

Introduction to Mindfulness Meditation

Online Course Materials

by Gil Fronsdal and Ines Freedman

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Introduction

This is the written material that we used for the Online Mindfulness Course offered by the Insight Meditation Center in 2009 taught by Gil Fronsdal and Ines Freedman.

www.audiodharma.org/onlinecourses.html

At the request of a number of participants, I have consolidated all the material into one document. In it's current form, it's intended as a support for those who have taken the course previously. We hope it's helpful for you as you continue to develop and grow in your practice.

Ines Freedman

About the Teachers

Gil Fronsdal is the primary teacher for the Insight Meditation Center in Redwood City, California; he has been teaching since 1990 and has practiced Zen and Vipassana in the U.S. and Asia since 1975. He was a Theravada monk in Burma in 1985, and in 1989 began training with Jack Kornfield to be a Vipassana teacher. He was ordained as a Soto Zen priest at the San Francisco Zen Center in 1982, and received Dharma Transmission from Mel Weitsman, abbot of the Berkeley Zen Center. Gil has a PhD in Religious Studies from Stanford University. He also teaches at Spirit Rock Meditation Center where he is part of its Teachers Collective. He is a husband and a father of two boys.

You can listen to his talks at www.audiodharma.org/talks-gil.html

Ines Freedman first became interested in meditation through her yoga practice in 1970. She has been practicing Buddhist meditation since 1985, with Gil Fronsdal being her primary teacher since 1995. She is a graduate of the Spirit Rock Meditation Center Community Dharma Leader Program and was Managing Director of Insight Meditation Center in Redwood City. She has experience with long meditation retreats including extended self-retreats, and has a special interest in working with meditation for those with chronic pain. She directs and teaches the Audiodharma Online Meditation Course, and serves on the IMC Chaplaincy Council. She is a retired chiropractor.

You can listen to her talks at www.audiodharma.org/talks/InesFreedman.html

Her Guided Meditations for Pain are here: www.audiodharma.org/talks-pain.html

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Week 1: Mindfulness of Breathing

Assignment: Week 1

1. Listen to: [Gil Fronsdal's Introduction to Meditation \(1 of 6\)](http://www.audiodharma.org/talks-intromed.html) from 10/3/07:
www.audiodharma.org/talks-intromed.html
 - Transcribed in the Appendix
2. Postures for Meditation
3. Insight Meditation and Mindfulness
4. Mindfulness of Breathing
5. Practice Instructions
6. Practice Support
7. Daily Reflections
8. Optional: *How Mindfulness Works When it Doesn't Work*

Postures for Meditation:

- Introduction
- Sitting Positions
- Chair
- Lying Down
- Hand Positions
- General Guidance
- Legs Falling Asleep?
- Sitting Equipment

Introduction

There are many positions we can meditate in: sitting, standing, walking and lying down. These instructions focus on the sitting position, the most common position for formal practice, as it's conducive to staying alert and relaxed. For those unable to sit, you may use the alternate option of lying down.

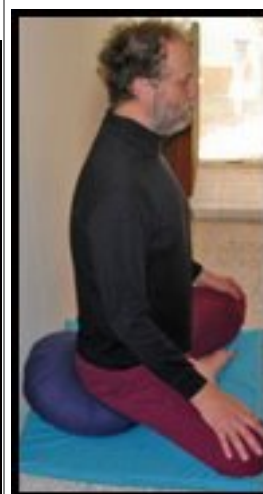
The aim of the sitting posture is to balance being upright and alert, with being relaxed. When exploring a sitting posture, we want to choose a method that is relatively easy. Choosing a method that looks good, but is a significant struggle defeats the purpose of meditation. What is most important is what you do with your mind, not what you do with your feet or legs.

Sitting Positions

Sitting on the floor is recommended because it is very stable. A very effective posture has been the pyramid structure of the seated Buddha. We can use a **zafu** (a small pillow) to raise the buttocks just a little, so that the knees can touch the ground. With your bottom on the pillow and two knees touching the ground, you form a stable tripod base. If you are on a hard floor, placing your cushion on a **zabuton** (a square padded mat) or blankets is recommended. (See **Hand Positions** below.)

Burmese style

- The legs are crossed and the tops/sides of both feet rest on the floor.
- The knees should ideally rest on the floor. Depending on flexibility, it may take some practice for the muscles to stretch and the knees to begin to drop. A cushion under the knee(s) can help.
- Sit on the front third of the zafu (if round), which helps keep your back upright.
- Imagine the top of your head being pulled upward towards the ceiling, which straightens your spine, then just let the muscles go soft and relax.
- There should be a slight curve in the lower region of the back. In this position, it takes very little effort to keep the body upright.
- If you sit more than 30 min. daily, I recommend that you alternate which leg goes in front.



Half Lotus

The left foot is placed up onto the right thigh and the right leg is tucked under. This position is slightly asymmetrical and sometimes the upper body needs to compensate in order to keep itself absolutely straight. If you sit more than 30 minutes a day, I recommend that you alternate which leg goes on top.



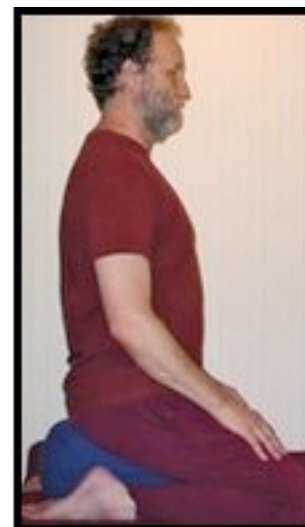
Full Lotus

The most stable of all the positions is the full lotus, where each foot is placed up on the opposite thigh. This is symmetrical and very solid, but only if you can be relax in it. Unless it's easy for you, one can easily injure their knees trying to force it.



Seiza Position (with a bench, zafu, or just kneeling)

- You can sit kneeling using a seiza bench, which keeps the weight off your feet and helps keep your spine straight.
- You can also sit kneeling with a pillow between your legs. If using a zafu, it is often placed "on edge."
- Some people prefer kneeling, without any pillow or bench, sitting on their heels.



Chair

It's easier to stay upright and alert on a chair if you sit closer to the front edge and hold your own spine up instead of leaning against the chair back. If you sit with your pelvis against the back of the chair, you can use a cushion behind you to help keep your back straight. The hips should be slightly higher than the knees, this keeps you from slouching.

- Keep your feet flat on the floor.
- If you are much taller or shorter than "average" you can compensate using a cushion under the feet if shorter, or under the buttocks if taller.
- The hands can be kept on the thighs, or folded on the lap, or on top of a cushion on the lap.



Lying down

- The tendency to fall asleep is more of an issue, but there are ways of encouraging alertness when lying down.
- Place your feet comfortably apart on the floor with the knees up, the knees not touching. If you fall asleep, the knees will bump each other or fall away and wake you up.
- Another choice is keeping one of your forearms perpendicular to the floor, with your elbow and upper arm resting on the floor. If you get sleepy, it will drop.
- Another option is holding the hands in a "mudra" with the thumbs touching each other. This can work as a feedback device: when you are beginning to lose consciousness and drift off, the thumbs will pull apart and that will wake you up to bring you back to your meditation.



Hand Positions

We recommend any position where the arms and hands can be relaxed, often palms up or down on your thighs or folded on your lap. If there is neck, mid-back or shoulder strain, a small cushion can be placed under the folded hands.

Another common position (a similar one used in Zen) involves having the dominant hand held palm up holding the other hand, also palm up, so that the knuckles of both hands overlap. (If you're right-handed, your right hand is holding the left hand...) The thumbs are lightly touching forming an oval, which can rest on the upturned soles of your feet if you're sitting full lotus.



General Guidance

- Wear loose clothing. Loosen your belt if necessary. Material should not gather behind the knees when you cross the legs, inhibiting circulation.
- The mouth is kept closed. Unless you have a nasal blockage, breathe through your nose. The tongue can be pressed lightly against the upper palate. This may reduce the need to salivate and swallow.
- In our tradition we recommend to keep our eyes closed, but it's perfectly okay to meditate with your eyes open. Usually you do so with the eyes kept lowered, with your gaze resting on the ground about two or three feet in front of you.
- The chin is slightly tucked in.

Legs Falling Asleep?

It's common and normal for the legs to fall asleep, as long as it doesn't take more than a minute or two for the circulation to come back. As we get used to sitting, our circulation can improve so it takes longer for them to fall asleep. For some people different cushions, such as crescent shaped, can take the pressure off, and let us sit comfortably longer.

It's helpful to not give in to every urge to move, but to sit with the discomfort for a while, and then slowly and mindfully make a minor adjustment to make the body more comfortable. If sitting cross-legged, you might switch which legs is in front, or on top.

Sitting Equipment

- **Zafu:** a round cushion used for sitting in meditation, usually made from kapok (a kind of cotton) or buckwheat. (The kapok is firmer; the buckwheat has more 'give'.) A zafu raises the hips, making the cross-legged positions more stable. It can also be used "on end" to place between the legs and kneel.
 - **Varieties:** there are several varieties available that may be more comfortable for different bodies, including taller ones and different kinds of "crescent" shapes.
- **Zabuton:** a square or rectangular padded mat that can sit under the zafu or bench to cushion the knees and ankles. Particularly helpful on hard floors.
- **Seiza Bench:** a wooden bench used in the kneeling posture, raising the buttocks up so as not to compress the legs.



Insight Meditation and Mindfulness

Insight meditation, or *Vipassana*, is one of the central teachings of the Buddha. It has continued as a living practice for 2500 years. At the heart of insight meditation is the practice of mindfulness, the cultivation of a clear, stable and non-judgmental awareness. While mindfulness practice can be highly effective in helping bring calm and clarity to the pressures of daily life, it is also a spiritual path that gradually dissolves the barriers to the full development of our wisdom and compassion.

During this 6 week introductory course, the basic instructions in insight meditation are given sequentially, each week building on the previous one. The first week focuses on mindfulness of breathing. The second week expands our attention to mindfulness of the body, to include all our physical experiences. The third week introduces mindfulness of emotions. The fourth week addresses mindfulness of thinking. The fifth week focuses on the "quality" of the mind, on the state of the mind. The sixth week focuses on the role of mindfulness in daily life and in deepening one's spiritual life.

Insight meditation is nothing more mysterious than developing our ability to pay attention to our immediate experience. We are often preoccupied with thoughts about the past or the future or with fantasies. While sometimes such preoccupations may be innocent and harmless, more often they contribute to stress, fear and suffering. Mindfulness practice is learning how to overcome preoccupation so that we can see clearly what is happening in our lived experience of the present. In doing so, we find greater clarity, trust, and integrity. Mindfulness relies on an important characteristic of awareness: awareness by itself does not judge, resist, or cling to anything. By focusing on simply being aware, we learn to disentangle ourselves from our habitual reactions and begin to have a friendlier and more compassionate relationship with our experience, with ourselves and with others.

Mindfulness is the practice of being attentively present. It is called a practice in the same way that we say that people practice the piano. Being attentive is a skill that grows with practice. It develops best if we set aside any self-conscious judgments or expectations of how our meditation is developing. The practice is simply to relax and bring forth an awareness of what is happening in the present.

In order both to develop the skill and experience the joys of non-reactive presence, a daily meditation practice is helpful.

Mindfulness of Breathing

Insight Meditation usually begins with awareness of breathing. This is an awareness practice, not an exercise in breathing; there is no need to adjust the breathing in any way. We simply attend to the breath, getting to know it as it is: shallow or deep, long or short, slow or fast, smooth or rough, coarse or refined, constricted or loose. When we get distracted by thoughts or emotions, we simply return to the physical sensations of the breath.

Because of the mind's tendency to be scattered and easily distracted, we use the breath as a kind of anchor to the present. When we rest in the breath, we are countering the strong forces of distraction. We train the mind, heart, and body to become settled and unified on one thing, at one place, at one time. If you are sitting in meditation and your mind is on what you did at work today, then your mind and body are not in the same place at the same time. Fragmented this way, we all too easily lose touch with a holistic sense of ourselves.

Mindfulness of breathing is a powerful ally in our lives. With steady awareness of our inhalations and exhalations, the breath can become an equanimous constant through the ups and downs of our daily life. Resting with, even enjoying, the cycles of breathing, we are less likely to be caught up in the emotional and mental events that pass through us. Repeatedly returning to the breath can be a highly effective training in letting go of the identification and holding which freeze the mind and heart.

Instruction in Mindfulness of Breathing

Sit in a comfortable but alert posture, and gently close your eyes.

Take a couple of deep breaths, and as you exhale, settle into your body, relaxing any obvious tension or holding.

Breathing normally, bring your awareness to your body. There is no particular way to be; just notice how you are at this moment.

Then, from within the body, become aware of your breathing, however it happens to appear. There is no right or wrong way to breathe while doing mindfulness practice; the key is to simply notice how it actually is right now. Let the breath breathe itself, allowing it to be received in awareness.

Notice where in your body you feel the breath most clearly. This may be the abdomen rising and falling, the chest expanding and contracting, or the tactile sensations of the air passing through the nostrils or over the upper lip. Wherever the breath appears most clearly, allow that area to be the home, the center of your attention, your anchor.

Keep your attention connected with the inhalations and exhalations, sensing the physical sensations of breathing.

Let go of the surface concerns of the mind. Whenever the mind wanders away, gently come back to the breath. There is no need to judge the wandering mind; when you notice that the mind has wandered, simply return to the breath without evaluation.

To help maintain contact between awareness and the breath, you may use a label or mental note. Softly, like a whisper in the mind, label the in-breath and out-breath, encouraging the awareness to stay present with the breath. You can label the breath as "in" and "out," or perhaps "rising" and "falling" for the movement of the abdomen or the chest. Don't worry about finding the right word, just use something that will help you stay connected.

To strengthen your ability to become mindful and present, use the gentle power of repeatedly, non judgmentally returning and resting with the breath.

Practice Instructions: Week 1

Part I. Meditation Practice: 20 minutes or more daily

You will get the most benefit from this course if you engage yourself with the practice every day. It can be helpful to keep a meditation journal, writing a few notes at the end of your sitting.

- Focus on staying aware of your breath.
- Begin the sitting with a conscious intention: clearly remind yourself that you are about to devote yourself to being mindful and present. Let go of any concerns, remembering that you will have plenty of time to take them up again later.
- End the sitting with a brief reflection on what happened during your meditation session. There is no need to judge what happened; you just want to strengthen your mindfulness through a brief exercise in recollection. It can be helpful to write it down.

Part II. Practices in Daily Life

1. Choose one routine physical activity you do each day, and commit to doing it mindfully without distractions. Activities you might choose include brushing your teeth, washing the dishes, driving to work, etc...
 - Do just this one activity while you are doing the exercise. (For instance, no listening to the radio.)
 - Do the activity at a leisurely pace.
 - Remain in the present as well as you can. When the mind wanders, simply come back to the activity.

For 30 minutes this week, as you go about a normal activity, pay attention to your posture. Without straining, assume a posture that is alert and upright. Notice what happens to your mood, thoughts, feelings, presence, and degree of mindfulness as you do this exercise.

Practice Support: Week 1

Choose and respond to the questions below that you resonate with **after** you have practiced with the material for at least a few days.

1. Briefly describe your meditation background (e.g. did you have a meditation practice before starting this course, etc...)
2. Are you sitting every day? For how long?
3. What posture do you sit in? (e.g. cushion, chair, kneeling...) Do you have any issues with this?
4. Where do you pay attention to your breath (e.g. belly, chest, nostrils)?
5. Are you finding it challenging or easy to establish a daily meditation practice?
6. What is your attitude toward your intention to sit every day? (inspired, procrastinating, resistant, neutral...)
7. What happens when you first sit down? Describe what you do and what you notice when you begin your session. For example, do you notice your mood? Your posture?
8. Describe what you feel or notice during a typical in-breath and out-breath.
9. What have you noticed about keeping a balance between alert and relaxed?
10. How do you respond or react to the mind's tendency to wander off into thinking?
11. What distracts you from the breath? Is there a particular theme?
12. Do you usually feel yourself settling in and relaxing?
13. After meditating, have you noticed any difference in how you feel during your next activity?
14. Is there a particular difficulty you are having with the meditation?
15. Did you pick a routine physical activity to be mindful of? What is your experience of that?
16. Are there other times in the day when you take periods to be particularly mindful? If so, when?

Daily Reflections: Week 1

Monday ~ **Continuity of Attention**

Pay particular attention to the very beginning and ending of each inhale and exhale.

- Notice the very beginning of the in-breath. Staying with the in-breath, pay close attention as it ends.
- Notice any gap before the next out-breath. If there is a gap, let the attention rest in the area where you experience the breath.
- Notice the beginning of the out-breath. Staying with the out-breath, pay close attention as it ends.
- Notice any gap before the next in-breath. If there is a gap, let the attention rest in the area where you experience the breath.

In this manner, you can increase the continuity of attention one half-breath at a time. Many of us tend to let our attention drift during the gaps between the in-breath and out-breath. Try to keep your attention continuous from one breath to the next.

"Every moment is worthy of our attention."

Tuesday

Mindfulness meditation involves three aspects: knowing the mind, training the mind, and freeing the mind. When you first sit down, you want to learn what's there. Don't try to force the mind to be quiet right away. Allow yourself to be curious, to explore how you are. If it's chaotic or unpleasant, there's no need to judge it. Gradually, bringing the mind back to the present, over and over again, our mindfulness muscle grows, and our mind begins to be trained. Training the mind brings calm, alertness and a sense of spaciousness. A trained mind sees clearly, and has much more choice of how to respond, it's much freer and less reactive.

"With dripping drops of water, even a water jug is filled." ~ Dhammapada 121-122

Wednesday ~ **Counting Breaths**

For some people, to help settle the mind and develop concentration, counting breaths can be very helpful. It serves as feedback to let you know that your mind has drifted.

- This method can be used for the entire meditation session or just for the first part of the sitting, until the mind calms a bit.
- Silently count each breath, beginning with one and count up to ten. Each count includes an entire cycle of inhalation and exhalation.
 - Some people prefer to count at the beginning of the inhalation, and some near the end of the exhalation, either works.
 - Another way is to count during both the inhale and the exhale. One for the inhale, and one for the exhale; then continue with two and so on...
- When you get to ten, come back to one and start over.
- Remember to keep most of your attention on the physical sensations of breathing.
- If you get distracted at any point, start over again at one. It doesn't matter how far you get, just start again. You are training the mind, not trying to accomplish getting to 10. The starting over is an essential part of the training. Any time you are starting over at one, you are being mindful.

- Even if you only notice 2 breaths in a row, just by coming back and starting again, you are accomplishing the practice.
- Sometimes our attention can drift and we might not notice until we have counted up to 20 or 30! It doesn't matter, back to one.

More Complex Counting: For some people, adding a level of complexity to the counting is helpful. You can count up to ten, just like above, but when you reach 10, you begin to count back down to one. Then start over again from 1 to 10 and 10 to 1.

"If you don't fail at least 90 percent of the time, you're not aiming high enough." ~ Alan Kay

Thursday ~ **Meditation Breaks**

Commit to taking a couple of 5 minute "meditation breaks" during the day. Maybe sitting at your desk, sitting in the car before getting out, sitting quietly before eating a meal. This is a very effective training of your concentration: with a commitment to meditate for just 5 minutes, it's possible to really be present for more of your breaths.

- Close your eyes, take a couple of deep breaths and let your body relax.
- Put aside all concerns.
- Pay attention to the breath, noticing every inhale and exhale. Remain alert and relaxed.

"I like the image of the mind as a mirror. The mirror has the capacity to reflect precisely whatever comes before it without any discrimination." ~ Joseph Goldstein

Friday ~ **Washing Dishes**

By now, you may have picked one routine physical activity to be mindful of each day, if not, please do so. When you perform this activity, pay close attention to your posture. Is your abdomen relaxed? Are your shoulders relaxed? Your face? Are you slouching or erect? Encourage the mind to stay in the present, to not race ahead as to what is next, to not fret about the past.

Feel free to pick a second activity to be mindful of. At first it's helpful to pick simple activities that you might do alone, such as brushing your teeth, getting up from a chair, washing dishes... Eventually, as our ability to be mindful increases, we can broaden our practice to activities that are more difficult to stay mindful in, such as working at the computer or having a conversation.

"While washing dishes, wash each piece relaxingly, as though each bowl is an object of contemplation. Consider each plate as sacred. Follow your breath to prevent your mind from straying. Do not try to hurry to get the job over with. Consider washing the dishes the most important thing in life. Washing the dishes is meditation. If you cannot wash the dishes in mindfulness, neither can you meditate while sitting in silence."

~ Thich Nhat Hanh

More than a thousand years ago a Chinese Zen-master wrote:

*Magical power,
marvelous action!
Chopping wood,
carrying water...*

Saturday ~ **Radical Acceptance**

In Mindfulness practice we are practicing a *Radical Acceptance* of the present moment, no matter what we find there.

If our child is ill, we would want to respond to the situation as skillfully as we are able to. If we use our energy bemoaning that it shouldn't be this way, that our child should not be sick -- how could this happen, etc... , the result is a conflicted mind, which is less capable of attending to our child. Our attention is entangled in our own conflict, instead of being fully available to our child. If we can fully accept the moment, the truth of the situation, that our child is ill, and not be in conflict with it, we can be free to attend to our child with a more peaceful mind. We will do everything we can to help our child heal, but we will be doing it much better if our attention is on what is needed in the present, rather than resisting the fact that the situation exists.

This applies to any situation we don't like. Getting a flat tire. It makes no difference to the situation if we're happy or upset. The flat tire is still there and we have to deal with it. It's a lot easier to deal with a flat tire when we're happy.

The practice of mindfulness trains us to learn to accept the moment, no matter what it brings, even if we don't like it. When we accept the moment, we can respond to it more skillfully. If we sit down to meditate and find the mind is agitated, can we accept that agitation is present? Can we say "Ahh! That's what agitation is like!" Be curious about it, be interested in it, be non-judgmental.

Any time you argue with reality you lose. ~ Yogi Buce

Optional Reading: How Mindfulness Works When It Doesn't Work

Chapter 4 from Gil Fronsdal's book [Issue at Hand](#)

*Like a fish out of water,
Thrown on high ground,
This mind thrashes about
Trying to escape Mara's command. - Dhammapada 34*

In practicing mindfulness, it can be helpful to remember that the practice works even when it doesn't seem to work. Perhaps this is explained best through an analogy.

