerful for me. I really appreciate that."*

Gil: "Good. And I hope you will learn by the end of the 6 weeks is that there is no need to struggle between the different parts of who we are. There is a way to use the attention and awareness to be very inclusive and include, rather than maintain the conflict, between different parts. So when we talk about thinking in the mind, it will expand to include that as well."

Student 3: *“What is interesting for me is my mid-back. That’s where my attention goes. And it goes between water flowing through it—very comfortable—to a stiff rock. It just changes and alternates and I started doing the naming thing that you talked about. I just said “stiff, flow” and without judging it, it became a form of acceptance which is quite unusual.”*

Gil: “So the naming and being present was a form of acceptance. Great. Some people will use the word acceptance to describe what the mindful awareness entails. It entails a kind of presence that allows things to be there. Some people describe as being acceptance. There’s a book called, ‘Radical Acceptance’ that describes this practice. Thank you.”

Student 4: *“If you’re focusing on your breath but it’s hard for you to breathe because you’re really congested, should you just focus on being congested?”*

Gil: “You could. Anything can be a subject of mindfulness and you probably have a lot of commentary to tease apart. In some ways an uncomfortable meditation because of that, but certainly you could do that. It might also be, if your mind is really scattered, and you can’t really be there very well with the breath with its congestion, you can use something else that’s more useful to pay attention to. So, for example, it might be more useful, rather than being aware of the breath around the area of your face and your nose, just to be aware of the movement in your belly. Soften your belly and feel the movement down there. Some people find it useful to be aware of the expansion and contractions of the back ribcage because it’s much more neutral. It’s not connected to the congestion, and the congestion disappears because you’re so focused on the sensations in your back. One common alternative would be to do listening meditation. Be very relaxed and open, just hear sounds, and notice how different sounds arise uninvited. They just suddenly appear uncreated by you— “hearing, hearing, traffic, hearing, rustling, hearing.” Take it all in and then if something else becomes compelling then you can go to that part of your body. Sounds are always in the present, so it’s a way of training yourself to be present. Some people find it very relaxing to do listening meditation that way. That’s another alternative. So when the body is difficult, sometimes it can be helpful just to ignore it.”

Student 5: *I notice that most of my intrusions are of little preparations for good answers for the teacher. And I go back to second grade with very good answers. So when I had noticed already that my left clavicle hurt, and you said to let go of the breathing and just go with the one thing that is most prevalent, it was clearly that. And I was ready for an answer, ready to tell the teacher what it felt like. So I just noticed that that’s a real common intrusion for me, and it was not too hard to say ‘Oh, that old familiar intrusion, I know that one.’*

Gil: “Great. Part of the function of this kind of meditation practice is to begin revealing the common habits, the common mental reactions we have. Some of them can be very subtle and not seen in daily life because they happen so quickly. But as we get more centered, focused, and still, these kinds of things become clear. Once you start seeing them, it gives you the option to have a new relationship to them. To not let them push you around but actually relax and let go and not believe them. Learning not to believe your thinking is a great help.”

Student 6: *“I’m not sure if you talked about sleepiness. I was struggling with that today, so when you said to turn your mind to what was particularly bothering you, it was sleepiness.”*

Gil: “Good. I didn’t say focus on what was bothering you. What’s bothering you is more in the realm of the commentary. In this meditation practice, there is nothing that needs to be thought

about as bothering, it's just stuff that's happening. What I said was 'what's strongest.' Now, sleepiness can be one of those things that is quite compelling, quite strong. There are two general approaches with sleepiness: the pure way for mindfulness meditation is you take the sleepiness on as the subject of awareness. So you go into the body and you feel the heaviness of your eyes, the heaviness in your cheeks, the low energy, the heaviness in your shoulders, and the murkiness of the mind. You explore all the different sensations that go with sleepiness. Two things happen then. One is that you might wake up a little bit because you get interested—"Wow." The other is you're doing mindfulness. So that can work for some people, just do that—that's the pure way. The impure way or the other way is to do something about it, and so there are a variety of things you can do if you're sleepy in meditation. One is to open your eyes, just opening your eyes sometimes can bring more alertness. Sit up straighter; put more energy into your body. Sometimes you can awaken a little more mental energy or effort. Try to notice more things more carefully and more often, be more attentive—that can wake the mind up a little bit. You can also do standing meditation. If you're really sleepy just quietly stand in your place and continue with your meditation standing. Most people find that once they're standing they won't fall asleep. Once someone did fall over, but I've been teaching this for almost 20 years so once in 20 years is not so bad. More often people have fallen over sitting. You can also wash your hands or your face with cold water. Get more sleep."