Consider a mountain stream where the water is quite clear, and seems placid and still. But if you place a stick into the water, a small wake around the stick shows that in fact the water is flowing. The stick becomes a reference point that helps us notice the movement of the water.

Similarly, the practice of mindfulness is a reference point for noticing aspects of our lives that we may have missed. This is especially true for mindfulness of breathing. In trying to stay present for the breath, you may become aware of the concerns and the momentum of the mind that pull the attention away from the breath. If you can remain with the breath, then obviously mindfulness of breathing is working. However, if your attempt to stay with the breath results in increased awareness of what pulls you away from the breath, then the practice is also working.

Without the reference of mindfulness practice, it is quite easy to remain unaware of the preoccupations, tensions, and momentum operating in your life. For example, if you are busily doing many things, the concern for getting things done can blind you to the tension building in the body and mind. Only by stopping to be mindful may you become aware of the tensions and feelings that are present.

Sometimes your attempt to be with the breath is the only way that you see the speed at which the mind is racing. Riding on a train, if you focus on the mountains in the distance, you might not notice the speed of the train. However, if you bring your attention closer, the rapidly appearing and disappearing telephone poles next to the tracks reveal the train's speed. Even when you have trouble staying with the breath, your continued effort to come back to the breath can highlight what might otherwise be unnoticed, i.e., the rapid momentum of the mind. In fact, the faster our thinking and the greater the preoccupation, the greater the need for something close by like the breath to help bring an awareness of what is going on. That awareness, in turn, often brings some freedom from the preoccupation.

When staying with the breath during meditation is difficult, we can easily get discouraged. However, that difficulty is an opportunity to become more aware of the forces of mind and the feelings causing the distractions. Remember, if we learn from what is going on, regardless of what is happening, the practice is working, even when it seems not to be working, when we aren't able to stay with the breath.

Even when it is relatively easy to stay with the breath, mindfulness of the breathing can still function as an important reference point. In this case it may not be a reference point for the strong forces of distraction, but rather for subtler thoughts and feelings that may lie close to the root of our concerns and motivations. Don't pursue those thoughts or feelings. Simply be aware of their presence while continuing to develop the meditation on the breath, so that the breath can become an even more refined reference point. When we are settled on the breath, the heart becomes clear, peaceful, and still like a mountain pool. Then we can see all the way to the bottom.

Week 2: Mindfulness of Body

Assignment: Week 2

1. Listen to: [Gil Fronsdal's Introduction To Meditation \(2 of 6\)](http://www.audiodharma.org/talks-intromed.html) from 10/10/07:
www.audiodharma.org/talks-intromed.html
 - Transcribed in the Appendix.
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5. Daily Reflections

Mindfulness of the Body

Mindfulness of breathing is a wonderful beginning to cultivating awareness. It strengthens our ability to concentrate and steadies the attention on our present moment experience. It also weakens our tendency to get lost in reactive emotions and mental preoccupations. With time, attention to the breath helps us to develop a clear, non-reactive awareness that can then be turned to the full range of our human experience. As mindfulness develops, we begin to bring this awareness to other areas of our lives.

Mindfulness is an embodied practice. By practicing mindfulness, we learn to live in and through our bodies. Learning to be mindful of bodily experiences is one of the most useful aspects of mindfulness. It is much easier have a balanced, healthy awareness of the rest of our lives when we are in touch with our immediate physical experience.

During this week we expand the practice to include the body. Many people ignore their bodies. The busier a person's life, the easier it is to discount the importance of staying in touch with how the body feels. Many people may be attentive to their body, but it is from the outside in; that is, they are concerned about body image and appearance. Mindfulness of the body is attention from the inside out. We notice what the body is feeling, in and of itself. We give a generous amount of time to be with the felt sense of the body. Not only does this help the body relax, remaining mindful of the body is a safeguard from getting wound up with mental preoccupations.

Benefits of Mindfulness of the Body

First, cultivating mindfulness of the body increases our familiarity with our bodies and with how the body responds to our inner and outer lives, to our thoughts and emotions, and to events around us. The Buddha saw the human mind and body as unified. When we suppress or ignore aspects of our emotional, cognitive, and volitional lives, we tend also to disconnect from the body, from the physical manifestations of our experience. Conversely, when we distance ourselves from our physical experience, we lose touch with our inner life of emotions and thoughts. The awakening of the body from within that comes with mindfulness can help us to discover, not only our repressed emotions, but also, more importantly, a greater capacity to respond to the world with healthy emotions and motivations.

Second, in cultivating mindfulness we are developing non-reactivity, including the ability to be present for our experience without turning away, habitually seeking or resisting change, or clinging to pleasant and avoiding unpleasant experience. All too often, our automatic desires, aversions, preferences, and judgments interfere with our ability to know what is actually happening. Learning to not respond automatically and unconsciously makes possible a deeper understanding of the present moment and our reaction to it, and gives us more freedom to choose our response. Being non-reactively present for our physical experience goes a long way in learning to do so with the rest of our lives.

Last, but not least, mindfulness of physical sensations helps us both to relax tension and to understand its causes.

Meditation Instruction: Mindfulness of Body

During meditation, center your awareness primarily on the physical sensations of breathing. With dedication, but without strain, keep the breath in the foreground of attention. The idea is to be relaxed and receptive while alert and attentive. As long as other experiences such as bodily sensations, sounds, thoughts, or feelings are in the background of your awareness, allow them to remain there while you rest your attention with the sensations of breathing.

When a strong physical sensation makes it difficult for you to stay with the breath, simply switch your awareness to this new predominant experience. The art of mindfulness is recognizing what is predominant and then sustaining an intimate mindfulness on whatever that is. When the mind wanders and you lose the mindful connection with the sensation, gently and without judgment return your attention to the physical sensation.

As if your entire body was a sensing organ, sense or feel the physical experience. Simply allow it to be there. Drop whatever commentary or evaluations you may have about the experience in favor of seeing and sensing the experience directly in and of itself. Carefully explore the particular sensations that make it up - hardness or softness, warmth or coolness, tingling, tenseness, pressure, burning, throbbing, lightness, and so on. Let your awareness become as intimate with the experience as you can. Notice what happens to the sensations as you are mindful of them. Do they become stronger or weaker, larger or smaller, or do they stay the same?

As an aid to both acknowledging the physical experience and sustaining your focus, you can ever so softly label the experience. The labeling is a gentle, ongoing whisper in the mind that keeps the attention steady on the object of mindfulness. You should primarily sense directly the experience and what happens to it as you are present for it. For instance if an itch arose that becomes predominant, you can softly label it "itching, itching." If a tightness of the shoulder becomes predominant, you might label it "pressure, pressure" or "tightness, tightness." The exact words are not important, the purpose of the labeling is to help you connect with the experience.

Be alert for when the focus of your attention moves from the physical sensations to your reactions to the sensations and your thoughts about them. If this happens move your attention back to the felt-sense of the sensations. Try to keep yourself independent of whatever thoughts and reactions you have. Relax.

Once a physical sensation has disappeared or is no longer compelling, you can return to mindfulness of breathing until some other sensation calls your attention.

Exercises for the Second Week

- Continue your daily twenty-minute meditation session.
- In the midst of your regular activities, devote two one-hour periods during the week to being mindful of your body. During this time, perhaps using a timer or some other cue to remind yourself, periodically check in with your body, maybe every five minutes or so. Notice, in particular, your shoulders, stomach, face, and hands. If you find tension in any of these places, relax.
- Devote **one meal** to eating slowly and mindfully, paying attention to the tastes, textures, temperature, and other qualities of your food, and to the experience of your body eating. (When does your body tell you that have had enough?) If possible, take the meal in silence, with no other activities to distract you. You might want to put down your spoon or fork between bites. Whenever your mind wanders, or whenever you get caught up in reactions to what is happening, relax and come back to the simplicity of eating mindfully.

Practice Support: Week 2

Choose and respond to the questions below that you resonate with **after** you have practiced with the material for at least a few days.

When possible, **DESCRIBE** your experience, not just a Yes or No.

1. Do you have any difficulty feeling your body? Knowing what you feel physically? Connecting with it?
 - If yes, do you have judgments or commentaries about that? Describe.
2. Were you aware of any unpleasant sensations (that were not "painful")? If yes, how did you work with that?
 - Did you have any response or reaction, any commentary? Do you have the tendency to judge it, give it meaning? If yes, describe.
3. Were you aware of any significant pain? If yes, describe.
 - Are you able to differentiate between the body experience and the commentary or reaction?
 - Were there any times that you relaxed into pain or discomfort? Allowing it to be there, to be present for it, to open to it? This is different than tolerating it stoically, by gritting your teeth and forcing yourself to sit with it.
4. Have you spent any time during your meditation **waiting** for unpleasant experience to go away? Have you paid attention to discomfort in order to make it go away, expecting it to go away, waiting for it to go away?
5. During meditation, were you aware of any pleasant sensations in your body? If yes, did you have any response or reaction, any commentary? If yes, describe.
6. Are you able to be aware of your posture at times during the day?
 - Any particular times you particularly pay attention?
 - Any times you think might be helpful to pay attention that you don't?
7. Being aware of the body includes being aware of the 5 senses. Take a few minutes during the day and become mindful of each of the five senses, one at a time. **Describe** what you experience with each sense, and briefly, any commentary that may arise. Notice the difference between the sense experience and the commentary.
 - Hearing - close your eyes and listen to sounds.
 - Seeing - look around you, mindfully, notice your environment.
 - Sensing/touch - close your eyes and gently touch your hands.
 - Smell - with eyes closed, smell your environment. It might be helpful to go outside or to the kitchen.
 - Taste - with eyes closed, take a bite of food or sip of a drink. Notice the taste.
8. Did you work with being mindful of a routine physical activity this week? If yes, describe.
9. Is there any particular difficulty you are having with the meditation? With your posture?
10. Is there anything else you would like to ask about or share?

Daily Reflections: Week 2

Monday ~ **Resistance**

Resistance can take many forms and have many objects, but in essence, whether it's resistance to sitting or to our current experience, resistance generally arises in the presence or expectation of an unpleasant or painful mental or physical state.

As you practice with mindfulness of the body, be aware of any resistance to experiencing what's there. If it helps, label it, "*resistance...resistance*". How does it feel to resist? Encourage the mind to let go of the resistance, but don't be concerned if you are not able to. It's enough to incline the mind in that direction, and to open to your experience as much as you are able to.

It is possible to open to painful and unpleasant moments in a spacious manner, without clinging, without trying to push them away. Shinzen Young expressed it succinctly in this equation:

$$\text{Pain} \times \text{Resistance} = \text{Suffering}$$

This speaks to the difference between pain and suffering. Pain is the raw experience. Suffering is the unnecessary layers we add to it. As the formula expresses, if you can drop the resistance to zero, there may be pain, but no extra suffering.

** Physical pain can be a warning sign that something needs to be attended to, these instructions are not meant to ignore that.*

Tuesday ~ **Hearing**

In practicing mindfulness of the body, on and off the cushion, we can pay attention to the entire range of physical experience. We use the five external senses to perceive the outside world: hearing, seeing, touch/pressure, taste and smell. We use the inner senses of balance, position, temperature, and pain to perceive the internal world.

When any sensation is in the background, we can leave it there, and focus on the breath, but when it becomes compelling or dominant, we turn our attention to it and make it our new object of meditation.

Take a minute right now, wherever you are reading this, and take a couple of deep breaths, and open your attention to sounds. Whatever they are. You may hear external sounds or internal sounds. Hearing points to the natural quality of mindfulness. You don't have to make the sounds come or go, you don't have to manipulate them. Just be alert to sound, be present. You don't have to go searching for the sounds, just open to them. The mind can be relaxed and spacious. There's nothing to do, but listen. If it's helpful to keep your attention steady, you may want to label the experience "hearing... hearing...". The labeling should be soft, like a whisper in the mind, taking up only about five per cent of your attention. Most of your attention should be on the hearing itself.

This open spacious way of listening to sound can be practiced anywhere, anytime. It quickly brings you back to the body, back to the present.

Hearing can be pleasant or unpleasant, but the open quality of hearing can be spacious regardless of the flavor of the sound. You can open to the sweet sound of birds, but if during your quiet meditation, you hear a loud leaf-blower, it is possible to open to that experience also, non-reactively, in the same way, "hearing...hearing..."

*“Within this very fathom-long body, with its perceptions and inner sense,
lies the world, the cause of the world, the cessation of the world,
and the path that leads to the cessation of the world.”
~ The Buddha*

Wednesday ~ **Balance**

If you have ever tried balancing while walking across a thin beam, you soon realize that the process of balance consists of repeatedly falling to either side, at first grossly, then just little wobbles to the left, wobbles to the right, until finally, when well trained, we are “centered” — in the zone, walking steadily.

The mind is the same way, it keeps wanting to fall left into the past, or right into the future. We fall left into desire, and right into aversion. Over and over, with mindfulness we catch ourselves, restoring balance. The present moment is the only place our life can be balanced.

Thursday ~ **Mental Noting**

Mental Noting or Labeling can be a helpful tool for focusing and sustaining the attention in meditation. Labeling the breath with a simple “*in... out...in...out...*” or “*rising...falling...*” can help maintain our attention on the breath. The labeling should be like a whisper in the mind. Most of the attention should remain on the sensations of breathing, only about five percent on the words.

When physical sensations get our attention, we can softly name them, so as to keep our attention focused. If there is a pain in the knee that becomes compelling, we might label it: “*pressure...pressure...burning...tingling...oscillation...etc...*”, then if the sensation fades, or is no longer compelling, we return to the breath, “*in...out... in...out...*” This can help maintain the continuity of our attention.

If one finds that the mind drifts for long periods during meditation, adding a tool like noting or counting breaths, can help stabilize the attention.

Some people use noting at specific times, such as when strong emotions arise, which can easily carry us away; noting can help us stay mindful during the intensity of emotions. Labeling the experience can give us a sense of spaciousness. “*Anger...anger... fear....sadness...worry...worry... aversion...desire...etc...*”

Even as we get concentrated, as words seem too unrefined, we can note with a simple “yes, yes” or a mental “nod”, just to help maintain the continuity. When the attention is settled and continuous, the noting can be dropped, but returned to if the attention weakens.

*Optional: See References below for a section on *Noting*.

Friday ~ **Investigation**

Investigation is a natural activity of the quiet mind. Walking in the woods you might easily notice the trees, the sky, the birds, insects, other animals, sounds and smells.

In practicing mindfulness of the body we investigate any compelling physical sensations. If a minor itch arises, we can often leave it in the background of attention, but if it becomes intense, we then can turn our attention to it and make it the meditation object. But how do we investigate this itch?

Investigation has the quality of observing what is happening with curiosity -- observing carefully, precisely, and intimately. So as we turn our attention to the itch, we may notice that the sensation moves

or changes; it's not constant, it gets bigger or smaller, it's unpleasant, it radiates, it pinches, it changes shape.... vibrating, oscillating, fading, decreasing...it's gone.

The fundamental question that we ask in practicing mindfulness is, "*What is this?*" Never coming to a conclusion, just an open exploration.

"It's like turning on a light in a dark room and seeing what's there, it doesn't require much thinking. Investigation can be understood as turning on the question, "What is this?", and letting the light of that question reveal the particulars of the present experience."

~ Gil Fronsdal

When we become interested in our experience, we change it in a positive way. We bring a brightness to it. For instance, if we're feeling worried, investigating it adds a friendly quality to the worry, making it easier to experience. Instead of seeing the situation from the point of view of the "worrier" you can shift and take the point of view of the "investigator."

Ajahn Sumedho describes investigation as "affectionate curiosity." It comes out of caring about ourselves and others, about this life and about this world. It is not a cold, superficial analysis; it's affectionate, it's warm, it's intimate. We want to bring a quality of openness into our life and fully experience it without resisting it, without being for or against our experience, without grasping.

The opposite of investigation can be assuming that we already know how things are. It's easy to fool ourselves—anger arises, and we think, "I already know anger," and not explore it. But it's a new experience every time. We often rely on memories of our experiences and of people, instead of looking at them newly, but instead, we can look at our experience with a beginner's mind. Assuming that we don't know, and exploring with affectionate curiosity.

Saturday

*"It's helpful to realize that this very body that we have,
that's sitting right here right now...with its aches and its pleasures...
is exactly what we need to be fully human, fully awake, fully alive."*

~ Pema Chodron

Week 3: Mindfulness of Emotions

Assignment: Week 3

1. Listen to: [Gil Fronsdal's Introduction to Meditation \(3 of 6\)](http://www.audiodharma.org/talks-intromed.html) from 10/17/07:
www.audiodharma.org/talks-intromed.html
 - Transcribed in the Appendix.
2. About Mindfulness of Emotions
3. Meditation Instruction: Mindfulness of Emotions
4. Practice Support
5. Daily Reflections

About Mindfulness of Emotions

In mindfulness practice we keep our attention on the breath, unless some other experience is so strong as to pull us away from the breath; then we turn our attention to that other experience. One kind of experience that can pull us away is physical sensations, which we talked about last week; another is emotions.

No emotion is inappropriate within the field of mindfulness practice. We are not trying to avoid emotions, or to have some kinds of emotions and not others. We are trying to allow them to exist as they arise, without the additional complications of judgment, evaluation, preferences, aversion, desires, clinging, resistance or other reactions.

The Buddha once asked, "If a person is struck by an arrow, is that painful?" Yes. The Buddha then asked, "If the person is struck by a second arrow, is that even more painful?" Of course. He went on to say, that as long as we are alive, we can expect painful experiences - the first arrow. Often the significant suffering associated with an emotion is not the emotion itself, but the way we relate to it. If we condemn, judge, hate, or deny the first arrow, that is like being struck by a second arrow. The second arrow is optional, and mindfulness helps us avoid it.

An important part of mindfulness practice is investigating our relationship to our emotions. Do we cling to them? Do we hate them? Are we ashamed of them? Do we tense around them? Are we afraid of how we are feeling? Do we measure our self-worth by the presence or absence of an emotion? Can we simply leave an emotion alone?

Mindfulness itself does not condemn or condone any particular emotional reaction. Rather, it is the practice of honestly being aware of what happens to us and how we react to it. The more aware and familiar we are with our reactions, the easier it will be to have, for example, uncomplicated grief or straightforward joy, not mixed up with the second arrows of guilt, anger, remorse, embarrassment, or judgment. Emotional maturity comes, not from the absence of emotions, but from seeing them clearly.

Mindfulness helps us to be as we are without further complications. If we can be accepting of ourselves in this way, then it is much easier to know how to respond appropriately with choice rather than habit.

Meditation Instruction: Mindfulness of Emotions

Generally, during meditation, keep yourself centered on the breath. If there are emotions in the background, leave them there, keeping the breath in the foreground of awareness as if it is the fulcrum for your experience. When an emotion becomes compelling enough to make it difficult to stay with the breath, then switch your attention to the emotion, making it the center of your attention.

There are four aspects to mindfulness of emotions. You don't have to practice all four each time you focus on an emotion. At different times, each is appropriate. Experiment to see how each can help in developing a non-reactive attention to emotions. The four are:

- **Recognition:** A basic principle of mindfulness is that you cannot experience freedom and spaciousness unless you recognize what is happening. The more you learn to recognize the range of your emotions, including the most subtle, the more you will become familiar and comfortable with them, and the less you will be in their thrall.
- **Noting or Naming:** A steady and relaxed labeling of the emotion of the moment, e.g., "joy," "anger," "frustration," "happiness," "boredom," "contentment," "desire," and the like, encourages us to stay present with what is central in our experience. Naming can also help us become calm and less entangled with the emotion, less identified with it or reactive to its presence.
- **Acceptance:** This does not mean condoning or justifying certain feelings. It means simply allowing emotions to be present, whatever they may be. Many people frequently judge and censure their feelings. Formal meditation practice offers us the extraordinary opportunity to practice unconditional acceptance of our emotions. This does not mean expressing emotion, but letting emotions move through you without any inhibitions, resistance, or encouragement.
- **Investigation:** Notice the bodily sensations of the emotion, letting the body be the container for the emotion. Investigation is not analysis, but more a sensory awareness exercise of feeling our way into the present moment experience of the emotions. In a sense, the body is a bigger container than the thinking mind which is easily exhausted, and which tends to spin off into stories, analysis, and attempts to fix the situation - away from acceptance of the present moment experience. This entails dropping any fixed ideas we have about an emotion and looking at it afresh. Emotions are composite events, made up of bodily sensations, thoughts, feelings, motivations, and attitudes.

Exercises for the 3rd Week: Writing down some notes afterwards can be helpful.

1. **Lengthen your daily meditation session to 25 minutes.** When you first sit down, notice the main concerns, feelings, physical sensations that may be preoccupying you, and consciously set them aside for the duration of the meditation.
2. **Ride out an emotion** at least once during the week. When you are feeling a strong desire, aversion, fear, or other emotion, don't act on the feeling. Rather, bring your mindfulness to the feeling and observe the changes it undergoes while you are watching it. Notice the various body sensations and tensions, the changes in the feeling's intensity, the attitudes and beliefs that you have about it, and perhaps any more primary emotion triggering the feeling. If after a time the emotion goes away, spend some time noticing what its absence feels like.
3. **Notice feelings of happiness or contentment:** Spend several hours this week noticing feelings of happiness, contentment, well-being, joy, pleasure, and ease. Even if your day is primarily characterized by the opposite of these, see if you can identify even subtle and seemingly insignificant moments of these positive states. It can be as simple as appreciating the texture of a doorknob or a flash of ease in your eyes as you notice the blue sky after the fog has burned off. This is not an exercise for manufacturing positive states but rather discovering that these may be much more a part of your life than your preoccupations allow you to notice.
4. **Notice Preoccupation:** Spend several hours noticing which feelings tend to pull you into a state of preoccupation. Notice any patterns in the kinds of feelings that lead to becoming lost in thoughts. Notice your relationship to those feelings, do you accept them? Do you judge them?

Practice Support: Week 3

Choose and respond to the questions below that you resonate with **after** you have practiced with the material for at least a few days.

Note: Sometimes significant emotions don't seem to arise during meditation even though they do so during the day. If so, when practical, you can stop what you're doing and attend the emotion, in the same way you would while meditating.

1. **Desire/Wanting:** During meditation, desire or wanting can range from the gross (I **want** pizza), to the subtle (I **want** to be calm.) When wanting arises, pay close attention to how this feels in both the body and mind. After your sitting, write down some wants/desires that came up.
 - Were you able to feel it in your body? If yes, describe.
 - Was the experience of wanting pleasant? Unpleasant? Both? Describe.
 - Were you able to stay with it until it faded?
 - What is your relationship with desire/wanting?
2. **Anger:** Did any feelings of anger, irritation, aversion or ill-will arise?
 - What was your initial response to seeing it arise? Acceptance, rejection or ignoring?
 - Were you able to have a friendly attitude towards it?
 - Were you able to feel it in your body anywhere? If so, **describe**.
 - Was the experience pleasant, unpleasant, or both? Describe.
 - Did it feel empowered in any way?
 - Were you able to stay with it until it faded?
 - Were there any stories that supported the ill-will?
3. **Love:** Did any feelings of love arise? Were they directed at someone? Describe.
4. **Pain:** If pain arose, did any emotions arise with it? Sadness? Anger? Impatience? Annoyance? Despair? Describe.
5. **Fear, worry, anxiety:** Fear is aversion to something that hasn't happened, that could happen. Anxiety is a non-specific fear, it's unnamed – a fear that "something" undesirable might happen. Did you experience any fear, worry, anxiety or apprehension? Describe.
6. Did any emotions arise that you thought you shouldn't be experiencing? If so, name and describe them.
7. Did memories of the past arise during your meditation? If so, were there emotions associated? Which ones? Describe.
8. Did thoughts about the future arise? If so, what emotions come up then? Describe.
9. Many people don't have a broad vocabulary for emotions; the list below may help you become more aware of the range of emotions. **Mark any emotions below that you recall having recently either in formal meditation or during the day:**

<p> Aggression Anger Annoyance Anxiety Apathy Arrogance Aversion Bitterness Blame Craving Depressed Desire Despair Desperation Discouraged Dissatisfaction Energized Embarrassment Envy Fear Grief Guilt Hate Helplessness Hopelessness Hostility Humiliation Hurt Impatience Jealousy Loneliness Loss Lust Panic Passion Pity Possessiveness Pride Regret Rejection Resentment Righteous indignation Righteousness Sadness Self-pity Self-righteousness Shame </p>	<p> Acceptance Amusement Anticipation Appreciation Bliss Calmness Caring Cheerfulness Compassion Contentment Courage Creativity Curiosity Delight Determination Empathy Encouragement Energized Enthusiasm Equanimity Excitement Forgiveness Friendliness Generosity Gladness Gratified Gratitude Happiness Interest Joy Kindness Laughter/Humor Love Passion Peace Renunciation </p>
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Daily Reflections: Week 3

Monday ~ **Keeping it Simple**

Mindfulness is paying attention to what is there: *knowing the mind*. We don't need to make anything happen. We focus on the breath as an anchor, or a reference point, keeping the mind open and welcoming to whatever shows up. When any compelling experience shows up, such as physical sensations or emotions, we make those the object of meditation, observing it like a scientist would observe a new species: objectively, curiously, alert – what is the shape, size of this creature? How does it behave?

Sometimes, there's a whole party going on in the mind, chaotic and confusing. It may be difficult to see what's present. We can note *confusion...confusion...*, staying friendly with the confusion. Or keeping it simple, you can just return to the breath, it's always fine to return to the breath.

The Guest House by Rumi

*This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.*

*A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.*

*Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.*

*The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.*

*Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.*

Tuesday ~ **The RAIN Formula**

Sometimes strong emotions are confusing or overwhelming to us. When that happens, it can be helpful to have a systematic way of exploring them. The **RAIN** formula can be helpful. Sometimes it's enough to just do the first step. Other times it might take all the steps to be able to attend a difficult emotion.

R: Recognize it. Name it.

A: Accept it.

I: Investigate it, be curious. What is it like, right now, this moment, in the body, heart and mind?

N: Non-identification (Not-me): *This feeling is just a passing process that comes and goes, it's not who I am.*

Wednesday ~ *Emotions About Emotions*

Every time anger arises, it is a different anger. Every sadness is different...every joy. There may be similar patterns, but it's never the same. Mindfulness of emotions asks us to be fully present for them each time they arise. To not assume that we already know that experience, but to experience it newly each time.

We frequently have reactions to our emotions. For example, if we're meeting someone for dinner, and they are late, irritation or anger might arise. A thought might occur, "*Maybe they were in a car accident, I shouldn't be angry...*" Then maybe guilt arises. We may notice the anger, but not the guilt.

For instance, we might feel sadness, quickly followed by aversion to the sadness — not wanting to feel it. There is a feeling of conflict in the mind. When this happens, instead of trying to staying with the sadness, we can turn our attention to the aversion itself. What does it feel like to "not want to feel sad?"

These "emotions about our emotions," or secondary emotions, tend to be less seen. It can be easier to notice our strong primary emotions, such as anger or grief. But these secondary emotions, which often shadow our emotions, can easily pass by unseen. These secondary emotions are often a rejection of our experience, and though unseen, their effect on us can be significant.

How often are we in essence saying to ourselves: "I shouldn't feel this way? I don't want to feel this way?" There's the emotion, and then there's a pushing away of the emotion, the aversion to it. Can you notice, what is this aversion like?

Thursday ~ *Placing Attention*

Scenario 1

I have a deadline tomorrow, and before the deadline I have to complete 22 items. I have several hours to do so. This is an important project that many people depend on. Understanding this, I feel determined to do my best in the short period I have. Determination is a feeling of steadiness and strength; it motivates me. I can focus on my tasks. I may not finish on time.

Scenario 2

As in Scenario 1, I have a deadline tomorrow with 22 items to complete. In this instance though, I turn my attention to the imagined future; to how short a period of time I have left to accomplish the tasks.

Directing my attention to the future triggers fear that I may not be able finish in time. The fear agitates me, and I turn my attention to my tasks, but I feel unsettled and tense. I can't stay focused. My mind rushes back to the idea of the deadline that I might not meet. I imagine the consequences and that further agitates me. Some of my energy is drained by the stress as I force myself back to the task at hand, trying to suppress the anxiety. I may not finish in time.

Commentary: The only difference between the 2 scenarios is where we place our attention. It's the same amount of work, it's the same situation.

Turning our attention to the imagined future can be a mental habit -- not much different than biting our nails. The mind automatically returns there, over and over. With mindfulness practice, we can ground ourselves in the present, in our current experience, over and over again, and the mind can begin to develop a new habit.

Friday ~ **Mixed Emotions**

Our wholesome emotions are often entangled with other not so wholesome emotions. For instance, we may have a genuine love for our partner, but we may also feel needy, and the neediness and the love can get bound together. Most love songs express this neediness, and encourage it with lyrics like: "I can't live without you."

We may have confidence in a skill, but also feel arrogance about how good we are, and those get bound together. Or we may be very happy for our children when we hear of their success, but that happiness can get entangled with a sense of personal pride: "I'm great because my kids are great..."

In mindfulness meditation, we don't reject any of these emotions, the positive ones or the negative ones. But we try to disentangle them; to not mistake love for neediness or arrogance for confidence, etc... We explore them with curiosity, we want to see them as they are, and not reject the "negative" qualities and push them away. "Ahh, this is what righteous indignation is like!" We allow ourselves to feel the emotion; what is this experience of righteous indignation? "Ahh, this is what jealousy is like".... "This is what love is like...what neediness is like..."

As we learn to see these negative emotions clearly, they can begin to loosen their hold on us.

The Sun Never Says

*Even after all this time
The sun never says to the earth,
"You owe me."
Look what happens,
With a love like that,
It lights the whole sky.
~ from "The Gift", by Hafiz*

Saturday ~ **A Cherokee Legend**

A grandfather is talking to his young grandson about life. He tells the boy: *"I have two wolves inside of me, struggling with each other. The first is the wolf of peace, love and kindness. The other wolf is fear, greed and hatred."*

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, *"Which wolf will win, grandfather?"* The grandfather replied, *"Whichever one I feed."*

Week 4: Mindfulness of Thoughts

Assignment: Week 4

1. Listen to: [Gil Fronsdal's Introduction to Meditation \(4 of 6\)](http://www.audiodharma.org/talks-intromed.html) from 1/30/08:
www.audiodharma.org/talks-intromed.html
 - o Transcribed in the Appendix.
2. About Mindfulness of Thinking
3. Meditation Instruction: Mindfulness of Thinking
4. Practice Support
5. Daily Reflections

About Mindfulness of Thinking

by Gil Fronsdal

Sometimes people think that the point of meditation is to stop thinking -- to have a silent mind. This does happen occasionally, but it is not necessarily the point of meditation. Thoughts are an important part of life, and mindfulness practice is not supposed to be a struggle against them. It's more useful to be friends with our thoughts than thinking them unfortunate distractions. In mindfulness, we are not stopping thoughts as much as overcoming any preoccupation we have with them.

Mindfulness is not thinking about things. (It is not "meditating on" some topic, as people often say.) It is a non-discursive observation of our life in all its aspects. In those moments when thinking predominates, mindfulness is the clear and silent awareness that we are thinking. I found it helpful and relaxing when someone said, "For the purpose of meditation, nothing is particularly worth thinking about." Thoughts can come and go as they wish, and the meditator does not need to become involved with them. We are not interested in engaging in the content of our thoughts; mindfulness of thinking is simply recognizing we are thinking.

In meditation, when thoughts are subtle and in the background, or when random thoughts pull you away from awareness of the present, it is enough to resume mindfulness of breathing. However, when your preoccupation with thoughts is stronger than your ability to easily let go of them, then direct your mindfulness to being clearly aware that thinking is occurring.

Strong bouts of thinking are fueled largely by identification and preoccupation with thoughts. By clearly observing our thinking, we step outside the field of identification. Thinking will usually then soften to a calm and unobtrusive stream.

Sometimes thinking can be strong and compulsive even while we are aware of it. When this happens, it can be useful to notice how such thinking is affecting your body, physically and energetically. It may cause pressure in the head, tension in the forehead, tightness of the shoulders, or a buzzing as if the head were filled with thousands of bumblebees. Let your mindfulness feel the sensations of tightness, pressure, or whatever you discover. It is easy to be caught up in the story of these preoccupying thoughts, but if you feel the physical sensation of thinking, then you are bringing attention to the present moment rather than the storyline of the thoughts.

When a particular theme keeps reappearing in our thinking, it is likely that it is being triggered by a strong

emotion. In that case, no matter how many times you recognize a repeated thought or concern, come back to the breath. If the associated emotion isn't recognized, the concern is liable to keep reappearing. For example, people who plan a lot, often find that planning thoughts arise out of apprehension. If they do not acknowledge the fear, the fear will be a factory of new planning thoughts. **If there is a repetitive thought pattern, see if you can discover an emotion associated with it, and then practice mindfulness of the emotion.** Ground yourself in the present moment in the emotion itself. When you acknowledge the emotion, often it will cease generating those particular thoughts.

Thoughts are a huge part of our lives. Many of us spend much time inhabiting the cognitive world of stories and ideas. Mindfulness practice won't stop the thinking, but it will help prevent us from compulsively following thoughts that have appeared. This will help us become more balanced, so our physical, emotional and cognitive sides all work together as a whole.

Meditation Instruction: Mindfulness of Thinking

1. For the remaining weeks of this class, extend your daily meditation session to 30 minutes.
2. For at least the first ten minutes, keep your meditation simple -- focus on the breath. To the best of your ability, when some other experience gets in the way of being with the breath, simply let it go and come back to the breath.
3. After this ten-minute warm-up period, switch to more open mindfulness. This means continuing with the breath until something else becomes more compelling. When physical sensations, emotions or thinking predominate, let go of the breath and focus your meditative awareness on these. When nothing else is compelling, come back to the breath.

Practice Support: Week 4

Choose and respond to the questions below that you resonate with **after** you have practiced with the material for at least a few days.

PART I: Once this week, for 2 hours, remind yourself every few minutes to notice what you are thinking. You can do this amidst activities – while cooking, cleaning up, dressing, etc.... This is not a closed eye meditation session. You might write yourself a note to remind you that says: *Pay attention to thinking*. Keep the note where you can see it. Notice any patterns about your thoughts:

- Are they primarily about yourself or about others?
- Do they tend to be critical or judgmental?
- Do you have frequent thoughts of "should" or "ought" ?
- Are they mostly directed to the future? To the past? Toward fantasy?
- Do they tend to be more optimistic or pessimistic?
- Do they tend to be apprehensive or peaceful?
- Do they tend to be contented or dissatisfied?

PART II: During your meditation sessions:

1. What is your attitude when thinking arises? Are you curious about it? Do you wish it didn't arise? Are you irritated? Annoyed? Do you see it as an interruption to the meditation? Are you easily seduced by it?
2. Do your thoughts disappear as soon as you give them attention?
3. Have you been able to feel your body while thinking? If yes, describe one instance of sensing your body while thinking.
4. During meditation, when thinking arises, do you frequently experience any of the following?
Describe.
 - **Thoughts about the past:** Pleasant memories? Regret? Shame? Guilt?
 - Do your thoughts about the past trigger emotions? Describe.
 - **Thoughts about the future:** Planning? Worry? Anxiety? Excitement? Anticipation?
 - **Thoughts about the present:** Wanting the meditation to be better? Wanting unpleasant feelings/sensations to go away?
 - **Fantasy?**

Daily Reflections: Week 4

Monday ~ *Watching the Clock*

Most of us enjoy being calm and not having a lot of thoughts running around the mind. Because of that, it's easy to judge thinking as being undesirable. But we all think. It's important to not place thought outside of the meditation process. We are already thinking, what we want to do is make our thoughts more conscious and turn them towards what is useful.

An insidious habit many of us have is "*watching the clock*." In school or at jobs, we often repeatedly glance at the clock, "*How much longer before the class is over, or the workday is over?*" It's so prevalent that we even have an acronym for it: TGIF (Thank God it's Friday!).

This seemingly harmless kind of thought actually has a great impact on us. It really tells us that the present moment is not worth experiencing, that the present moment is not okay. So a sense of contention is created, which produces tension and stress.

So, in meditation, when you find yourself waiting for the bell to ring and the sitting to be over, you might note "*impatience*", but it might also be useful to ask yourself, "*What is it that I don't want to feel?*"

How often in daily life are you waiting for something to be over? Waiting in line? Waiting on hold on the phone? Waiting until the person you are talking with gets to the point? All that waiting is supported by thoughts. Thoughts that ignore the value of the present moment. Don't let "*How much longer...*" thoughts go by unnoticed.

Tuesday ~ *Judgment*

Most of us don't like being judged. With mindfulness practice we find that every time we judge ourselves, it's unpleasant. Every time we judge others, there is also an unpleasant component.

I am referring to judgment that has an insulting quality. There is nothing wrong with judging if someone is taller than someone else, especially if you need someone to retrieve something from a high shelf; it's wise to know the strengths and weaknesses of your co-workers, employees, family members. It's when we add unhelpful criticism that it becomes a harmful habit.

Judging is a mental habit, often a deep mental habit. How much of our mental lives are spent in this unpleasant activity? "This meditation isn't calm enough..." Not only are we having to experience the unpleasantness of not being calm, but we then add this unpleasant unnecessary judgment to it.

Of course, when we notice that we are judging, let's not add more insult to injury and judge ourselves for judging! By waking up and really seeing it, and noticing the effect it has on us, we can gradually begin to let go of this unhelpful mental activity. For some of us it's very prevalent, and as we explore it, we need to bring patience to our process, as it might be a long-term proposition.

A Five Minute Exercise in a Public Place:

Next time you find yourself in a public place, where you can watch people for a little while, such as at a

market, waiting room, park, airport, grid lock... take a few minutes and look around, watching each person for 15-20 seconds. There are 2 parts to this exercise:

Part 1: Focus on someone, another human being just like you, with hopes and fears and a desire to be happy. Notice if any judgmental thoughts come up. If they do, note them, “*judgment...judgment*”.

- Keep noticing different people, and any reaction you have to them. No need to judge yourself, to be in conflict with this, even if there’s a judgment every time you look at someone. Just see what comes up.
- After a few minutes, stop and see how you feel.

Part 2: Again, watch each person for 15-20 seconds, but this time find something you like: Maybe their smile, hair color, the way their clothing hangs, how they hold the hand of their child... anything you can find to like. After a few minutes, stop and see how you feel.

Wednesday

*All experience is preceded by mind,
Led by mind,
Made by mind.
Speak or act with a corrupted mind,
And suffering follows
As the wagon wheel follows the hoof of the ox.*

*All experience is preceded by mind,
Led by mind,
Made by mind.
Speak or act with a peaceful mind
And happiness follows
Like a never-departing shadow.*

~ Dhammapada (1-2) – translated by Gil Fronsdal

Thursday ~ **Mindfulness of Planning**

Planning is an important practical skill. You don’t build a house without planning, or run a business, or a myriad of things we do in life. It can also be an unhelpful habit arising from worry or anxiety, where we plan and re-plan anxiously.

Take a moment, right now, while you are reading this. It should only take a few minutes. **Read the whole exercise before you begin:**

- Plan something that you will likely plan for anyway – a simple plan, not a “*building a house*” type plan. A brief plan, such as:
 - Making plans for the weekend
 - *I need to talk to X about Y, what are the points I need to discuss?*
 - Planning a meal
- While you are planning, maintain a light awareness of your body. Keep checking in. Relax physically as much as you are able to.
 - Is the belly relaxed? The forehead, eyes, jaw, shoulders, hands, chest?
 - Keep planning, but maintain a light awareness of your posture.

We make plans every day, this is a rich time to practice mindfulness of thinking.

*The spacious mind has room for everything.
It is like the space in a room,
which is never harmed by what goes in and out of it...
~ Ajahn Sumedho*

Friday ~ **Just Standing There**

It's a beautiful day and you're in a good mood, you're at the store shopping for food for a dinner you plan to make for your guests. You're standing in line. You notice that the person in front of you can't find her wallet. She very slowly begins to empty her purse, one item at a time. After the 10th item, you feel irritated, by the 20th item, maybe you feel some anger towards her. She finally finds it, but now doesn't have enough money in it, so she starts to put things back. It's been 10 minutes. Maybe you become very angry or maybe you turn the anger inward, you think "I always get in the wrong line! I messed up again!" Your mood has darkened. What's happened? You're just standing there, in one way, nothing has changed.

Backtracking now, being mindful of your thinking, when she starts emptying her purse, instead, you could realize that this is going to take longer than you want, and that you are not going to get what you want, which is paying for your groceries and getting home promptly. You might notice the unpleasant feeling of the unfulfilled want. You take a breath, go back to the body, and accept the situation. It's still a beautiful day and you're just standing there.

You can wake up to the way you are clinging at any point – it can be at the earliest impatience or when the anger is full-blown. The moment you notice, is a moment of mindfulness and the possibility of choice and of letting go. We can incline the mind to relax into the situation, to accept it, because, after all, you're just standing there.

Saturday ~ **Enough**

*Enough. These few words are enough.
If not these words, this breath.
If not this breath, this sitting here.*

*This opening to the life
We have refused
Again and again
Until now.*

*Until now.
~ by David Whyte*

Week 5: Mindfulness of Mind

Assignment: Week 5

1. Listen to: [Gil Fronsdal's Introduction to Meditation \(5 of 6\)](http://www.audiodharma.org/talks-intromed.html) from 10/29/08:
www.audiodharma.org/talks-intromed.html
 - Transcribed in the Appendix.
2. About Mindfulness of Mind
3. Meditation Instruction: Mindfulness of Mind
4. Practice Support
5. Daily Reflections

About Mindfulness of Mind

by Gil Fronsdal

Now that we have practiced with mindfulness of the breath, body, emotions and thoughts in previous weeks, the new instruction is to turn the attention around and notice the mind itself. Not just the content of the mind in terms of particular feelings or thoughts, but the quality of the mind; the mood of the mind; the state of the mind; the attitude.

Sometimes it is not easy to notice the overall state of the mind because we are focusing so much on the details of what is happening during mindfulness practice. This often can be the case in daily life as well, especially when we are preoccupied with what we want or don't want. It is like focusing on the details of driving while noticing neither how dirty the windshield is nor the strain of looking through the dirt. Part of mindfulness practice is to step back from the details of what we are experiencing in order to notice the subjective feeling of being aware. For example, does our mind feel contracted or spacious? Tense or relaxed? Scattered or focused?

States of mind tend to have a pervasive quality that is more lasting than the particular thoughts or impulses that can arise. For example, angry thoughts sometimes may appear briefly without affecting our mood. In contrast, an angry state of mind can shape our entire demeanor. While in an angry mood, not all our thoughts may be angry. However, the mood can linger as a background for whatever we are experiencing, sometimes significantly coloring our perception of things.

For some people, this background attitude is at the heart of what motivates their life. All too often it is closely connected to people's suffering. When they are not aware of the influence their attitude has, people can feel trapped in their suffering. An attitude or mood can create a bias in how we see our experience. Moods of desire or aversion can influence us one way, moods of generosity or friendliness another way. When we are clearly aware of our mood we are less likely to be unduly influenced by it.

If we do not notice the underlying attitude it can fester and build up stress and tension in our lives. The attitude may only cause relatively mild tension or stress in any given moment, but if it is chronically reinforced, then the tension can become great and lead to greater suffering.

In becoming mindful of our attitude, it is useful to distinguish between what is happening at any given moment and what our relationship is to what is happening. Mindfulness practice helps to tease these apart so that we can be more discerning about how our opinions, judgments, attitudes and feelings may or may not accurately represent what is happening. The space between what is happening and our relationship to what is happening is a door to peace.

The suffering and stress that mindfulness practice helps address is less about how things are and more about our relationship to how things are. Fortunately, freedom is not as much about what is happening in the world or within us, but more about how much freedom we have in relating to what is happening.

Meditation Instruction: Mindfulness of Mind

1. Continue meditating 30 minutes daily.
2. **During meditation** periodically ask yourself, what is your attitude? What is your relationship to what is happening?
 - For example, you may feel some discomfort. Notice your relationship to the discomfort. Are you clinging or resisting? Are you relaxed, generous, or kind towards the discomfort? Once you notice the relationship, hold it in the warmth of your attention.
 - Remember that there is no need for judging, criticizing or being upset with what we see when we look at our relationship to the present moment, even if what we see is unfortunate or difficult. Similarly, there is no need to praise or get involved with fortunate or preferred attitudes. In either case, the practice is to be mindful of the relationship or attitude without being for or against it. This practice then allows the relationship or attitude to settle or relax.
3. **During the day**, periodically notice your attitude, the general state of your mind. Does it feel tired or alert, contracted or expanded, calm or agitated, fuzzy or clear, resistant or eager, pushing forward or pulling back?
 - Put aside commentary or judgments about it; just notice what's there. What emotions come with it? What is its felt sense? What relationship is there between your mind state and how your body feels? What does it feel like to step back and observe the state of mind rather than be in it? What happens to your state of mind as you are mindful of it?