Student 7: *"Is there any difference meditating by yourself or meditating in a group of people?"*

Gil: "Yes. Many people report differences but different people report different kinds of differences. Some people find that it's a lot easier to meditate in a group than alone. There's group support, group feeling, and ambience, and it's a lot easier to stay focused. Some people are surprised. They come here Monday nights and they sit for 45 minutes. "How did I manage that? At home, I'm lucky to sit 15 minutes." It's because the energy is going in that direction. However, there are other people who find it really irritating to be around all these people. So many people, rustling—"This person sat down too close to me. I can hear their breathing. It's so much better to sit at home." So it depends on the person. People often report differences, but different people report the differences differently."

Student 7: *"But the energy around you is still the same."*

Gil: "Yes. I think there is a kind of energy or atmosphere that occurs when there's a lot of people meditating and being really quiet together. If you are still enough you can tune into that and feel support for that. It's not that strange. On occasion, we've had the UPS person burst into the door when we're meditating. And the UPS person gets really quiet. It doesn't take a lot to feel something. There can be a certain kind of group energy that happens, or a group atmosphere that people can feel. I feel it. So yes that can happen, but there can be other factors that override this so for some individuals. For them, it actually works better to meditate at home alone."

Student 8: *"You said sometimes people fall over. I have the feeling that I'm going to fall. It's a split second feeling like I'm out of control."*

Gil: "Do you actually kind of drop?"

Student 8: *"Yes, but it's not like I'm falling asleep."*

Gil: "Is it almost like your body catches itself?"

Student 8: “Yes.”

Gil: “Then no problem!”

Gil: “It could be that you’re falling asleep. Things can happen very quickly and very momentarily. And there can be a dropping of the body; it falls forward. But also sometimes that happens, because there can very brief moments, when the body and mind get very, very relaxed. The mind is no longer caught up in its normal train of thoughts and concerns sometimes it happens in a very deep, thorough way, and then there’s a dropping. It’s a dropping away. You can just take that as a good sign. That’s my general answer. It’s hard to know without really hearing much more over time. But I would generally take it as a good sign. You’re getting relaxed, and dropping. Does that seem okay with you?”

Student 8: “Okay.”

Student 9: *“Hi. I had a sharp pain in my chest and inside my back. That’s what I was aware of, what took over. And I had a lot of aversion to it so it’s really hard for me to tease apart the experience of it from my judgment of it. The other thing is that I find I get more of that when I’m meditating with a group. When I’m meditating on my own I don’t seem to have as strong a physical sensation.”*

Gil: “So it’s hard to know. A few things: next week we’ll talk about emotions. If aversion is more compelling than pain, the instruction will be to pay attention to the aversion. That’s an interesting exploration in its own right: to sense the feelings and sensations of aversion and to be present for these. By looking directly at aversion, it’s easier to tease its experiences apart. Also, you have to be patient. One of the first lessons that any meditator needs to learn is patience. So if it takes awhile to learn to tease these things apart, find out how it works and be present. I don’t know why your pain is more pronounced in a group but as you get more familiar with yourself you’ll be able to catch the subtleties of what’s going on in your mind. You might one day notice, when you come in to meditate, there’s a very subtle judgment about being in a group that is a trigger for that pain or for that sensation, but it’s so subtle that the normal mind can’t see it. Perhaps it happens very quickly but when you get quiet enough you might see that judgment or the thoughts that arise.”