Practice Support: Week 5

Please engage in the exercises and questions below.

In Mindfulness of Mind we turn our attention from the content of the mind (*sensations, emotions, thoughts*) to the mind itself. We explore the quality of the mind, the underlying mood or attitude. These mind-states tend to be more pervasive and longer lasting than the more ephemeral emotions. At times they can last for hours, days or even be a near-constant “backdrop” in our lives.

“In any given moment, there are two things happening. There is what’s happening and our relationship to what’s happening.” ~ Gil Fronsdal

In Daily Life: It might be helpful to use a notepad to write down your observations. **Feel free to pick and choose which practices below you’d like to do.**

1. Periodically, notice the general state of your mind. Does it feel tired or alert, contracted or expanded, calm or agitated, fuzzy or clear, resistant or eager, pushing forward or pulling back? (If it’s helpful, at the end of this page I listed some common mind-states and moods.) Describe some of your observations.
 - If you already know that you tend to be anxious, cheerful or sad, much of the time,don’t assume you know what that feels like. Keep checking in, don’t respond from your memory, but from experiencing the mind-state newly.
2. Choose one activity you do on a daily basis, such as driving to work, preparing breakfast, reading email, etc... For the next week, each time you do this same activity, become aware of your state of mind.
 - How does your state of mind influence how you relate to the activity? Keep a log of your changing states during this activity over the week and notice the role your mind state has on how you do the activity. **Describe.**
3. Choose an ordinary activity you do that helps you have a positive state of mind, (such as playing music, petting the dog, gardening, etc...) During this week, do this activity more often, and notice what this state of mind is like physically, emotionally and cognitively.
 - Explore how you might realistically maintain this state of mind after you have finished the activity that tends to bring it on. **Describe.**
4. Pay close attention to your Mood **when you wake up** each morning. Write it down for several days. Is it similar each day? **Describe.**
5. Pay close attention to your Attitude or Mood **when you go to bed** at night. Is it similar each day? **Describe.**
6. What’s your Mood or Attitude **when you’re about to eat**? Just note the beginning of each meal. **Describe.**
7. Is there any chronic mind-state that seems to be there most of the time? If yes, **describe.**

In Meditation

1. After sitting for ten minutes, turn your attention to your mind-state, to your mood or attitude, instead of to the content of the mind. After your sitting, write down any of the mind-states that you noticed. Notice any physical sensations that accompany the mind-states. Describe.
2. Is there any chronic mind-state that seems to be there most of the time in meditation? If yes, **describe.**
3. When you have unpleasant mind-states, are you able to pay attention to them without judgment? Without trying to change them?
 - If no, next time one comes up, see if you can greet it warmly, “*Hello, old friend, Anxiety, here you are again...*”
 - Is it possible for you to have a different relationship with it?

Some Common Mind-states, Moods, Attitudes

Amused	Agitated
Appreciative	Angry
Calm	Anxious
Cheerful	Averse
Clear	Clinging
Compassionate	Confused
Concentrated	Contracted
Confident	Depressed
Determined	Distracted
Eager	Fearful
Energetic	Foggy
Enlarged	Insecure
Equanimous	Irritable
Excited	Lethargic
Expanded	Lonely
Friendly	Low-energy
Generous	Resigned
Grateful	Resistant
Happy	Restless
Light-hearted	Restricted
Kindly	Sad
Loving	Scattered
Mindful	Self-critical
Passionate	Shrunken
Patient	Sinking
Peaceful	Tense
Persevering	Tight
Relaxed	Wanting
Released	
Spacious	

Daily Reflections: Week 5

Monday ~ ***Clinging or Not-Clinging?***

Sometimes it's difficult to find words for a mind-state. The experience can be subtle and words can't quite describe it. What can be useful then, is to reflect if the mind is peaceful or stressful. Is there clinging or not-clinging?

Very simply notice if you feel either contented or unsettled. Right now, at this very moment, is there peacefulness or is there stress?

Tuesday ~ ***Open Space***

It is never too late for any of us to look at our minds. We can always sit down and allow the space for anything to arise. Sometimes we have a shocking experience of ourselves. Sometimes we try to hide. Sometimes we have a surprising experience of ourselves. Often we get carried away. Without judging, without buying into likes and dislikes, we can always encourage ourselves to just be here again and again and again.

The painful thing is that when we buy into disapproval, we are practicing disapproval. When we buy into harshness, we are practicing harshness. The more we do it, the stronger these qualities become. How sad it is that we become so expert at causing harm to ourselves and others.

The trick then is to practice gentleness and letting go. We can learn to meet whatever arises with curiosity and not make it such a big deal. Instead of struggling against the force of confusion, we could meet it and relax. When we do that, we gradually discover that clarity is always there. In the middle of the worst scenario of the worst person in the world, in the midst of heavy dialogue with ourselves, open space is always there.
~ Pema Chodron, from "*When Things Fall Apart*"

Wednesday ~ ***What's the Weather Inside?***

In mindfulness of mind we notice whether it is a mind filled with sense-desire, a mind filled with anger or fear, a confused mind, a clear mind, a concentrated mind, etc... By meeting the mind-states with attention that is free of judgment or commentary, we are in effect stepping outside of these mind-states. This creates some space which allows us to choose how to respond to them, possibly responding by simply noticing them and allowing them to come and go in awareness. It's like looking out the window and simply noticing what the weather is outside. Can we notice what the weather is inside?

~ Adapted from [Rose Colored Glasses](#), an article by Phil Jones

*Optional: Listen to Gil's talk on [Mindfulness of Heart-Mind Quality](#) from 11/04/07.
www.audiodharma.org/talks-rec.html. Transcribed in the Appendix.

Thursday ~ ***Inclining the Mind***

Just by recognizing what is present in our minds, it is already transformed. By accepting what is present, the transformation becomes a helpful change.

Sometimes, it can happen, that even though we recognize that our clinging, our attachment, is hurting us, we are unable to let go. Unable to accept what is present. We may feel stuck.

At times like this, it can be helpful to think of “inclining” the mind towards letting go, towards acceptance. There is no need to force it. It’s enough to incline in that direction. We are planting the seed. A flower opens its petals in its own time, it can’t be rushed.

Friday ~ **FOMO**

“Fear of Missing Out” (FOMO) can take many forms. You might be at a party talking with someone, and there’s an underlying anxiety that you’re missing out on all the other conversations going on. Maybe you’re interested in movies, and you scan the reviews, trying to make sure you learn about every last one, with an underlying sense of urgency, you don’t want to miss a single good one. Maybe you’re weeding the garden, and though you’ve been working hard, your time has run out and there are still weeds, you’ve missed some, you feel unsettled. You may be studying a topic and gathering information, and though you’ve given it quite a bit of time, there is an unpleasant feeling of it being incomplete.

You may have an attitude that you need to get the most out of your day, and pack it with great activities, but somewhere in the process of trying to get the most out of your day, you lose the ease of the day. Maybe you have a house or garage so full of things that you can’t find anything, can’t use your garage, but are afraid of letting go of something in case you might need it some day...but of course, when that day comes, you can’t find it.

We may be so anxious about missing out on important articles, or books – and even meditation books – that we rush through them so we can get to the next one.

The fear of missing out is sometimes related and intertwined with the feeling of not being good enough. Life isn’t good enough right now, we’re not good enough, we’re not doing a good enough job. An anxiety that if we make one choice, we miss out on the others.

This mental attitude can be a background attitude that colors our life and keeps us from fully relaxing into the moment, even when we are doing things we enjoy. Sometimes it comes out of clinging to desire. Wanting to be part of “all” the conversations.... Sometimes it comes out of fear, that if we relax and are happy and at ease, maybe we won’t do what’s needed.

There is this erroneous idea that if we didn’t miss out then we’d be happy. But it’s not possible to be part of all the conversations, to get all the weeds, to get all the information on a topic (especially in this age when googling the word “meditation” results in over 55 million pages.)

We can explore this recurring attitude, experience it in our bodies, and incline towards letting it go. By being mindful of this mental-state we are stepping outside of it, allowing spaciousness, and being at peace with this “fear of missing out.”

Saturday ~ **Opening**

"If your every day practice is to open to all your emotions, to all the people you meet, to all the situations you encounter, without closing down, trusting that you can do that - then that will take you as far as you can go. And then you'll understand all the teachings that anyone has ever taught."

~ Pema Chodron

Week 6: Mindfulness of Daily Life

Assignment: Week 6

1. Listen to: [Gil Fronsdal's Introduction to Meditation \(6 of 6\)](http://www.audiodharma.org/talks-intromed.html) from 2/13/08:
www.audiodharma.org/talks-intromed.html
 - Transcribed in the Appendix.
2. Building on the Foundation
3. Developing Mindfulness in Daily Life
4. Practice Support
5. Daily Reflections

Building on the Foundation

Excerpted from a talk by Gil Fronsdal

Life unfolds with a lot less stress, and more of a sense of freedom and wisdom, if we can be present for our life in a careful way. This is what mindfulness meditation is trying to help us do. The question is how to build on the foundation of this practice that we have been studying for the preceding five weeks.

Now that we have the basics of mindfulness meditation, there are two primary ways to go further:
(1) Practice mindfulness in daily life and (2) Develop more concentration with the mindfulness.

Mindfulness In Daily Life

There are many ways to practice mindfulness in daily life. Some people like to practice mindfulness when the phone rings. Rather than rushing to immediately answer the phone, they use the ringing as a cue to be present and check in with themselves. They ask themselves how they are feeling and what is happening at that moment. Then when they enter into the conversation with the person on the phone, they are more connected to themselves and thereby more connected with the caller. Some people like to practice mindfulness in conversation, being present for whomever is speaking and being aware of their own behavior during the conversation. If we do this, one thing we may discover is how little we really listen. Listening is sometimes considered a synonym with mindfulness. The qualities you need to really listen well are the same qualities needed to be mindful well.

Other people use walking through doorframes as a mindfulness cue. Whenever they walk through a doorframe into a different room they notice and pay attention to what is happening with themselves and in the room that they are walking into. Additionally, if we drive to work we can park a little bit further away from our office and use the walk as a place to practice walking meditation.

Another mindfulness reminder that people have used is traffic lights. While they are waiting for the light to turn green they stop and notice how they are feeling. If we do this, we may find that we are impatient for the light to turn green. Now we can ask ourselves whether this is helpful and whether this is how we want to live our lives.

As we practice mindfulness throughout our daily life, often we find that our life starts getting richer. We start reclaiming our life and taking more responsibility for how we want to be in our life. As we bring more presence to our lives we have more choices and we can then make choices that are wiser and more appropriate for how we want to live our lives and engage with people and things. Too many people live

their life without taking any healthy responsibility about how they want to be. They are always rushing and doing and letting the mind drive the show. If we stop and pay attention we have a chance to make some choices about our life.

Concentration

The second way to build on the foundation of our mindfulness is to develop greater concentration. Concentration helps provide steadiness for mindfulness. With concentration our minds have the ability to focus and be present in a careful way. Mindfulness is the telescope that looks and concentration is the tripod that gives stability to the telescope so we can see very clearly.

One way to develop concentration is with regularity of practice. One of the most important things is just practicing every day, day in and day out. The mind benefits from regularity. It can be like a child and it is more likely to do what you want and not act out with consistent and persistent practice.

Another way in which our tradition develops concentration is going on retreats. Going on retreat allows us to step out of our lives and perhaps get a better perspective and let things go a little bit. Also, by meditating longer through the day it allows the mind to settle more and let go more of the everyday concerns that often keep us preoccupied. As those preoccupations fall away we can get concentrated and still and be really present. It is one of the great delights of life to have all the preoccupations fall away. An analogy may be that we go around here on the Peninsula and not really notice the air quality. Then one day the air is crystal clear and we can see the Mt. Hamilton range across the bay. We can see so clearly, it is such a delight. It is so refreshing to have that clarity suddenly. We didn't realize what we were missing because we were so used to the smoggy air. To be really present and not have the mind be murky or foggy or distracted is one of the great things of life. This happens slowly over time if we practice everyday at home, but it happens quicker and deeper when we go on retreat.

If we're new to meditation we don't necessarily want to go on retreat right away, but start doing a regular practice. If we meditate regularly at some point we will probably feel that we would like to do more and then we might consider a retreat.

Developing Mindfulness in Daily Life

Recommendation: You might want to print this page and revisit the suggestions periodically.

To develop mindfulness we commit ourselves to coming back to the present moment over and over again. Our formal sitting and walking practices develop our mindfulness and concentration, and our practice in daily life develops the continuity of our attention.

The suggestions below are divided into practices we can aim for doing all day long, and specific activities that develop our mindfulness. Choose the practices that resonate with you.

All Day: (Choose one)

These practices that can be used all day long. It's preferable that you stay with one method for at least a few months before switching to another.

1. Maintain an awareness of keeping a "soft belly". Check in, is the belly relaxed?
2. Maintain an awareness of your posture. Are you relaxed? Can you relax a little more?
3. Maintain an awareness of the breath throughout the day, no matter what you are doing. Keep checking in.
4. Maintain an awareness of your mind-state. Is there calm? Is there stress? Relax the mind.

Specific Daily Practices: You can easily incorporate the practices below without making your day busier, but actually adding a feeling of spaciousness to it. Choose what practices resonate with you.

- **Reading** dharma books can inspire us in practice. Read them slowly and deliberately. Don't rush through them, don't try to devour them so you can get to the next one. To rush through them is to miss the point. Sometimes reading one page and reflecting on it is much more helpful than reading the entire book.
- **Waking up:** When you first wake up, take a few mindful breaths. Gently stretch your body, staying mindful of each movement as you stretch. Be mindful of any resistance to getting up or any feelings of rushing into the day.
- **Eating:** Take a minute of silence or reflection before you eat. Connect with your body and relax. Notice the food in front of you. You might reflect on your gratefulness for the meal.
 - Put your fork down between bites. Finish what's in your mouth before taking another bite.
 - You can silently recite a mindfulness poem or phrase before you eat. You can write your own. For example:

*I am thankful for this food which I am about to eat.
May it nourish this body.
May I eat it moderately, peacefully, and mindfully.
I am thankful to all the beings that have made this meal possible
and for those I am sharing this meal with.*

- **Speech:**
 - Before **answering the phone**, use the ringing of the phone as a mindfulness reminder. Take a deep embodied breath before answering the phone.
 - **A Gatha:** A poem or a phrase can be used before a meeting, making a phone call or before a difficult conversation. This is one example:
*Words can travel across thousands of miles.
They are intended to build up understanding and love.
Each word should be a jewel,
A beautiful tapestry. ~ Thich Nhat Hanh*

- **Routine Daily Activities:** Choose a couple of brief routine activities that you can commit to being mindful of each day, such as: brushing your teeth, showering, washing dishes, petting the dog, going through a door, getting up from sitting, the entire process of going to the restroom, every time the phone rings. As your mindfulness develops, you can add more routine activities..
 - Create 100 small notes with a message to remind you, maybe "*Pay Attention.*" Then hide the notes throughout your home, office and car.
- **Going to Sleep:**
 - Do a gentle **body scan** before going to sleep. Guided scans can be found here:
 - www.audiodharma.org/talks-guidedmeditation.html (one by Leigh Brasington and one by Gil Fronsdal.)
 - www.audiodharma.org/talks-pain.html by Ines Freedman
- **Driving:** Be mindful getting in and out of the car. Use stop signs, lights and gridlock, as times to reconnect with the breath.
- **Waiting:** All moments of mindfulness are worthwhile and enrich our lives. Transform any moment of waiting to a moment of mindfulness. Waiting in line, waiting for an appointment, waiting on hold on the phone.
- **At the computer:** Set a recurring alarm with regular mindfulness reminders. See Meditation Timers.: <http://www.insightmeditationcenter.org/meditation-timers/>
- **E-mail:** Before writing an e-mail, take a moment to think of the person you are writing to. You may want to smile before writing each e-mail, as if you are actually greeting the person.
- **Eight-Breath Meditation:** Use the Eight-Breath Meditation throughout the day. See References below.

Practice Support: Week 6

Please engage in the exercises below.

Exercise 1: Pick a routine activity that has an **unpleasant** aspect. It might be a chore you don't particularly like, maybe cleaning the kitchen floor, changing the oil in the car, etc... Commit to staying mindful for this activity. **Describe** your experience.

- Notice your mental state and attitude just before the activity.
- Keep noticing how you feel during the activity, pay attention to the body. Is the belly tensing? The shoulders? The breath?
- Notice how you feel after the activity.

Exercise 2: Mindful Listening, Mindful Speaking. Take a couple of times this week when you are engaged in a conversation, to be particularly mindful of your body and attitude. What is it like for you to bring more awareness to this area of life?

Listening:

- When listening, are you listening carefully? Are you rushing forward preparing what you're going to say next? Notice any feelings like impatience, irritation, delight, interest. **Describe.**
- Can you listen carefully with a very light awareness of your body posture. Is the body relaxed? Are there areas that contract in reaction to what you hear? **Describe.**

Speaking:

- While you are speaking, pay attention to your tone. Are you rushing what you are saying? Are you speaking at a relaxed pace. Are you aware if the other person is understanding you? **Describe.**
- Can you lightly be mindful of your body, of your posture, as you speak? **Describe.**

Exercise 3: Mindful Walking.

Read the Instructions for Walking Meditation in the Appendix. Please practice one of the recommended methods formally at least once, for ten minutes.

Commit one day this week to Mindfulness of walking. Use any method that keeps you grounded in the body. You can pay attention to the movement of your legs and feet, or to the contact of the feet with the ground, or to the body globally. Whatever helps you stay present.

Practice Mindfulness of Walking:

- Every time you get up from a chair and walk to another room
- Walking to the car, walking from the car
- Going for a walk

Describe the experience of doing this throughout the day. Notice if and how it affects your next activity.

Daily Reflections: Week 6

Monday ~ **Mindful Speech**

Have you noticed how challenging it is to stay mindful of speech?

*Suzuki Roshi was asked: "What do you think of all these American Students?"
He responded: "You are all enlightened until you open your mouth."*

The way we speak and the way we listen has deep implications in our lives. Our speech not only affects our relationships with others, but also our relationship with ourselves. Expressing our anger to the customer service person, is not only hurtful to them, but is hurtful to our own peace of mind.

Many of us have unhelpful habits of speech. During conversation it can be difficult to stay mindful; it can be helpful to have some guidelines:

Pause and Relax. Pause briefly before speaking and reconnect with your body and feelings and relax. Notice your intention.

Listen Deeply

- Try to let go of your own thoughts and agenda, and pay attention to what the other person is saying. Notice any judgments and let them go, staying receptive. This doesn't mean you agree with what is being said, but rather you are giving your full presence and attention.
- Notice their tone of voice, and if they are in front of you, notice their posture and facial expression. Not to judge, but to respond to the entire communication, not just the words.
- Notice any tendency you may have to rush to respond or to cut them off.
- Allow a small amount of your attention to rest in your body, note if any areas are tensing, and gently relax what you can relax. Paying attention to having a "soft belly" can be helpful.
- When the other person is done speaking, pause before responding, giving some space for what they have said to settle.

Guidelines for Skillful Speech. If unsure, consider the following:

- Is it **true**?
- Is it **kind**? Does it harm anyone? Even if you disagree, it can be said kindly. Even if what you say is unpleasant, it can be said with a kind intention .
- Is it **helpful**?
- Is this the **right time** to say it?

Speech to Refrain From: For some of us it's easier to focus on what type of speech to stay away from.

- Refrain from **lying**.
- Refrain from "**malicious**" speech. Speech that might encourage discord in relationships. When talking about someone: are you representing the person with dignity?
- Refrain from "**harsh**" speech. This includes: tone of voice; scolding, condemning, or reproofing someone angrily; using bitter words, cursing – insulting someone, being sarcastic.
- Refrain from "**idle chatter**." This refers to speaking without connecting, without purpose, talking for the sake of talking. Sometimes even forgetting there is someone else listening to you. Sometimes you may want to "break the ice", and though the topic may seem trivial, the purpose is to connect, so then it would be skillful speech.

Tuesday 11/10/09 ~ ***Mindfulness of E-mail***

The written word changes the world. It can educate us and give us wisdom. It can oppress us and give us propaganda. In today's world, due to the internet, both the positive and negative potentials of the written word have been vastly multiplied.

Many of us find ourselves awash in a sea of e-mail, or in lives so busy, that we find ourselves rushing through our e-mail communications carelessly. E-mail is a valuable tool to connect with people freely and easily, share information and stay in touch, collaborate on projects and for doing our jobs. It's become a necessity for most. And it's also a place that can add significant stress to our lives, and where miscommunication can easily occur.

Before beginning to write an e-mail we can take a breath, relax, and mentally greet the person we are writing. It takes seconds to remember that we are writing another human being. We can even smile or generate some warmth towards them. This very brief moment of care can transform the experience of writing e-mails into one that is relaxed and helps us feel more connected with those we communicate with. It can be a moment of nourishing ourselves and those we correspond with.

There are various helpful guidelines that can be found on the internet for using e-mail tactfully, effectively and safely. But in mindfulness of e-mail our primary concern is our intentions. Our intention to tell the truth, to be kind, to be helpful, and to do so at an appropriate time.

Wednesday 11/11/09 ~ ***Intention and Motivation***

Intention precedes all action, it directs the body, speech and mind. We can know we are going to move before we move, we can know we are going to speak before we speak.

Motivation is what fuels our intentions, the **reason** we do things. For instance, if I'm working at my desk and I'm feeling sluggish, it's my "motivation" to feel energetic that fuels the more immediate "intention" to stand up and go for a walk. We can be motivated by compassion, desire, anger or a necessity, such as getting a drink of water, etc...

Unless we are mindful, we live our lives habitually, not noticing our motivations and intentions. We might get in the car and turn on the radio without making a conscious choice to do so. We may finish eating a bag of chips because it's there. Perhaps we gossip about someone, not aware of the consequences.

Joseph Goldstein said "*Everything rests on the tip of motivation.*" It's why we do what we do. For instance, I can make a special dinner for friends. I can make it because I want to impress them, or I can make it because I appreciate them. It's a very different experience for me depending on which of these motivates me. Wanting to impress is a stressful state, appreciation a happy one.

As our mindfulness strengthens, many of our unconscious intentions start to be seen. These intentions are often harmful to our peace of mind. Mindfulness gives us choice. We can pause and act in a way that is helpful instead of causing ourselves stress or suffering.

For instance, during a disagreement, we may have unseen anger, and our tone of voice can turn hostile, though our words might "*appear*" innocent. If we carefully notice our intention, we might see that we actually want to "*hurt*" the person we are disagreeing with.

Some people say they want to exercise every day, that it's very important to them. But for some reason, they don't, they can't make themselves do it. They can feel very frustrated. It might be that "avoiding

pain and discomfort” is a primary motivation, stronger than the desire to exercise, and exercise can involve a certain amount of discomfort. These unconscious intentions can override the conscious ones. This is one reason why it’s so important to meditate and be mindful when things aren’t pleasant. Most of us enjoy meditating when it feels good. Some people don’t meditate if they are ill or in pain or upset, they wait until they feel good. But it’s only when we practice with what we don’t like that we are able to see these hidden intentions that can run much of our lives.

"If you are only free when you are comfortable, you're not really free." ~ Gil Fronsdal

From our deep aspirations, we may have the intention to discuss a difficult subject with kindness, the intention to be with someone’s anger with compassion, to attend an insult to our ego with letting go. Yet despite these aspirations, we may find ourselves getting “caught” in anger or defensiveness. At those times it’s helpful to remember the intention to be kind and patient with ourselves, to keep inclining the mind towards kindness and acceptance.

Thursday 11/12/09 ~ **Virtue**

How we live our lives is intricately connected with the deepening of our meditation practice. If our deepest aspirations are in conflict with our actions, then there is an internal struggle keeping the mind in turmoil, and making it more difficult for it to settle.

The Five Precepts are the guidelines for virtue and ethical behavior formulated by the Buddha, not based on ideas of good and bad, but on the observation that some actions lead to suffering and some actions lead to happiness and freedom. We can ask ourselves, "Does this action lead to increased suffering or to more happiness, for myself and others?" This pragmatic approach is more conducive to investigation than to guilt.

The Five Precepts Are:

- Refrain from Killing and Act With Reverence to All Forms of Life
- Refrain from Stealing and Cultivate Generosity
- Refrain from Sexual Misconduct & be Considerate in Intimate Relationships
- Refrain from Lying and Speak and Listen Skillfully
- Refrain from Intoxicants which Confuse the Mind

These precepts are the actions that come naturally when we are connected with the motivation to decrease suffering for ourselves and others. They can be understood as “training rules” of behavior, not as commandments. We can commit to them as a practice that promotes the development of meditation, wisdom, and compassion.

How we understand and interpret the precepts is up to the individual. Some people won’t kill an ant, but will eat meat, others are vegetarian. Some drink a glass of wine, as they feel it enhances relaxation. Others are teetotalers. The precepts aren’t about all of us doing it “right”, but about honestly deciding for ourselves what is helpful and what is hurtful.

If we have a deep habit of criticizing people to others, we may choose to practice with the fourth precept. Some people expand the fifth precept to include activities we intoxicate ourselves with, like television or the internet. When the precepts were written we didn’t have the myriad of activities we can entertain ourselves with.

If we “break” a precept, it’s important to differentiate between guilt and remorse. The purpose of the precepts is to make us happy, to eliminate suffering. When we accidentally hurt someone, we naturally

feel remorse – we’re sorry it happened. We might vow to ourselves to be more careful and learn from it. This quality of remorse can come and go easily without leaving residual feelings. Guilt, on the other hand is a form of self-hatred and causes suffering. Instead of focusing on our actions, guilt has negative judgment added. Instead of noticing an undesirable behavior, it says that there is something wrong with us. Many of us have the unhelpful habit of guilt. So if we become mindful that we are feeling guilt, can we be compassionate with ourselves?

Friday ~ ***Creating a Container for Practice***

Meditating daily is a gift we give ourselves. A daily practice offers benefits in all areas of our lives, physically, mentally and spiritually. It allows us to relax into our lives, increasing our ability to meet whatever arises in life with clarity and openness. It helps us see our deep patterns of unhelpful conditioning, allowing us to let them go. It allows us to learn to trust that in each moment we have everything we need.

Meditation practice strengthens our mindfulness so that it’s easier to be mindful in our daily lives. Mindfulness can become the way we are most of the time, not just an exercise we practice.

To help establish and maintain a daily sitting practice, sometimes it’s helpful to “*create a container*” for it, a support. For each of us, what supports us, what inspires us, is likely to be different. Some helpful things include:

1. Meditating with friends or a group or having someone with whom to share our practice.
2. Inspiring reading, maybe a passage in a book, a poem, or listening to a talk...
3. Keeping a meditation journal. Reminding ourselves why we meditate, writing down our aspirations and reading it regularly.
4. Creating a special place to meditate, doing it at the same time each day.

Find out what works for you, what inspires you, what supports you.

Developing our meditation practice doesn’t happen in a straight line, it is composed of many peaks and valleys. Sometimes in the valleys, it’s easy to get discouraged. As Gil says, we can ask ourselves: “*What’s the best energy available to me at this moment?*” And even if this energy is confused, cloudy, or sluggish, it doesn’t matter. “*What’s important is the continuity of our best effort, however that is.*”

Saturday

*Try to be mindful, and let things take their natural course.
 Then your mind will become still in any surroundings,
 like a clear forest pool.
 All kinds of wonderful, rare animals will come to drink at the pool,
 and you will clearly see the nature of all things.
 You will see many strange and wonderful things come and go,
 but you will be still.
 This is the happiness of the Buddha.*

~ Ajahn Chah from “A Still Forest Pool”

References

Counting Breaths

For some people, to help settle the mind and develop concentration, counting breaths can be very helpful. It serves as feedback to let you know that your mind has drifted.

- This method can be used for the entire meditation session or just for the first part of the sitting, until the mind calms a bit.
- Silently count each breath, beginning with one and count up to ten. Each count includes an entire cycle of inhalation and exhalation.
- Some people prefer to count during the inhale, and some during the exhale, either is fine. One can also count during both the inhale and the exhale: 'One' for the inhale, and 'One' for the exhale... then continue with two and so on...
- When you reach ten, you start over.
- Keep most of your attention on the physical sensations of breathing.
- If you get distracted, start over again at 'one'. It doesn't matter how far you get, just start again. You are training the mind, not trying to accomplish getting to 10. The starting over is an essential part of the training. Any time you are starting over at one, you are being mindful.
- Even if you only notice 2 breaths in a row, just by coming back and starting again, you are accomplishing the practice.
- Sometimes our attention can drift and we might not notice until we have counted up to 20 or 30! It doesn't matter, back to 'one'.

More Complex Counting: For some people, adding a level of complexity to the counting can be helpful. You can count up to ten, just like above, but when you reach 10, you begin to count back down to one. Then start over again from 1 to 10 and 10 to 1.

Eight Breath Meditation

No matter how busy your life is, no matter where you are, you can find one minute to do this 8 Breath meditation. It's particularly helpful for those who sit at a desk all day, to do this hourly. These 8 breaths bring you to your body, bring you to the present.

Begin with the intention to put aside all your preoccupations for the next minute and just relax. You will take 8 deep breaths.

- 1st exhale: relax your face, forehead, eyes, scalp and jaw. Smile slightly if you'd like.
- 2nd exhale: relax your neck, shoulders, and arms.
- 3rd exhale: relax your entire back.
- 4th exhale: relax your chest and belly, keep your belly soft.
- 5th exhale: relax your lower extremities (thighs, legs and feet.)
- 6th exhale: pay attention to your body globally. Feel your entire body.
- 7th breath: keep your attention on your body globally.
- 8th breath: keep your attention on your body globally.

Five Hindrances

Contents

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- Investigating the Hindrances
- Sensual Desire or Greed
- Aversion and Ill-Will (vyapada)
- Sloth and Torpor
- Restlessness, Anxiety and Remorse
- Doubt
- The Five Jhanic Factors and the Five Hindrances

Introduction

The Five Hindrances can be seen as the major forces in the mind that hinder our ability to see clearly or become concentrated. They are universal, we all experience them.

The Five Hindrances are: 1) sensual desire or greed 2) aversion or ill-will 3) sloth and torpor 4) restlessness, anxiety and remorse, and 5) doubt.

The primary instruction in working with the hindrances is to turn them into your meditation object. It doesn't matter if a hindrance is present or not, but it does matter if you're not aware of it.

Any moment the hindrances are suspended, one feels happy and calm. It's important to have a friendly relationship with the hindrances, not an adversarial one.

Investigating the Hindrances (*nivarana*)

The RAIN Formula: When a hindrance is present it helps to investigate it:

R: Recognize it.

A: Accept it

I: Investigate it, be curious. What is it like?

- Physically (How does it feel in the body? Is it pleasant? Unpleasant? Does it change?)
- Emotionally
- Energetically (such as feelings of rushing, sinking or lifting)
- Cognitively (What beliefs or stories do we tell ourselves?)
- Motivationally (is there an urge to act or cling?)

N: Not personal. Non-attachment. This is just a passing process that comes and goes, not who we are.

It's helpful to first explore the hindrance and investigate it. Often just recognizing a hindrance is enough for it to fall away. But at other times, it's helpful to use "remedies" to counterbalance the hindrance.

Sensual Desire or Greed (*kammachanda*)

Desire becomes a hindrance when we want something and grasp for it, cling to it. It could be either harmful to us or inappropriate or not useful at this time. Wanting to eat is a healthy desire, but not useful while meditating. Whereas a desire for a cigarette might be a desire for something harmful.

No matter how weak or strong Desire is, mindful attention is always appropriate. You can work with it using the RAIN formula (*Recognize, Accept, Investigate, Non-identification*).

- If there is excessive preoccupation with lust, one can focus on the body's non-attractive parts, such as urine, saliva, pus, feces, phlegm, sweat, body hair, teeth, bones, bone marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, spleen, intestines, undigested food, blood, fat....
- If desiring something that is harmful to us, we can focus on the consequences of getting what we want. Maybe you are craving potato chips and it gives you high blood pressure. Reflect on the possible effects of high blood pressure.
- If we desire something that might be appropriate, but we are clinging to that desire, we feel we just have to have it, we can focus on the impermanent nature of what we want. How long will the satisfaction last if the desire is fulfilled? This desire will fade. It may come back, but it's not permanent.

Aversion and Ill-Will (*vyapada*)

Aversion is wanting things to not be the way they are and pushing them away. Ill-will is an escalation of that into wishing harm to someone or something that is in the way of us getting what we want. It can range from a very subtle pushing something away to intense hatred and anger or ill-will.

No matter how weak or strong an aversion is, mindful attention is always appropriate. You can work with it using the RAIN formula (*Recognize, Accept, Investigate, Non-identification*). See References below.

With the less intense forms of aversion, just noticing them is often enough to dispel them. Sometimes aversion to something can be so deeply ingrained, it's like the air that we breath; like a fish swimming in water doesn't notice the water... Low self-esteem can be that way; a chronic voice that says "I shouldn't be this way."

Remedies

At times, applying a "remedy" or **counterbalancing** aversion might be useful:

- Narrow your focus: increase your concentration, such as counting your breaths
- Broaden your focus: listen to all sounds, or experience the body globally
- Change your focus: Aversion is often due to "one-sided attention," when the irritating, unpleasant or repulsive feature of something receives undue attention. If someone seems very annoying and we dislike them, we can pay attention to their positive qualities. (This applies to ourselves as well.)
 - In a difficult situation we could ask: "What might I learn from this situation?"
 - Lovingkindness: if you are being harsh with yourself or someone else, you can give wishes of good-will to yourself.
 - If Anger is a significant issue in your life, the regular practice of Lovingkindness can be very helpful.
- Pain: It's helpful to notice the difference between the sensations of pain, and our aversion and emotional reaction to it.
- Reflect on our own good deeds: reflect on things you have done that have helped yourself or others....

Fear is having aversion of something that hasn't yet happened. (Something imagined, even if likely will still never be just like you imagined...)

- Being in the body is very important for working with fear.
- If you have the luxury of time for dealing with the fear, as you might during formal meditation, or on retreat, a great deal can be learned.
- Change your Focus: if fear is not manageable, sometimes it's appropriate to counterbalance with a change in focus.
 - e.g.: Public Speaking – focus on what the audience needs to know instead of your desire for the talk to be successful.
 - If you are hiking on a scary path, and you have no choice, narrow your focus to what's right in front of you, not the drop 1,000 feet down.

Sloth and Torpor (*thina-middha*)

We want to develop a mind that is both **Tranquil and Alert**. Too much tranquility without alertness and we're in dreamland. We sometimes call it "sinking mind", it tends to be dreamy and pleasant. It's relaxing, but it's not conducive to awareness, to mindfulness. Too much alertness and no tranquility, and we can be tense or quickly either planning or worrying about the future, or regretting the past...

The first thing to do is to recognize it when it happens. Then to consciously intend to put a little more effort into staying mindful. How is the posture? The breathing? Sometimes it helps to start the sitting with a clear intention that we want to stay present with each breath.

Sloth and torpor refers to **heaviness of body and dullness of mind**. This includes drowsiness, low energy, sluggishness, sleepiness, lethargy. Nothing is clear. The mind feels heavy and dull or dreamy. Sloth refers to the physical aspects: it feels difficult holding oneself up. Torpor is more mental, it feels difficult to pay attention. It can be both pleasant or unpleasant. When it's pleasant it's more seductive.

Causes

- Lack of direction - In daily life as in meditation, a lack of direction causes a lack of energy: energy has to be directed. There needs to be a goal. Energy arises when one has a clear-cut direction. Committing to a goal gives the mind direction, such as committing to being mindful for the next 10 breath.
- Lack of stimulation – the mind likes to have something to do, when it doesn't it's in the habit of getting drowsy.
 - Broaden the focus: give the mind more to be mindful of.
 - Pay attention to details more closely
- Notice resistance. Often we don't want to pay attention, we don't want to be here.
 - It can be resistance to unpleasant states
 - It can be a protective mechanism, of a deep memory or feeling.
- Notice Complacency: Sloth and torpor can set in out of complacency. It's nice here. Sometimes meditation is a challenge or a struggle. It's quite pleasant now...even though I'm dreamy... It can lull you into not making any more effort.
- Our thoughts can increase our energy or decrease it. Some thoughts can drain us, such as worrying, planning, regretting...
 - Thoughts of Discouragement/Failure. Focusing on failures or feared failures drains our energy.
 - Thinking "*there's 20 minutes left*" can be discouraging, being mindful for the next breath is bite size.
- Sometimes there is the mistaken idea that a meditative state should be passive instead of receptive.
 - Being "relaxed" and calm is sometimes being overemphasized. Diligence, energy, ardency, vigorous active engagement are all necessary.

"Calm is very important. Equanimity is very important. Tranquility is important... but not at the expense of being energized." ~ Gil Fronsdal

- Sometimes Sloth & Torpor is a reaction to the constant chronic habit of tension and anxiety. With years of that kind of stress, when people finally sit completely still they feel the exhaustion of this chronic tension.
- Don't overeat before meditation, it tends to make us tired and sleepy.

Physical Remedies

- Sit up straight.
- This works during the day also—your posture will affect you!
- If this is a recurring hindrance, sit without back support.
- Take a few deep breaths (can count breaths).
- Open your eyes.
- Look at a LIGHT: the effect of light awakens the system, look at a light, a light bulb, the moonlight...
- OR imagine a white light in the forehead area.
- In general, focusing on head increases energy, focusing on belly calms...
- Pull earlobes, rub face.
- Change posture – stand (standing meditation), brisk walk.
- Go outside.
- Wash face with cold water.
- If you're doing walking meditation, you can walk backwards.

Mental Remedies

Energy is always available but you need to know how to turn on the switch. Setting a reasonable goal is a wise and effective way to generate energy, as is deliberately developing interest in the task at hand.

- Counting breaths: Just pay attention to 5 more breaths. (small goal)
- A lack of direction causes a lack of energy, a goal can be helpful. Energy arises when one has a clear-cut direction. The goal of being mindful can be brought to mind with “just this one breath, just this one step...”
- Effort often begets effort. When we apply ourselves there might be resistance initially, but after a while after you keep making the effort and doing it, something happens and it begins to feel effortless. Like pedaling a bicycle hard, and then coasting.
- When something is new it can be exciting. We often get a lot of energy when we meet someone new or go somewhere we haven't been to before – novelty energizes us. But if we can look at our life, or our meditation, with a 'beginner's mind' we can see our ordinary lives newly each moment, we can see new angles and fresh possibilities which arouse energy.
- We can develop delight in whatever we are doing by training our perception to see the beautiful and interesting in the ordinary, thereby generating interest
- TO AROUSE ENERGY, DO MORE:
- You can be more fully engaged with the breath by counting or making the counting more complex.
- You can add touch points: during the space between the exhale and the inhale, you can notice your sit bones, or the palms of your hands...
- You can increase the details and frequency of noting.
- Contemplate on our desire for awakening, on something or someone who inspires us.
- Remind yourself why you meditate, what are your highest goals?
- For some, thinking about death can be helpful: life is uncertain, death is certain, right now is the best opportunity for meditation. This works if it arouses you, and doesn't depress you, it's not for everyone...
- The Buddha also recommended to his monks to contemplate on 5 “threatening dangers”. The dangers of illness, age, lack of food, war, lack of support by good friends... That now is a good time to practice, our conditions for practice might not be available later
- If this is a recurrent issue, doing things that inspire you before sitting is helpful, such as reading a passage from a book before sitting
- If nothing works, take a nap, but don't do it every time it arises, it creates a habit! Try to always investigate the hindrance before napping – even if it's for only one minute.

Restlessness, Anxiety and Remorse (*uddhacca-kukkucca*)

Restlessness is a feeling of agitation or over-excitement, it agitates the mind, so it doesn't have the time to see fully. Restlessness is unpleasant, so there is a tendency of the mind to push it away, to not want it there. The mind is restless, and restlessness is further enhanced by struggling against it.

Worry is fear of what may happen in the future. **Anxiety** is a non-specific fear of what will happen in the future.

Remorse is regretting our unskillful past actions, sometimes dwelling on them repeatedly.

Restlessness of the mind tends to show itself in restlessness in the body; in meditation, by wanting to shift positions, by tightness and tension. It can take different forms: worry, planning, physical restlessness, self-judgment, regret of the past, nervousness, remorse, anxiety. But what these different forms have in common is that we are either regretting or judging the past or worrying about the future. Peace and happiness can only occur in the present moment.

We can get lost in regret of the past and self-judgment. Regretting the past comes from actions we've either committed or omitted, and is a major source of restlessness in meditation and daily life. When we pay attention to how much of the disquiet of the mind comes as a result of past actions, the imperative to live a life of integrity becomes more and more compelling.

Planning is useful at the right time, but it can easily become worry, when one becomes concerned if the plan will materialize. We often find ourselves planning and re-planning a coming event, a conversation, often in the same useless loop.

Lack of exercise can cause a physical restlessness we often don't recognize, especially among those that tend to be sedentary. If we pay attention to our bodies, we'll get up and stretch or take a walk, if we don't the body itself becomes restless. Too much coffee or other stimulants can also cause a physical restlessness. For many, it's probably not a good idea to sit and meditate after a couple of cups of coffee.

Suppressed Emotions can also be a source of restlessness. When we don't pay attention to our emotions when they arise, we tend to either act them out or suppress them. Suppressed emotions can often simmer underneath unnoticed, except for a pervasive feeling of restlessness.

The mind likes stimulation, when stimulation is low, it can be experienced as slightly unpleasant. We tend to call that "**boredom**". When we notice we are bored, it's because we don't like this state of low stimulation and want it to go away, so the mind becomes restless, increasing stimulation.

Working with Restlessness

The most direct way to work with restlessness or any of the hindrances is to be mindful of them, to transform them into the object of meditation. You can use the RAIN formula: Recognize it, Accept it, Investigate it, Not identify with it. (see References below).

Restlessness can be unpleasant; try to stay with it and experience it without getting caught up in the content of its story, don't push it away. Don't resist it. Don't be in a rush to get rid of it.

Remedies

- **Concentration:** When restlessness seems too strong to simply observe, try counting your breaths, until the mind comes back to balance. Concentration cultivates calm and tranquility.

- **Metta or Lovingkindness Practice:** A happy mind is not restless. Lovingkindness practice is often taught using 4 phrases we repeat silently . Common phrases are: “May I be happy. May I be peaceful. May I be well. May I be safe.” Focusing on lovingkindness towards oneself helps with restlessness in two ways: it’s a form of concentration practice, which calms the mind; and it also inclines the mind to kindness and acceptance.
- **Smiling:** A practice sometimes used for the cultivation of happiness is smiling, it has a direct effect on calming the mind.
- **Broaden the Focus:** One can shift the attention from using the breath as an anchor to Listening to sounds or a global sense of the body. By expanding the focus outward, the mind can feel less constricted.
- **Sitting still:** just by sitting still and not moving, the mind itself begins to quiet. It’s like taking a glass of dirty water and shaking it. At first the water is murky, but after a while, the particles settle at the bottom.
- **Bargaining:** When restlessness is overpowering, sometimes skillful “bargaining” can be useful. “I’ll just pay close attention to the next 5 breaths.”

Doubt (vicikiccha)

It is said that Doubt, as one of the hindrances, is the most dangerous of the hindrances, as it is the one that can cause a person to give up their practice. We can have doubt in our ability to practice or doubt of the practice or the teachings. It's a state of indecision, of vacillation, that doesn't allow us to fully apply ourselves, causes us to hold back, to get lost in discursive thinking.

Doubt interrupts the gathering of data with premature questions; it interferes with the process of seeing. Doubt can question one's own ability "Can I do this?", or question the method "Is this the right way?" Even, "How am I doing?" Such questions are obstacles to meditation because they are asked at the wrong time and thus become an obstacle, obscuring one's clarity.

Doubt is not productive or useful, it drains us or disconnects us. It keeps us unwilling to apply ourselves.

"To have doubt about mindfulness, of the value and importance of just being mindful, borders on having doubt about the value of being present for life in general, because mindfulness and being present for life is the same thing." ~ Gil Fronsda

Remedies

No matter how weak or strong doubt is, mindful attention is always appropriate. You can work with it using the **RAIN formula** (*Recognize, Accept, Investigate, Non-identification*).