So it’s certainly an adventure. Over time as you do this practice, it’s a phenomenal process of self discovery. You discover so much. But not only do you discover yourself, but more importantly, you discover how to be free of yourself. And as you’re free of yourself you’re more free to be yourself, in a fuller, more complete way. It’s not like you’re becoming a non-entity, you become freer to be yourself in a full way. And then eventually, if you follow this far enough in a Buddhist way, your sense of self falls away, and that’s a wonderful feeling, just to be present without self consciousness.

GUIDED MEDITATION:

So, to shift gears: I would like to do a meditation exercise with you. It’ll just be a few minutes. So if you can, get yourself into a meditative posture again, and gently close your eyes. And take just couple of deep breaths to settle in and relax, and get into your body. And now bring your awareness into your right hand. A heightened sensitivity to what’s happening in your right hand: vibrations, pressure, coolness, warmth, tingling, pulsing, heaviness, lightness, hardness, softness. Feel the three-dimensional quality of that hand, the sensations there. Feel the palm of your right hand, the back of your hand, the fingers. And then letting yourself be soft and relaxed, in a calm, deliberate way, switch your attention

to your left hand. Start awakening a greater sensitivity to what's happening in your left hand. Not thinking about your left hand, but sensing it, feeling it. Feel the tingling, vibration, energy, warmth, coolness, softness, hardness, heaviness, and lightness. And now with calmness, move your attention to experience your breathing—wherever in your body you experience the breathing most easily and in the same way that you took in the experience of your hands. Heighten the sensitivity in that area of your body where you experience the breathing. Enter into the world of sensations there, the fullness of sensations in the part of your body that responds to breathing. Every time you exhale let go of whatever you are thinking about so that as you breathe in you can feel more fully the experience of breathing.

RETURN TO TALK:

So I hope that exercise gives you a little sense that the awareness we're cultivating has a lot to do with sensing more fully, not just watching, but being in it and sensing, letting the whole area become more alive or more aware, revealing itself more fully. Many people do the exercise with the hands, and discover a lot of sensations that they probably wouldn't have been aware of had they not been told to pay attention to the hand. It would never have occurred to them. How many of you have noticed your little toe tonight? You don't pay attention to it. Right? But, when directed, you can bring your attention to your toe so that the toe becomes alive with a lot more sensations. That sense of heightened sensitivity is partly what we're doing with mindfulness practice. So when you're feeling the breath, it isn't just from a distance, or matter-of-fact, kind of watching it come and go, but its actually feeling in there and allowing a heightened sensitivity to arise in your body around the experience of breathing and that part of your body that's breathing. And then if something else becomes more compelling like sensations in your body, you can let go of the breath and take in those sensations and then the idea is try to be more fully there with heightened awareness. Be with what actually is and the simplicity of it, apart from the judgments or commentary or reactions to it. This is how it is, simply by itself. If it becomes too intense, if it's painful, you could get discouraged. If so, please by all means, shift your posture.

The so-called official rest posture of meditation when you are sitting on the floor is to bring your knees up in front of you and wrap your arms around your knees. That's the way to rest if you need to. And then when you feel rested, then you go back. You can shift your posture if it's getting to be too much. What we want to do in meditation ideally is to not shift your posture at the first sign of discomfort. If you're only free when you're comfortable, you're not really free. So part of the training of mindfulness is to learn how to hang in there, to hang out with the mindfulness and be present to the uncomfortable things, so we can find how to be free with them. So we can discover the wisdom, discover the development that happens there as well. But it's your choice how far you go with discomfort. Maybe you'll find it useful to hang in there with more than you normally would, given your normal, habitual reactions.

Next week we'll do mindfulness of emotions. And as I said last week, being aware of the breath makes it easier to become aware of the body. In turn, being aware of the body makes it easier to become aware of emotions. Being aware of emotions makes it easier to become aware of thinking. Being aware of thinking makes it easier to be aware of the mind. So it builds. So thank you very much.