The most important thing about working with Doubt is to learn to recognize it when it arises, and to put it aside while we meditate. If Doubt is persistent, we can work with this hindrance by gathering clear instructions, talking with those we respect who practice and being willing to suspend our doubt until we have tested the practice and seen for ourselves. We can study more, understand what we're doing, maybe there's a good reason why we have doubt, maybe we haven't really understood the basic premise, the ideas, the teachings well enough to really want to apply oneself.

Maybe we haven't understood the instructions for practice well enough and so have reasons to have doubt. "How should I practice? What should I do? When should I do it?" So sometimes doubt is resolved by reflecting on what questions we have, and learning more or coming and talking to a teacher and exploring it with them.

If one really understands the value of one moment of mindfulness perhaps one will not be plagued by Doubt.

The Five Jhanic Factors and the Five Hindrances

The *jhanas* are states of deep absorption that can occur in meditation. These states can occur only when the hindrances have been suspended for a consistent period of time. These states are states of deep joy, happiness, calm, contentment, and equanimity. This tranquility and stability in the mind, allows it to pierce deeply into the nature of reality creating a fertile ground for the insights that can occur in insight meditation.

There are five *Jhanic* factors needed to enter the first of these absorptions. Each one is an antidote to one of the corresponding hindrances.

1. **Sensual Desire:** One-pointedness (*ekkagata*)
2. **Aversion/ill-will:** Joy (*piti*)
3. **Sloth and Torpor:** Applied Thought (*vittaka*)
4. **Restlessness and Remorse:** Happiness (*sukha*)
5. **Doubt:** Sustained Thought (*vicara*)

Applied Thought (*vittaka*): Applied thought is the mind's ability to strike at an object. In the context of attaining the first jhana, the object is struck at with enough power that with the aid of sustained thought, the mind becomes absorbed in this object. Applied thought counters the hindrance of **sloth and torpor**.

Sustained Thought (*vicara*): Sustained thought is responsible for the mind's ability to remain on the object of its attention once applied thought places it there. It is the factor that investigates, examines, and experiences the object. Sustained thought counters the hindrance of **doubt**.

Joy/Rapture (*piti*): This factor could also be translated as "ecstatic joy," and is experienced as a strong energy in the body. It arises when the mind takes a pleasurable interest in the object of meditation due to the presence of applied and sustained thought. Rapture counters the hindrance of **aversion or ill will**.

Happiness (*sukha*): Happiness is a pleasant feeling of great peace and calm. Rapture and happiness are closely connected, but there are qualitative differences. Rapture has the defining quality of excitement or stimulation. This is lacked in happiness, ultimately making it a more gratifying experience. Happiness counters the hindrance of **restlessness and remorse**.

One-pointedness (*ekkagata*): One-pointedness of mind is the factor that works to eliminate all distractions that prevent the mind from focusing on its object of attention. One-pointedness of mind counters the hindrance of **sense desire**.

Noting

Mental Noting or Labeling can be a helpful tool for focusing and sustaining the attention in meditation. Labeling the breath with a simple “*in... out...in...out...*” or “*rising...falling...*” can help maintain our attention on the breath. The labeling should be like a whisper in the mind. Most of the attention should remain on the sensations of breathing, only about five percent on the words.

When physical sensations get our attention, we can softly name them, so as to keep our attention focused. If there is a pain in the knee that becomes compelling, we might label it: “*pressure...pressure...burning...tingling...oscillation...etc...*”, then if the sensation fades, or is no longer compelling, we return to the breath, “*in...out... in...out...*” This can help maintain the continuity of our attention.

If one finds that the mind drifts for long periods during meditation, adding a tool like noting or counting breaths, can help stabilize the attention.

Some people use noting at specific times, such as when emotions or the 5 hindrances arise. Emotions and hindrances can easily carry us away; noting can help us stay mindful during the intensity of emotions. Labeling the experience can give us a sense of spaciousness and detachment: “*anger... anger... fear... sadness... worry... worry... aversion... desire... etc...*”

When we are busy thinking during meditation, noting can keep us from getting lost in our thoughts. It allows us to observe the thinking process instead of getting lost in it, “*thinking...thinking...*”

A very useful practice, is noting the feeling tone (*vedana*) of our experience, if it's pleasant or unpleasant. The cool wind blows on our skin (*pleasant*), the foot is tingling as it's falling asleep (*unpleasant*). An itch arises (unpleasant), a memory of a good friend arises (pleasant)...and so on... Seeing the pleasant and unpleasant nature of our experience can allow us to not automatically cling to the pleasant and push away the unpleasant. It gives us choice.

Even as we get concentrated, as words seem too unrefined, we can note with a simple “yes” or a mental “*nod*”, just to help maintain the continuity. When the attention is settled and continuous, the noting can be dropped, but returned to, if the attention weakens.

Optional: Gil Fronsdal's talk on [Mental Noting](http://www.audiodharma.org/talks-rec.html) from 7/20/08:
www.audiodharma.org/talks-rec.html

- The talk is transcribed in the Appendix.

Rain Formula

The RAIN Formula: When a hindrance is present it helps to investigate it:

R: Recognize it.

A: Accept it.

I: Investigate it, be curious. What is it like?

- Physically (How does it feel in the body? Is it pleasant? Unpleasant? Does it change?)
- Emotionally
- Energetically (such as feelings of rushing, sinking or lifting)
- Cognitively (What beliefs or stories do we tell ourselves?)
- Motivationally (is there an urge to act or cling?)

N: Non-identification. This is just a passing process that comes and goes, not who we are.

It's helpful to first explore the hindrance and investigate it. Often just recognizing a hindrance is enough for it to fall away. But at other times, it's helpful to use "remedies" to counterbalance the hindrance.

Walking Meditation

There are various methods for practicing walking meditation. There is no “*right*” way to do it. With any form of walking meditation, the primary intention is to stay mindful of the present moment.

Formal walking meditation can help focus the mind and develop both concentration and mindfulness. Some people begin their daily meditation with 10-15 minutes of walking meditation before they sit.

Developing awareness this way can carry over into daily life as we move our bodies from place to place in the course of the day. We can practice mindful walking as we get up from our desks to walk to another room, as we walk to the car, to the house, to the store, to answer the phone....etc...

PACE: Walking meditation can be done at any pace, varying from our normal walking pace, to extremely slow. For some, slowing the pace can aid concentration. For some, back and balance problems can sometimes inform us what speed is appropriate for our bodies.

Many meditation retreats consist of alternating periods of sitting and walking meditation. The idea is to aim for attention that is continuous. Paying careful attention to the transition between sitting and walking or walking and sitting is very helpful in supporting this continuity.

Method 1

1. Find a pathway about 30 feet long.
2. Find a pace that gives you a sense of ease as you walk.
3. Let your attention settle on your feet and lower legs.
4. Feel the contact with the ground.
5. Feel what it's like for the legs and feet to contract as you lift the leg, and feel the movement of the leg as it swings through the air. Feel the contact with the ground.
6. If helpful, silently label movements corresponding with your speed:
 - a. If fast pace: *step ... step*
 - b. If moderate: *lifting ... placing*
 - c. If slow: *lifting ... moving ... placing*
7. At the end of the path, come to a full stop. Notice your whole body.
8. Slowly and mindfully turn around, and stop again. Notice your whole body.
9. Set your intention to be mindful during the next pass and begin again.
10. Keep a soft gaze, eyes slightly downward without looking at anything in particular. Don't look at your feet, but feel the sensations of movement and contact from within. Some people find it useful to keep the eyelids half closed.
11. If a strong sensation, emotion or thought compels your attention, it can be helpful to stop, notice it until it passes, and then return to walking.

Method 2

Alternate Method for Moderate or Fast Pace:

Focus on feeling the body “*globally*” as it moves through the air. Be aware of your entire body moving. Some people use this method when they go for a walk, or it can be practiced in a similar manner to Method 1 above, using a 30 foot pathway and walking back and forth.

Method 3

Slow Walking – Coordinating with Breath

1. Find a pathway about 30 feet long.
2. Begin by standing and noticing your breathing, just as you do in sitting meditation. Relax.
3. Raise your right foot on the in-breath, heel first, then the sole of the foot, then the toes. Move the foot forward as the breath continues, and as you exhale, place it on the ground, finishing the step, with the heel just ahead of the toes of the other foot.
 - a. On the next inhale do the same with the left foot. Alternate with each breath.
4. Your primary attention is to the feet as they leave the ground, move, and touch the ground again. The breath is in the background, dictating the pace.
5. Let the breath set the pace.
6. At the end of the path, stop and stand and breathe mindfully for a few moments, then slowly and mindfully turn around and stop again and take a few mindful breaths. Begin again.
7. Keep a soft gaze, eyes slightly downward without looking at anything in particular. Don't look at your feet, but feel the sensations of movement and contact from within. Some people find it useful to keep the eyelids half closed.
8. If a strong sensation, emotion or thought compels your attention, it can be helpful to stop, notice it until it passes, and then return to walking.

Method 4

Metta or Lovingkindness Meditation

For those of you who practice Metta or Lovingkindness Meditation, you can also use the phrases during Walking Meditation. You can practice by repeating the phrases as you walk, or connecting them to the rhythm of your steps, or the rhythm of your breaths.

Resources:

- Gil Fronsdal's [Instruction for Walking Meditation](http://insightmeditationcenter.org/articles/walkingmeditation.html) article: <http://insightmeditationcenter.org/articles/walkingmeditation.html>
- A **7 minute Audio** of Gil Fronsdal's *Instructions for Walking Meditation* above can be found on [this page](http://insightmeditationcenter.org/imc-medinstruct.html): <http://insightmeditationcenter.org/imc-medinstruct.html>

Appendix: Transcriptions of Talks

Mindfulness of Breath (Week 1)

Transcribed and Lightly Edited from a talk by Gil Fronsdal 10/3/07

Welcome to the Insight Meditation Center. My name is Gil Fronsdal and I'm the primary teacher here. 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, and 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. Mindfulness is certainly very key to the whole Buddhist enterprise, and it's an interesting fact that that's the case, because what's required in Buddhism is not a doctrine nor a belief, but rather 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. In 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, 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 include them in the field of attention in a wise way. 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 that I was continuing to talk. Because you are retrospectively thinking about what I just said, in a sense, you got hung up 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 for stress-reduction and pain and stress management. When people who go to Kaiser, Sequoia, El Camino Hospital, Stanford Hospital, take these Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction classes, 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. Sometimes, people who have been meditating for 10 years haven't learned this one yet. Haven't learned that there's nothing that doesn't need to happen. There's nothing that 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 sometimes see it 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.

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 are all these different ways that the breathing shifts. Partly to give you more or less oxygen, depending on 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. As a person connects 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 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 this back into the meditation. Let me do mindfulness of agitation." It might be really helpful sometimes, for example, there might be something you haven't ever looked at very carefully in your life, 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."

The breath is calming, and also, because it's continuous, going back and forth, it's a wonderful place to train yourself to be in the present moment. 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 you 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 it 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 narrowly, 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 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, meditating 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 do that, both on the floor and the chair, is to 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 fine 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 lying 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:

Student 1: *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.

Student 2: *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:

Now we'll do a guided meditation. Sit 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.

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 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:

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, remember that the primary thing we're doing, is not to 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."

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. 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?

QUESTIONS:

Student 1: *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. 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.

Student 2: *I was sleepy, is there anything I can do?*

Gil: Anybody who meditates sooner or later will start experiencing falling asleep in meditation. For 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 it 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.

Student 3: *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 are 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... On the IMC website, you can download on your computer a meditation timer or you can play it so it will ring.

Student 4: *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.

Student 5: *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 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 breathe 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.

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...but 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 the five of you go into a huge cathedral, and the five of you 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, and 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, is 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. You 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.

Mindfulness of Body (Week 2)

Transcribed and Lightly Edited 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.

bell

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.

Mindfulness of Emotions (Week 3)

Transcribed and Lightly Edited from a talk by Gil Fronsdal 10/17/07

Good evening and welcome back to the 3rd week of our 6-week series. This is an introduction to the practice of mindfulness. The practice of mindfulness is a very simple practice of using your awareness or your attention in order to do two primary things:

One is to take a closer look at the life you are living. Not the life you imagine you are living in the future or the life you hope you have lived in the past. But take a closer look at the life you are living, which is always here in your lived experience of here and now. So take a closer look. Buddhists love different language for the idea of that closer look. One of them is the idea of intimacy. Buddhists love the idea that mindfulness is a kind of intimacy with life, with all different aspects of life, to really connect with it in a deep way, to see it clearly for what it is. The wisdom that Buddhism puts a lot of value on comes not because you read a book that tells you useful knowledge, but comes from seeing our lived experience, from seeing our life in some deeper way than is usually accessible in everyday life. It isn't some kind of strange capacity to see deeply. It's just taking the capacity to see or be aware and heightening it so that we can look more carefully or use it to investigate, to understand. So that's one function.

The other primary function is that there is something about the nature of attention or awareness in its simplicity, in its utmost simplicity, that is very liberating, very freeing, very refreshing. Because usually when people pay attention to things, or even before we pay attention to things, we're already predisposed in some kind of way. And as soon as we notice something, there are all kinds of ways we react to what we are seeing. Some of those reactions are quite fine, some are problematic and cause us a fair degree of suffering. But it's always a kind of complication. It's like if you have a simple, clear window, you can see right through to the other side, but often what happens is the window is smudged over or there's dust on it and you can't see all the way through. So the same thing happens with this capacity to see clearly in its simplicity. It's like having a clear window, and normally our reactions our judgments, our interpretations, our fears our predispositions, our past history or future expectations very quickly dirty the window so that simple awareness is not there by itself.

On the one hand we're trying to see more deeply, on the other hand, seeing more deeply is also helping us to free our attention so that attention can be there in this kind of pristine simplicity. Perhaps the expression 'simplicity' will seem to you as being simplistic, why would you want something simple when you could have something sophisticated, and wonderful. But when there's no smog in the bay area and you can look across the bay in that clear clean air, that's pretty simple, and it's priceless. There's something very wonderful about it, so to have a heart which is liberated and free, or an awareness which is liberated and free, is one of the goals for Buddhist practice. The marvelous thing is that this freedom is very closely connected to this capacity to pay attention. So rather than think of this capacity for liberation as some kind of abstract thing that's far into the future, there is something about the nature of the simplicity of awareness which partakes of the wonderful experience of liberation that's connected to it.

So we do this mindfulness practice to develop our awareness, to heighten our awareness, to cultivate it so it's a bigger resource, a strength, a skill that we carry with us in our lives. And one function is to help us see more deeply and as we see more deeply, we can see the forces that drive us, that motivate us, that push us around, the forces that we react to. And we can begin making wiser choices in relationship to that. As we see the ways in which we contribute to our suffering, our pain, we can start making different choices, we can start lightening up on that.

So, seeing more deeply is one primary purpose. And the other is to discover something about the freedom that's found in paying attention itself.

As we do this mindfulness practice, as I teach it, as it's often taught, we do it systematically, but it doesn't have to be taught this way. I was taught mindfulness practice in the monasteries in Burma. When I showed up I was given a cassette tape player. I plugged it in and in a half hour, they gave the full instructions and I was sent to my room to practice for the next eight months! So you got the full transmission in half an hour. I could certainly do that, but what we find is that it actually works better for most people, because human life is so complicated, to work with certain domains, certain areas of life and build on that foundation. You get to where you're familiar with more and more so at the end of six weeks you have a sense of what the full instructions are because you build slowly up to it. So we started with breath as the foundation, then last week we talked about the body, our physical embodied experience as a very important part of the mindfulness practice and certainly as part of Buddhist spirituality.

And then tonight's subject is emotions. Emotions are a great topic; emotions are connected to some of the most sublime, precious wonderful things that humans experience and also some of the most awful things that humans experience, so it's a wide range that emotions are about. But whether it's the positive or the negative, emotions are a very important part of human life. Given that, it's very important to get a sense of how to bring mindfulness to our emotional life. So we can see our emotions more clearly and we can discover freedom in relationship to them, or give freedom to them. The idea of freedom is both that you can become free, and that you're giving freedom to something else. It's like a two-way thing, or two-sides to the same coin. So there's a certain kind of freedom you can find that will allow your emotional life to flow through you much more freely than it has and that's a really beautiful part of the practice when the emotions have this freedom.

Meditation is a wonderful laboratory or arena because it's a place to have very deep trust of our emotional life. Rather than thinking that something should be denied or repressed or held onto, there's a very deep trust that what moves through us in an emotional way is somehow trustable, maybe not in and of itself, but its trustable to let it move through us, to let it come and be there. And one of the reasons why it's trustable is that most emotions that people have, maybe all emotions, are a form of communication, something is being communicated. So if you're very angry, something is being communicated and if you shut it out or deny it, then you aren't availing yourself of what's being communicated. You're not listening to what needs to be learned or seen there. This doesn't mean you act on the anger, but that you have enough respect or trust in the process that you're willing to open to it more deeply. And what happens is, that as you get a sense of how to do this in mindfulness, how to open and be present for emotions, there can be a transformation of emotions. There is an evolving, a resolution, a movement of emotions that is very clarifying, very helpful and ultimately can be very deepening, where we see not just the surface emotions in our lives but we start seeing some of the depth of emotional life, that is often not available so easily when we go about living our normal life.

So tonight's subject is emotions, and as I start this evening, I know that there are people who have very strong opinions about emotions in our society, people who have manifestos, who are almost willing to fight about what should happen with emotions: they should celebrate emotions, they should act on every emotion, they should not express any emotions, emotions are frightening and scary, let's not show them to anyone, let alone to ourselves. There is wide range of very strong attitudes that people have to emotions in our society.

Probably all of you already have a relationship, consciously or unconsciously, to what we might call our emotional life. And it's very helpful in this process of mindfulness to reflect a little bit about what that relationship might be. This is something you can do, go for a walk with a friend, journal, think about somehow, but if you can kind of explore a little bit what your relationship is to your emotional life, then that relationship is less likely to hang up the process of mindfulness. Because as you pay attention to emotions, the relationship you have to emotions might interfere with the simplicity of just noticing it... "Oh, this is how it is, right now I'm angry, now I'm happy"...being just very simply aware of that. As opposed to "Great! I'm happy and I'm going to celebrate it and dance in the streets" or "Grrrr..I'm angry

and I'm justified in my anger and I'm going to let it rip...really get into it". The idea is to just be really simple with it.

So part of mindfulness practice is learning to bring a wise attention to our emotional life. But it's important that in mindfulness practice, we don't give special value to our emotions, different than we give to our physical experience or mental experience or thoughts or the breath. From the point of view of mindfulness or awareness, it's all equal. So, again, some people have these very strong ideas that emotions are what they are about, and that everything is going to be experienced through their emotions. Whereas for some people it's like "emotions, no way...I'm not even going to get close to that". And both of those are already having a relationship or a value established that there is a hierarchy of what's important and what's not. But mindfulness practice doesn't really have a hierarchy, it's just open awareness, that's willing to see everything as it is. A clear window doesn't have judgment about what's in the center of the window. Many things will come past the window. So we don't want to excessively focus on emotions, or insufficiently focus on them, we want to focus on them as it's appropriate.

Before we do a meditation, there is a famous simile that the Buddha gave, called the simile of the arrows. He was talking to a gathering of people and he asked "If a man is struck by an arrow, would that hurt the man?". The assembly said "Yes, that would hurt!". And then the Buddha said: "Say the person is struck by a second arrow, is that even more painful?" and the people said "Yeah, one's bad but the second one makes it even worse." So the Buddha said: "Life sometimes brings you the first arrow, the second arrow is what you shoot at yourself." This is basically what he said. So if I'm walking down the street here and I stub my toe on the sidewalk, that's the first arrow, things like that happen, my toe hurts. The second arrow would be me telling myself "Gil, you are the worst walker, you are an embarrassment to human-kind and maybe you should only walk in places where people can't see you." So I've added something, and I then I see that I'm having all these negative judgments about myself, but I think "I'm a Buddhist teacher, I shouldn't do that, now I'm really embarrassed", and now I'm suffering because I think I shouldn't be doing this, so that's a third arrow. And then I get angry thinking "Now here I am embarrassed again, I should know better" and that's the fourth arrow. And so the arrows go on and on and on. But it's very important to distinguish between what belongs to life, what just comes with being a human being, and what are those secondary reactions we have to it that adds to the suffering. This is a really important part of mindfulness practice.

So maybe you come here today with a headache or a backache, those things happen, the Buddha had a bad back. You wouldn't believe it with his good posture, but he had a bad back and sometimes he couldn't give his Dharma talk, so he'd lie down instead and have one of his senior disciples give a talk. That's kind of nice, I like it. So, these things happen. But one of the things we want to be very careful about, like last week we talked about wanting to distinguish the commentary from the experience, we want to distinguish the reaction we have from the primary situation. Are we adding a second arrow? Are we attacking it, criticizing it, running away, how are we reacting to it that's different from just letting it be there in its simplicity. So part of some emotions belong to those second arrows. Anger sometimes is a second arrow, anger toward yourself. So there are a variety of emotions that belong to this world of second arrows, and again in mindfulness we don't judge ourselves negatively for having second or third arrows, we try to wake up, we try to pay attention and notice what's going on. It doesn't matter if you can finally wake up at the 130th arrow, it just matters that you wake up. Waking up means that you notice it, that you're aware of it and you don't add anything more....just, "Oh, ok, this is what I'm doing". Because if you get to the 130th arrow, and you say "This is terrible, I shouldn't be doing this", then you've just added a 131st. Sooner or later you either just forget what you're doing and become distracted or you wake up and say "Ok, enough" and just step back and take in the bigger picture here.

GUIDED MEDITATION:

So let's do a meditation. Take an alert, comfortable posture and gently close your eyes and then before doing anything else, take a few moments to notice how you are, how you're feeling, what's your emotional state, your mood. There is always an emotional state or mood present, even if you don't

recognize it. So how are you? And how are you about how you are? How are you relating to that? What are your judgments, thoughts, ideas or reactions, if any?

Then if you do recognize how you're feeling, reflect a little bit about how your feelings, your emotional state, might influence how you relate, interpret, react to this period of mediation. If you're sitting here and you're kind of grumpy, then are you likely to interpret things in aversive ways as we go through here? If you're discouraged, are you likely to carry a little burden of being discouraged or feeling a little hopeless as you go about this? Is there some way in which your mood or emotional state could have an effect on this experience as we go forward?

So then, take a few long slow deep breaths as a way of beginning here. As you breathe in deeply here, expand your rib cage, front, back, shoulders, feel the stretch. Like a massage. Then a slow long exhale where you relax and let go.

Taking a deep breath in and relax as you exhale. And then let your breathing return to normal and scan through your body to see if there are any obvious places where you can soften the muscles. It might be possible to soften the muscles of the forehead, around the eyes and the jaws, cheeks, especially as you exhale, send a softening wave through your head.

And also your shoulders, shoulder blades.

Perhaps you can soften the muscles of your chest, ribcage area, letting go of any holding, pressure. Also it can be helpful when you meditate to let your belly be soft, hang forward, perhaps you can feel the weight of your belly and let gravity gently let it settle.

And then within your body, as part of your bodily experience, become aware of how your body experiences breathing.

And then see if you can compose yourself, your attention, your presence, around the experience of breathing around the place in your body where you feel the breathing as most pronounced. Settle around that area, compose yourself around it, and then begin to hang in there, hang out there, with the rhythm of breathing in, breathing out... the expansion and contraction.

If your mind wanders away in thought, relax, relax the thinking mind and begin again with your breathing. Let go of what you're thinking about. If you can stay with your breathing and thoughts are in the background, let them stay there in the background quietly. You don't have to take care of them or attend to them, pick them up if in the foreground you can stay with your breath, breathing in, breathing out.

Notice when you shift from a simple awareness of what's happening to getting involved in commentary or getting involved in reactions. And if you can tease that apart, then return to the simplicity of your breathing.

If you find yourself reacting to what's going on, it might be helpful to very calmly and softly in the mind name the reaction "reaction...reacting" or some other name. Maybe it helps kind of free yourself a little bit from being caught in it. And then after a few moments of recognition come back again to your breathing. Trust that for now its enough just to be aware of breathing.

So now, let go of the focus on your breathing and instead, again, notice what is the emotional state you have, the mood, the mental state, or if there is a kind of reactive state that's present, very simply, see if you can recognize that reactive state and offer a kind of very simple awareness, like you're going to hang there with awareness, feeling what's happening, what you're feeling..

And then see if you can find out where in your body that emotional state or mood is most manifested, most expressed. What sensations or feelings in your body let you know that you're having this emotional

state. It could be you're calm or agitated; it could be that you're impatient or content, could be you're peaceful, agitated, happy or sad, irritated, delighted, confused, eager. See if you can notice how the emotional state is expressed through your body, through sensations in your body.

If your mood or emotional state changes or goes away, notice what replaces it. And as you do this, you can also very quietly label it or name it, letting the naming of it help you be simple with it, independent of it, but still feeling it.

So then for the last minute of the sitting, come back again to your breathing, and hang, hang out with your breathing, as if it's the most important place to be. Everything else can recede to the background.

(Bell)

BACK TO TALK

I'd like to say a few more words about the actual instructions for mindfulness. Generally we encourage people to put the breathing at the center of the meditation and with some encouragement to stay there because focusing on the breath can help stabilize the mind, help concentrate the mind, can help calm things down, and strengthen the mindfulness. There are a lot of benefits to staying with the breathing. But, if something else becomes more pronounced, more compelling than the breath, then the instruction is to let go of the breathing and take your meditative awareness and shift it to this other thing that is happening. Basically meditate with that, bring your awareness to that, cultivate your mindfulness, your present awareness on that experience. So if it's something in your body, some strong sensations in your body, then rather than thinking of the sensations as a distraction, we take them as just something new to develop our meditation on. So new meditators often have to deal with discomfort, so within reason, we simply move our attention to the discomfort and we hold it in awareness, explore it in awareness, trying to be really simple, not getting caught up in the reactions or aversions or fears we might have toward it, and just to be present for it. If there are compelling or loud sounds, again, we don't treat them as distractions, but we treat it as listening meditation. Let go of the breath and in a calm way, open up and take in the sounds as long as they are there. Sounds always happen in the present moment, so you're in the present moment when you're with a sound and your mindfulness of sound. Be present for that, experience that fully.

So the same thing with emotions, if emotions become pronounced, compelling, or predominant then they become the meditation subject. So again, you let go of your breath and you take in the experience of the emotion. It's a little bit tricky with emotions, because some people get very easily entangled with their emotions. They get involved with them or they resist them or they judge them or they do something with them. The trick is to have this very simple awareness of the emotion as its going through us.

There are a number of steps or aspects to mindfulness of emotions.

The first one is the **recognition** that now an emotion has become predominant or compelling; now there's an emotion that needs our attention. Sometimes that's not so easy for some people because some people are a little bit disconnected from their emotions. So it could be that there is an emotion that is having a really big effect on us, however we kind of dismiss it or don't really think it's important, or we think other things are more important like our thoughts or our stories. So there can be a dismissal of them or not valuing them. So part of mindfulness is to recognize when an emotion is present, when it needs attention. So the recognition is "oh here it is". Sometimes the emotion hits us over the head if it's really strong and clear so that the recognition part is pretty straightforward. So just recognize that you're having an emotional experience, a mood or something

The second step I like to call **acceptance or allowance**. And this is not being in any kind of conflict with the emotional experience you're having, so allowing it to be there in its freedom, to be there as it is. Meditation practice is a safe place to have your full range of emotions. You're welcome when you

meditate to have murderous rage. Now I don't know if it's such a good idea in other areas of your life, you might have to be wise in other areas of your life, how much you show it. If you have murderous rage toward your boss, maybe it's not so wise to let it be there. But meditation is this beautiful place, this safe place, you're committed to not moving! (laughter) So you can just let it course through you and let it be there as it needs to be.

Student 1: *Is murderous rage a second arrow?*

Gil : It's possible it's the 130th arrow, but the point is, if it's there, if you think, "Oh, it's the second arrow, it shouldn't be there", then you've added the third arrow.

So once its there, we give it permission, to just let it be there. So sometimes I call it acceptance, allowance, non-conflict, giving it permission to be there.

For some people, that's a huge training, to train oneself or develop oneself to be present for an emotional state while giving it permission to be there. Permission for it to be there is certainly not the same as resistance, judging it or being in conflict with it, but it's also not the same thing as giving in to it. So if you've heard that in meditation you can allow murderous rage, so then you think "ok, I'm really going to pump it up and get into it because it feels so good, Yes!", that's kind of getting entangled with it, that's not simplicity of awareness either. So the idea is not to add on to it, to fuel it, to get engaged in it, but also not to repress it. So mindfulness meditation offers this wonderful middle way, a third alternative to either expression on one side or repression on the other. If you're expressing it, then you've gotten involved, if you're repressing it, then you're entangled. But what we're trying to do in sitting still, in mindfulness, is just let it be there, neither repressed nor expressed.

So the first step is to recognize its there, the second is to allow it or accept it. It takes awhile to learn that. Don't think you can do it overnight, it varies in how long it can take to learn to do that.

The third step is to **name it**, the mental noting that is often done in our tradition, using a simple label. As in the ancient folk tales, if you name the dragon, the dragon loses its power. Or in some traditional cultures, you're given a birth name and you shouldn't tell your birth name to anyone because then they would have some kind of power over you. There is power in naming, there is something about naming our experience which sometimes takes the power away from our experience, the power that comes from being identified with it, being entangled with it, being reactive with it, or feeding it or something. So very simply, in a very simple, calm way (as calm as you can be in your mind) just name it "anger, anger" or "happy, happy" or "sad, sad, sad". The idea is that with naming it, you're trying to name it from a place in your being where you're not caught by it, not lost in it, not being swept up in it whatever it might be. So if you do the mental noting and when you're happy, you say "ahhh haaaaappy", then you're in it. Just say "happy" very simply. If you're angry and you say "grrrrh anger", you're in it, just say very simply "anger". So try to find that place in you that's not entangled, not caught in the experience. So you're not repressing it or not pushing it away, but just finding that adult-like place that can just be present in a stable way. Also, the mental noting has the function of being a gentle encouragement to you to stay present. So when there's an emotion, they don't disappear that quickly usually, so the emotion stays for awhile, you can just keep naming it "angry...angry....angry". It's also a little bit of an encouragement to stay there because the mind has such a tendency to wander off.

One of the strong places it can wander off in where there are emotions is that it can wander off into the story. Some emotions are strongly connected to stories, in fact, I can be sitting meditating minding my own business peacefully, and there is the sound of a car driving by. And it reminds me of the kind of car that rear-ended me 32 years ago. Then that anger wells up and it's partly because of the story "Why did they drive that way? Why didn't they stop? I should have given them a piece of my mind" and pretty soon I'm like in this other world.

I'll tell you a story from when I taught a retreat many years ago. I teach week-long, 10-day meditation retreats, and there was a woman who had been coming to retreats for a long time. She was a very troubled woman, emotionally troubled, and she'd been struggling with her emotions for a long time. One morning we had what seemed like a magical sitting. We were all meditating together, students and teachers, and there was a beautiful winter light coming through, very peaceful, very clear and you could feel the whole room got so still and clear and peaceful. The bell rang to end the sitting and no one wanted to get up, it felt so good. But it happened that she and I had an interview right after that sitting. She came in and sat in her chair and it was really clear that she was in an unusually peaceful clear state and I felt the same way, didn't seem like we had to say anything, we could have just sat there looking at each other, what do you say when you're at peace? Then we said a few words, and then she said to me, "yeah this is nice, but it wasn't this way yesterday, yesterday I.." and as she began telling me about yesterday, her features and her emotions got all completely wrapped up in it and I thought oh no, why does she have to start telling me the story of yesterday? Why couldn't she just stay with telling me what was here? So it's an example of how story-making can really entangle us in this whole world of emotions. So what we try to do when we do mindfulness of emotions, we try not to live in stories. Stories connected to emotions are usually not real-time stories, not about what's happening here-and-now. They're usually about what's happened before, what might happen in the future. They're a little bit virtual reality.

The idea in mindfulness meditation is to not get sucked into the story, because you've spent a lifetime in the story. The idea is to come back. So by naming the experience we're more likely to stay in the present "anger...anger...Oh, that person!...come back...come back, that's the story...anger...anger". Come back and be with the immediacy of what's here, with the anger. Be with the emotion of anger, don't be with the story that's fueling it or connecting to it or that feeds off it or is feeding it.

So, there is the **recognition**, the **acceptance**, the **naming**. Then the last thing I call **investigation**. That is, once you have the ability to recognize, accept it and start naming, be curious about it, start investigating "what is this experience?" Don't just hold it at a distance, but get close to it, to find out what is that, how is it really experienced? How do you experience it in your stomach, how do you experience it in your jaws? How do you experience it temperature-wise? What's actually being experienced when you're angry? What's the energy like in your system? Begin to explore it. That exploration is a movement of the mind which is adult-like, independent, not cowering or reacting to the experience, but simply "What is this?"

So one of things that is very important in working with emotions is to explore how is it experienced in your body. What's the physical manifestation of it? And virtually every emotion you're going to have is not only going to be expressed in your body, but IS your body. You wouldn't know what emotion you were having unless there was some kind of sensation in your body that corresponded with it. So some people, when they are afraid, their stomach will get tight, tightness will be there, and the shoulders get lifted up. Or if you're happy, you feel this softness that goes on, this warmth and tingling. If you're sad, you can feel the heaviness, the weight, the droopiness. So there's something that shifts and changes. Bring your attention closer to that physical side of the emotion, feel the physical side of it. Its one way of avoiding getting caught up in the story, because the body is not a story. You're still connected with the emotion, you're present for it, you're present for how it is in the body.

Also, the body in a sense has a wisdom of its own; some emotions are fueled by the story-making mind. When they are experienced or manifested in the body, the body wants to go to homeostasis, wants to go to healing, wants to come back to peace. So when I teach mindfulness of emotion to kids, like 7-8 yrs old, I have them act out their emotions, like "Show me how you are angry". It's really cute, a room full of 7-8 year olds trying to show me how angry they are. Then I say, "Ok, now everyone freeze." And they all freeze in different positions. Then I say, "Ok, now to stop being angry, what do you need to do with your body?" And then, they can all relax their bodies. So it's a way of showing them how to pay attention to emotions, to connect with their bodies, and how their bodies can be an aid to having some mastery over their emotion. And they love it, it's so much fun.

So the body doesn't want to stay tense, it wants to relax. So for those emotions that involve tension, there's a movement that the body wants to make. If the body's left alone, the body will relax. The body doesn't relax because the mind keeps reasserting its tensions, its resistance. So if you can drop down into the body and feel the emotion as a physical experience, you're kind of getting out of the way, the body has a chance to open up and allow the emotion to course through, to move and to evolve and resolve and dissolve. So in that line, I'm fond of the fact that the word "emotion" in English comes from the Latin word for motion, movement. The "e" part means "out", so "move out". So all emotions are processes. They are processes that want to move out, unless they are frozen. So resentment is frozen anger. So, to misquote Charlie Brown "bad grief" is frozen grief. Grief is grief and everyone experiences that sooner or later, then there is grief that gets frozen. So certain emotions get frozen and then the process, the evolution, the movement doesn't happen. But left alone, all emotions want to move through. That's one of the reasons why sometimes with certain emotions we say, "Well, I just have to give this time." If you give them time, things can sort of settle and to some degree take care of themselves.

So if we can experience the emotion as an embodied experience, the emotional life has an easier time to move through us, to change and shift. And it shifts in different ways, sometimes it resolves and quiets down, sometimes it gets stronger before it gets freer. So say sometimes you feel a little bit of irritation, and then that irritation, because you're present for it, explodes like this big volcano of huge fury. The fury was very deep inside and finally has a chance to come out. So it's not all a linear process where as soon as you're mindful you're better. But this wisdom, this kind of inner movement, this trust in mindfulness, if you can trust it, it can go in all kind of different directions. And we consider that part of the healing, or part of the resolution that it has to take. So just stay present, stay present and watch it go through its shifts and changes.

So in that last meditation, I asked you to notice your emotions, your emotional state, your mood. So what was that like for some of you? What did you notice when you actually brought your attention to that part of your experience?

STUDENT COMMENTS:

Student 2: *I noticed that when I'm sitting here, it's always generally pleasant, it's when I go out there that things arise, so I always have a very nice connotation with sitting at IMC. But what I've noticed with meditation without going out there, what you described last time, where you get more space & there is less reactivity to what comes up. So I'm not usually as calm or whatever out there, but I have a little bit better handle on what arises, what's coming up. I can see a little bit better.*

Gil: Great, thank you.

Gil: So someone else, something about what happened when you focused on your emotions in the last sitting.

Student 3: *When you asked us at the very beginning to identify our emotion, I actually came in tonight feeling very low, and I tried to find it like you said, where it might lie, and I found it up in the front part of my forehead. And I put a label on it, I identified it, like oh there it is. But I didn't know what to do with it. I tried not to change it, not to focus in on it too much, but it's still there.*

Gil: One place to start with investigating that question is, do you have some expectation about what's supposed to happen? Like it's supposed to go away. So that's commentary, that's extra. So it's very important to recognize that that is operating because things like that can operate very subtly in the background and have a big influence on your experience. But if it's not acknowledged, it can be a kind of irritant on your whole system. If you acknowledge it, then maybe you can drop it, and if you drop the expectation that it's supposed to go away, then maybe it's less of a problem. That's one thing. The other is, it's not the meditator's job to be concerned

about how long something stays. The meditator's job is simply to use whatever is happening as the vehicle, the means, for developing greater mindfulness, for staying present. So we often come with ideas like it shouldn't be there, I'm supposed to fix things, something is supposed to happen. In mindfulness meditation, we often try to free ourselves from the idea that something is supposed to happen. We're just trying to use whatever is happening as a way of developing stronger mindfulness. So if you're feeling low, ok, it's kind of a drag, but the task today is to cultivate mindfulness of the low feeling. So first we can look at: are you really recognizing it accurately? Are you accepting it, is there a sense of allowing there, are you not in conflict with it? Then name it gently in order to stay with it. And then you can start investigating it more. You can go and feel the different sensations more in your head. You can look more closely, from below, from the top, explore it different ways, feel your way into, is it just your skin or does it feel like it's deeper in your skull. If you bring your attention in really close, what does it look like, what does it feel like, does it feel like a solid thing or is it made up of a pattern of different sensations that are arising and passing? When you get close, what happens to it? Generally, when you get close enough to some physical experience, it begins shifting and changing, then you stay with the shifts and changes. Does that make sense?

Student 3: *It does make sense. I think one of the hardest expectations that I'm dealing with..I did your exercises on the pink sheet of eating very slowly and just being with yourself when you eat, and my god that was one of the hardest things I ever had to do (since childbirth!) (laughter). I do have an expectation that the end of my meditation that I will be at peace or more peaceful and that's a very hard expectation to let go of.*

Gil: Yes it is. Its to be expected that people have that expectation, because we often advertise meditation as being peacemaking and calming and its nice when it happens, and ultimately we want that to happen, but if it happens too quickly sometimes we mess up the whole deeper psychological and spiritual process that we need to go through. So for example I've known people who have gone through very difficult meditation sessions, sometimes for a whole retreat, and they end up the meditation session thinking well that was a waste of time, I should have gone for a walk or watched television or something. And then they come back some time later and say you know something, that session or that retreat was so hard for me, but what I learned, was I learned how to stay present in difficult situations. I didn't know at the time how useful it was, but later I was in the hospital and it was an awful time and everyone was angry with each other but because I had hung in there with that difficult meditation, I learned something about hanging in there in that difficult situation where I had to hang in there and normally I would have made a mess of it. So sometimes what we think of as a bad meditation, an angry, upset, painful meditation, is actually better than a calm one. So maybe I shouldn't say that in an intro class, but it's the case.

Student 3: *Well I had anxiety, so I thought, well that's inappropriate, its inappropriate to be so anxious in meditating so I tried breathing and I thought ok the anxiety will go away and then once I was breathing alright I was so anxious, so you said, ok just go with that, so I thought Ok, I'll just breathe. It was alright, it was just what you described, a big wave came and I had to think about that, and when it got really scary I was breathing, so I learned to separate from that and at least keep breathing.*

Gil: Beautiful. It can give you a lot of power in your life to have that ability. There's a practice I teach people sometime that I call "riding out an emotion" or "riding out the desire". This is good for people who have addiction issues, or it could be anything. Wait till you have a really strong juicy desire and when that time comes, sit down in a chair, and don't give in to it, ride it out. All the lawyers of the mind come out and will explain why you have to go do something, and you quiet the lawyers, and then the publicists come out, the commercials come out, and all this tremendous surge of energy, this tremendous compulsion, really powerful, but you're committed like being at the rodeo, you're not going to fall off your horse, and sooner or later, its guaranteed, the wave will kind of crest and you'll find yourself on the other side. And you'll get calm

eventually. And the people I've known who have hung in there through a really good wave, and watched it come to the other side, have felt so empowered in their life, "wow, I can be stronger than my addiction, than these very strong emotions, I can learn how to breathe through it, how to be present for it."

Student 4: Mine was very similar to the first one, I came in feeling irritated, then when I gave my irritation some attention I felt quite sorry for myself and then I felt sad, and I was annoyed because I usually feel better when I'm meditating, and I didn't do as well when you said label reaction, or did you say to label what reaction it was?

Gil: Either one, you can name it reaction. The labeling can be very helpful, but it's not very helpful if you spend a lot of time trying to figure out what the right name is, what the right label is, trying this and that. So if it's not obvious, just say "reaction". Or if it's not obvious what some emotion is, you can just say "emotion". I remember once I was feeling off, I didn't quite know what was going on, so I went and laid down, and because I know how to do this practice, I went into my body and felt this awfulness, and I could feel that I couldn't exhale all the way, so I felt that for awhile, and somehow it popped into my mind that I was depressed. And as soon as I named the depression, the chest relaxed. But at first, I just started noting "off, off" and I was just content with that and then at some point the clarity came, but it came on its own, it wasn't as if I was guessing or analyzing. Keep it really simple.

Student 5: I woke up this morning and I felt something and I labeled it fear. I told myself where it was in my body, wrote about it at work and then I thought about the fourth step of investigation. I came here, we meditated. You said pick an emotion and I tried to reach for that one from this morning, but it wasn't there and I had no emotion to pick, so I thought that was interesting, wow. Then I got stuck on investigation and I thought now that I've done these three steps shouldn't something be happening? Shouldn't I be asking fear questions? Shouldn't I be doing more investigation of those body symptoms and I just didn't know what to do after that. I guess I wasn't supposed to do anything.

Gil: Yeah, nothing has to happen in this practice. The idea that something is supposed to happen is just another commentary another judgment, an idea. Nothing is supposed to happen. If something happens, that's ok, but don't burden yourself that something has to happen. Just be present, ok, nothing's happening, now I'm bored, now something's happening...now I get to do boredom meditation. Ok, I've been told that I have to take boredom as my subject, so I guess I'll just write my PhD on boredom, get to know it really well, really feel that. Free yourself from the idea that something is supposed to happen, but on the other hand there is always some mood that is going on, but it might not be something you recognize very well, nothing you're familiar with, very vague or something you don't think of as a mood or emotional state. There was one woman on retreat who came to an interview with a teacher and said "I'm feeling something very strange...I don't quite know what it is". The teacher said "Keep investigating it, keep being present". And she came back the next interview a few days later and said "I discovered what it was...I'm calm! And I've never been calm in my life before so I couldn't recognize it." (laughter)

Student 6: This feels like a stupid question but I have to ask it. I wasn't feeling an emotion but I was feeling sleepy. So at some point when you said see if you have an emotion, I said I'm sleepy and stayed with that.

Gil: That's good. Being sleepy is maybe not an emotion, but being tired or having sloth and torpor may be a kind of state you're in so you can go in and explore that. Emotion, mood, mental state—it's kind of a wide field. And this is very interesting because the word emotion is really big here in the West but there is no easy word in Buddhist languages for the English word emotion. You can't easily translate it. So what does that mean, Buddhists don't have emotions? It's like the pie of human experience can be divided up different ways. English divides it up in a particular way and has this pie section called the emotions. But it's kind of a generalization, it's very vague

and general what an emotion is. So it's interesting to explore what makes up an emotion. Emotions are made up of physical sensations, sometimes motivations, desires, things we want, stories we tell each other, feelings of pleasant or unpleasant. They are kind of composite anyway, not a unitary or singular thing. So you can explore the different aspects of them.

BACK TO TALK

Now one of the things about emotional states or mental states is that Buddhism distinguishes those which are born out of reactions or reactivity or are born in relationship to things in the world, versus emotions which arise when the inner system (the heart, the mind, the body) are open channels, free and present and stable but not reactive or responding to anything.

So many emotions have to do with our relationships with things around us. So for example if I win the lottery, if I follow the usual pattern, apparently according to scholars who've studied it, I'll be really happy at first and then after a year I feel pretty miserable. So the happiness and the misery have a lot to do with my relationship to things in the world. So when I was 13 it was 1967, for those of you who are old enough to remember that wonderful time, and I was living in a little town in Italy. I'd come from California and I had the longest hair of any guy in that little town. And I was the only one with blue jeans. And having long hair back then was a big deal, for guys. So I was really cool. (laughter) So I went around town with a good feeling about myself, its good, its great. Then in the summer I came back to Los Angeles, and there was a lot that happened in California in the summer of 1967 and I no longer had the longest hair of the guys. So I went to school and I started pulling my hair, trying to get it longer, because I was so uncool. And they had figured out somehow to put their jeans through the washing machine 50 times, and some people put their jeans out in the road where cars would drive over them, and people cut them up and patched them up. And I just had plain blue jeans, and I was no longer cool. And I felt kind of inflated, kind of embarrassed. The only thing that happened was that I had crossed the Atlantic. And my energy level and my mood were so different. And that's an example of how my mood and my emotional state existed in relationship to some other people.

So we have all these experiences in life, people like us, people don't like us, we have failure in life, we get what we want, we don't get what we want. There are all these things that happen, we get sick, we get healthy, so all these things can affect our mood or our emotional state. To some degree this is normal and healthy, to some degree it can be very unhealthy to be always very caught up in the world of always having our emotional state tied to or relating to the experience of how things are in the world. Because then you're just like a slave, you're always just pushed around by the winds of the world. So that's one kind of emotion that arises, emotions that arise because of our relationship with the world.

There's a whole other category of emotional states that have much more to do with not being in relationship to the world, when we're not caught in relationship, when we're liberated, we're free from all that for and against, the system is just open and flowing. There can be a tremendous amount of what can be called maybe "unrelated" joy or happiness or peace. Peace, joy, happiness that bubbles up not because anything is going right or wrong. It doesn't have a reason or a cause or condition or catalyst for it in how things are going in the world. And that's a phenomenal thing, to discover a happiness or well-being that's not dependent on how things are going. Part of the possibility as we do this practice and learn how to just be present for things as they are and free ourselves from the commentary and the reactions and just be present, is that in time you will discover this tremendous treasure, and source of tremendous power in your life also, this happiness that doesn't require you to win the lottery or have people like you or think well of you.

So there are these two different realms. Generally the shift over time for people who do meditation practice is they start shifting to having more and more of the unrelated emotions, away from the related or reactive ones. But the key to doing that, or making that shift, to the personal growth that happens during meditation, has a lot to do with just staying present in a very simple way, to be present for what is, don't be present for what you want to happen, just be present for what is, and just be as simple as you

can for that. Try not to have an agenda, try not to have commentaries. If you do have them, all you're asked to do then is know that's there. Just know it's there, know it's there, know it's there, just stay in the knowing of "this is what's happening now, this is what's happening now" and see if you can avoid adding a second arrow. And if you add a second arrow, just be very allowing of that, "ok, there's a second arrow, wow, that's what a second arrow is like" as opposed to "shoot!" because then you have the third arrow. So it takes awhile to get the hang of it, but I hope you're getting the feel of how this practice goes. It's meant to be very very simple. Because it's so simple, it takes awhile to get the hang of it, because we always think we have to do something.

There is a handout for today, so explore it and practice with emotions over the next week. See if you can get into your emotional life, explore it, see how it works, both in meditation and outside. Also you might do people watching, see if you can pick up their emotions and see what's going on. Also you might hang out with some people, friends, colleagues, strangers, and ask them about their emotional life. Not so much what emotions you're having and the dark secrets of your life, but more abstractly, how do you relate to emotions? How do you work with them? What do you do with them? Maybe find someone you think is wise and ask them "How do you relate to emotions? What wise things have you learned about emotions?"

So, get into your emotions this week. The more you know about it, the easier it is to be free of it and practice with it, but another reason is that the more you are familiar with the world of emotions, the easier it will be to understand next week's instructions, which is mindfulness of thinking. Because thinking has a very close connection with emotions, and it's easier to be free of your thinking if you know how to be free in relationship to your emotions. Thank you very much and we'll see you next week.

Mindfulness of Thoughts (Week 4)

Transcribed and Lightly Edited - from a Talk by Gil Fronsdal 1/30/08

We'll start with some questions. Any questions or comments about the instructions so far or about your own experience applying it?

Question: *I find when I start I'm nice and erect and very in focus, and as I meditate I find myself rounding down. Is it better as you go back into focus to go ahead and straighten up my spine again, I assume that's what I should be doing.*

Gil: Yes, it's good to have a straight spine. There's a certain element of mindfulness that's required to focus on your posture and keep your posture erect, however, if you are straightening up every minute or two, then it's not so useful. Maybe twice or three times in the course of half an hour is okay. If it's happening more than that, what you may want to do is let yourself slump over, and then apply mindfulness to that, and notice what's going on, do you tend to slump when the mind is getting dull or sleepy? Or when you are getting lulled by calm? Or are you getting complacent or is your mind drifting a lot into thoughts. Notice what is going on around the time that you are slumping. You might get the information you need to find out how to sharpen up the effort or attention.

It's possible to meditate quite successfully with a completely slouched over posture. In Burma, men tend to meditate like this (severely slouched), and they get enlightened. The women meditate like this, (sitting with legs to one side), like the old way of riding horses, with one foot behind them. But the effect of this, is that it forces the body up and so the women in Burma sit with great dignity. One of the greatest sights of my life was in the monastery I was staying in there was a huge women's meditation hall, and because it was a hot climate, two sides of two whole walls were basically open and you could see right through. In the morning, on the way to breakfast, I'd walk right by the women's hall, and there would be 500 women meditating, and 500 women sitting up with tremendous strength and dignity. I was so inspired. I was never inspired like that by the men.

It's also well worth cultivating enough mindfulness of the body to keep the spine straight, and what will happen at some point or other, the mindfulness, the meditation energy, the concentration will kick in, you will find it effortless to keep the back straight. Until the energy is awakened, you'll have to keep using your mindfulness to stay straight and upright. Once it's awakened you're not going to slump any more.

What I'm trying to convey in this class is how to use attention effectively in a useful way so that our attention can help us not get caught by life, by experiences, our attention can help us become freer of whatever happens that goes on for us. Attention operates this way. We pay careful attention to what's going on.

There are two ways in which careful attention or mindfulness is freeing. One way that it's freeing is that you begin seeing what's actually going on, and we can see the ways that we are caught, the way we are holding on or resisting. Seeing that clearly, then allows us to release it, we can let go, we can begin letting go, softening around it. That's one way. So if I see that I'm clenching my fists, if I really know that I'm doing that, I can release it.

I remember once I was at the UC library desk trying to get a book which was not on the shelf, but had been returned, and they weren't cooperating to look for it. We were a bit heated, not exactly--- I was pretty adamant that I wanted that book. When the filing person left to go check in the back room, then I paid attention to my posture. I was leaning over the desk, way over. I hadn't known it. But as soon as I saw it, I straightened up, got my feet back on the floor. So if you see something, you can hopefully let

go, or begin the process of letting go. Letting go is not always easy, but you can begin. One is to see it. The other is the act of attention itself, mindfulness itself, doesn't cling. It's a very simple open awareness. And as you develop your awareness stronger, you get a sense of this awareness of this awareness that is free of what you are aware of. If I'm clenching or holding muscles really tight and I'm really concerned about this thing I'm holding on to, when I pay attention to it, the attention, chances are it gets entangled with my desire, it's in there, kind of with it, I can't see them as two separate things. But as the mindfulness gets stronger, you start seeing that mindfulness is separate of what you are mindful of. Mindfulness is different from what you are aware of. Once you start seeing that, you see that the nature of awareness is to be free. To be independent of what is known. That's a second way that the mindfulness practice gives you a sense of freedom. The advantage of the second way is that you don't have to let go in order to feel some degree of freedom or independence or spaciousness. As mindfulness gets stronger you discover this whole other capacity or way of being.

The way we emphasize mindfulness in our tradition, we try to develop mindfulness to be all inclusive, to include all aspects of our life. To include breath, our body, our physical body, to include emotions, our thoughts, the world around us that we encounter. Sights, sounds, smells, everything. There's nothing that is meant to be outside of the scope of awareness. We say that is what makes awareness sacred in Buddhism. In Buddhism itself, awareness is the most sacred kind of thing, reality. What makes it sacred is when there is no outside. There is nothing we are excluding, saying "I can't pay attention to that. That's not permissible." Sometimes in Buddhism it's called "Big Mind", the mind that holds it all. The awareness that holds it all within it, without excluding or shutting down or closing off or pushing away anything at all. That doesn't mean that we don't say no to things. It doesn't mean that we don't act in the world in ways to protect ourselves. But we don't allow the awareness or the open heart to close down, even though we might say no to something.

In the 60's there was an American who was practicing mindfulness in India and someone attacked her in the streets, some guy, she managed to break free and run away. She went to her meditation teacher and said, "What should I have done?" He said, "With all the loving-kindness you can muster up, you hit the fellow over the head with your umbrella." So I don't necessarily recommend hitting people over the head, but the principle was that you can have an open heart or open mind while you make choices in the world about how to act. You might say no to someone, lock your door; you don't close your heart or your awareness to it. In Buddhism, to get a really good sense of this ability to have your attention be free and open and include everything, is considered to be sacred, part of the sacred realm. We discover that through the strengthening of mindfulness. The mindfulness gets stronger and stronger. It's set free from what you are mindful of. Probably, what you'll find, what you have found, is if you have a strong sensation in your body, pain in your body, you will react to that, we're against it, we clench around it, we try to push it away – we have all these feelings of self-pity or anger, or despair. All kinds of things go on. All those strong reactions become connected or entangled with our sense of paying attention, of being aware of it. But as mindfulness gets stronger, the mindfulness itself begins to stand separately from, independently of all that. The analogy that is used in Buddhism is that of a lotus flower. A lotus flower grows up out of the muddy water, but as it blooms it's untouched by the mud. You have a beautiful white lotus that is sparkly clean. It's rooted in the mud, but it's not touched by the mud. It has this purity. As the mindfulness, the awareness, gets stronger and stronger, it has this feeling of being lifted out, of becoming free from the mud, the places of attachment, of clinging and all that.

So in the spirit of being all-inclusive, a very important part of mindfulness is the world of right thinking. There are certainly meditators who have aversive relationships to their thoughts. There are schools of meditation where thoughts are considered distractions and you have to somehow shut them down, quiet them down, not have any thoughts. In the popular mind sometimes meditation is understood – the aim of meditation is sometimes seen to be as having a silent mind with no thoughts at all. This meditation we are doing here, the aim around thoughts is to be aware of them. To include them in the awareness, and in that inclusion, with time, learn to be free of them. Sometimes thoughts dissipate, and the mind does become silent. But also, because the mindfulness has gotten so strong that we are not "velcroed" to them, we're not stuck to them, caught in them. A very important part of this practice is including thoughts,

thinking, as part of meditation practice. But agreeing to do it in a wise way, with a certain understanding how to do that.

In order to do that, I think we should do it through meditation.

GUIDED MEDITATION:

Take a meditative posture...Gently close your eyes. Give some attention to your spine. Maybe sit up a little straighter, more alertly, than you normally would. And that more alert spine perhaps will allow you a core or an inner strength around which you can relax.

Taking a few slow long deep breaths, as you breathe in, expanding outwards stretching your ribcage, your shoulders, back ribcage, and then as you exhale allowing whatever possible to relax around that core of the spine. Keeping the spine alert. As you exhale, softening the shoulders. As you exhale, allowing the belly to be soft as well. And as you exhale, see if you can soften the muscles of your face. Then letting your breath return to normal. Scan through your body, see if there's some way that you can set your body at ease. Staying upright with your spine, setting your body at ease....

And then entering into the world of your breathing, into the way your body experiences breathing...For now letting go of your thoughts and concerns, so that you can better feel and sense the experience of breathing. Noticing how inhalation feels different than exhalation...

Now, either letting go of your thoughts, or letting them recede in the background, so that in the foreground of attention you are with your breathing. Breathing in, breathing out...

Giving yourself over to your breathing, so that the breathing has a chance to settle you and calm you. So breathing can help center you, as you center yourself around breathing...

If you notice yourself thinking, for the next couple of minutes, let go of that and re-establish yourself in the breathing...

And now, with a certain degree of calm and deliberateness, let go of your breathing, let go of paying attention to breathing, and now simply notice when you're thinking. You're welcome to think. No need to stop thinking now. But then, as you're thinking, you're clearly aware that thinking is happening...Rather than letting go of thinking, look at your thoughts directly, head on.

If your thoughts fade away as you watch them, just wait until they come back or go back to your breathing until such a time as thinking begins again. When it does clearly look at your thinking, see that it's happening, be aware of it.

Very very softly, whisper in the mind, as you are aware of thinking occurring, label it or name it, "thinking, thinking." Very softly.

For the purposes of meditation, what you're thinking about is not important. But as we pay attention to thinking in meditation, you might notice other aspects of the process of thinking besides the content. So, for example, if you're thinking words or images, what's the quality of the inner voice? What's the quality of the pictures that you see? The inner voice that thinks, is it soft and gentle, is it harsh? Adamant? Is the inner voice critical? Or very accepting, easy-going?

Is there a lot of energy to think? Or is thinking very subtle?

Are there any emotions connected to what you are thinking about? The process of thinking, is it connected with or comes out of any emotion? If there is, then quietly note the emotion. Include that in the awareness.

If thinking goes away as you watch it, relax into the space that's left behind. Relax into the spaciousness of the quiet mind.

And then as you notice your thinking, notice if there is any physical side to thinking. Is there any pressure or tension connected to thinking? Somewhere in the body? Tightness? Could be pressure in the brain, in the forehead, tension around the eyes, the jaws. Holding in the shoulders, the chest. Is there some part of the body that feels activated in support of thinking, as part of your thinking?

Then is it possible to relax, soften any tension or pressure connected to thinking? Perhaps as you exhale, relaxing the thinking brain, like you'd relax a muscle.

Now can you let go of your thinking enough to re-center yourself on your breathing. Letting go of your thoughts, letting them recede to the background, and enter into the world of your breathing again. Hanging in there with the breathing. See if you can stay connected to a whole series of breaths in a row.

Then taking a couple of deep breaths, and when you're ready you can open your eyes.

Bell.

TALK CONTINUES:

Imagine yourself after a busy stressful week, and so glad the weekend has arrived, and you're going for a nice hike, you're so glad to be out. You come to an edge of a river, a nice oak tree. Sit next to the oak tree, have your picnic. Looking at the river, you perhaps take a little nap, beautiful weather, nothing you need, nothing you want, you're so glad to be away from all the busyness of your life. All that running after things, and doing things. It's just so good to be there, to be content to be alive, to be present. Wonderful to be there on the riverbank in the shade of the tree watching the river go by.

And then, one of those showboats go by. Flashing lights, casinos, dance shows, dancers and everything. Pretty exciting. Next thing you know you're on the boat, and you've been on it for the last 24 hours. And you didn't even know it. What happened to the riverbank? Somehow you manage to get ashore and get back to the tree, so happy to be back there, watching the river, content, and the next thing you know you're on a warship that goes by, and you've been fighting wars for a couple of days until you realize, wait a minute, how did I get on here? Then you get back on shore, find your place by the tree again, and then this really poor destitute raft comes by and next thing you know you're struggling for survival on this desperate little raft. And then you wonder, "How did I get on here?" So you go back ashore again and back to your oak tree. And all these boats go by and after a while you think, you know, there must be a different thing to do besides getting on every boat that comes by? Why don't I just watch it? So you decide to stay here, I'm not going to leave, I'm just going to watch it go by. I'm going to see it, the shape of it, the color of it, what's going on. I'm not going to leave my place, my seat, I'm just going to let it go by.

That analogy is sometimes used for thinking. That we establish ourselves in the shade of our breath, content and happy, and then sooner or later some thought floats by, comes along, and we don't even see it coming, we only know after a few minutes, hours, that we've been caught up in that particular thought world. A common one is planning, the word tomorrow bubbles up in your mind, and next thing you know you're planning tomorrow, all the things you're going to do and say, and eat and cook, and everything. Spend a few hours planning. Or then a thought comes up about the past, and then you start living in the whole world of regrets, or beautiful thoughts of how wonderful it was in the past. You live in the world of beauty, of the past, but still you've gotten on the boat. And so, much of life is lived on these boats of thinking. And some of them are beautiful and quite appropriate and healthy to be involved in, and some of them are quite painful and cause a lot of suffering to ourselves and to others. But even when they are healthy and good thoughts, they can also carry us down the river, and we can lose our

spot on the riverbank where we are on solid ground, and stable, centered, and we can be independent and free from all the things that are going on. One of the things we're trying to do in meditation practice, is to find ourselves on the riverbank, solid, with awareness, and learn to not get on the boats.

You can't stop the boats going by, but you cannot get on. You can't stop your thoughts, but you don't have to necessarily pick them up, get involved in them. In this regard, I make a distinction between the English word thinking and a new word "thoughting". "Thoughting" is what the mind does, it produces thoughts. You can't stop the mind from "thoughting". But thinking is when you get involved in your thought. Then a train of associated thinking goes on, one after the other, you get involved and caught up in that world. So what we're trying to do is let the thoughts come up and just let them go by. It can seem rather impersonal, maybe a little bit uninteresting, or very strange, because some people don't even know how much they are living in the world of thoughts, and how much they mediate, or see, or understand their life, through the filter of their thinking. They say that fish don't know, don't see the water they swim in. Humans don't see the thinking that they swim in.

Part of mindfulness is to see this hugely important element of human life, and to very clearly see it for what it is, and then have some choice of how we relate to it. Chances are most of you have not chosen much about how you relate to your thinking, and how you get involved in thoughts. Some of you are probably a victim of your thinking mind, it takes you wherever it wants to go. Partly the reason for that is that some people believe that who they are, is their thinking. Their identity is so closely tied to what they think about, that it's a completely foreign idea that they should be something different than their thoughts. If they stopped thinking, who are they going to be? If you don't tell yourself stories about who you are, then who are you? It can be a little bit challenging.

An important part of mindfulness is to really see the phenomenon of thinking. We're not at war with thinking, we're not necessarily trying to push it away or say it's bad. But some of them are painful. We're trying to see it from the vantage point of the riverbank, as opposed to being in it or on it. From the vantage point of the riverbank, looking at the thinking, we might start noticing things we haven't noticed before about it. They are different than the content, the ideas, the thoughts or the images.

In this last meditation I asked you to look a little bit; could you notice some other aspects of thinking besides the content? Could you notice if there was some emotional quality to it? If you think with the words, what's the tone or voice which you think with? Are there any physical aspects to your thinking? Meaning, if you're really churning up a lot of thoughts, you can even see it in some people's forehead, they get all bunched up, the eyebrows bunch up. You see it, they are really thinking hard. The physical part of it. You ask someone to think about something they are really worried about, you can see the shoulders go up as they really bear down thinking about it. Or their jaws clench up. Or you can't necessarily see it, but sometimes you can feel this energetic pressure or tension in the skull. I asked you to look if you noticed other aspects of thinking besides the content, and to just hang out looking at thoughts. I'm curious to hear from some of you as to what happened when you included thinking as part of the field of attention. When you focused on it. Because, if you can give me some examples of some of the things that have happened, I can respond and build on that.

QUESTIONS/COMMENTS:

Student 1: *I noticed I wasn't actually thinking, I was caught in emotions, in emotional stories. Things were going out of my mind, but it wasn't even "thoughting" it was feeling.*

Gil: What was happening with thinking while you were emoting?

Student 1: *Some part of me thought I was thinking, another part said, no you're not actually thinking, you're going through some emotional story.*

Gil: So, you couldn't really see any thoughts when you actually focused on it.

Student 2: *As usual, I start and get on the tomorrow boat, and start planning my day. I'm very kind with myself about it.*

Gil: There wasn't much opportunity to look at thinking, because as soon as you noticed you were on that boat. You were pulled in very easily.

Student 2: *Most of my thoughts are involved around planning.*

RETURN TO TALK:

Every time you come back from thinking you let go of it and come back to the riverbank. Every time you stop, let go or step back and look and are aware that you are thinking. It can be as simple as saying to yourself "thinking, thinking". As soon as you label it as thinking, you're not as enmeshed with it as when you're not saying it. Those movements are very powerful, they only take a moment, they don't look so dramatic, but they are actually very big movements of the mind. They are beginning to break old habits. People have spent a lifetime of developing a habit of just letting themselves just ride the currents of their thoughts freely without any kind of choice. Just going along. No wonder when you sit down and meditate, the mind wanders off in thoughts so easily, because it's had so much freedom over a lifetime. Relearning and breaking the old habits goes relatively fast compared to how much time you spent freely thinking. We expect it to be by tomorrow, but it takes more than a couple of days. Every time you notice, "I'm thinking", every time you let go of thought, is a very meaningful moment, it has tremendous impact on breaking that habit.

So meditation is content to do it whenever you can. That's part of it. Sometime is just seems like you do it and you get pulled into your thoughts so much. Sometimes you need to arouse a bit more determination. Be a little bit more of a warrior. I'm going to keep doing this. I'm going to sit up straighter than usual, be alert, really pay attention. Even though I think meditation is supposed to make me calm, I'm not even going to try and make myself calm. I'm just going to really try and be alert to notice as soon as I wander off into thought. You start to get a handle on what's going on. Once you start getting a handle on it then you can start relaxing. You might have to temporarily practice much more determination.

COMMENTS/QUESTIONS:

Student 1: *Actually, something happened this afternoon, I started thinking of people I saw, and experienced the physical sensation, tightness in my chest, because I know the person makes me feel anxious. When I experienced I shifted my attention from thought to physical sensation, so I was wondering in terms of this process, today we are focusing on thoughts, but in general focus on thoughts, on sensations, if emotion comes up, should I focus on emotions, where should I focus?*

Gil: That's what I'll talk about in a little bit as well, I'll talk more detail about the instructions about thinking. Thinking is a complex process. It isn't just insubstantial words or images that go through. The process of thinking involves much of who we are. It involves our body. Attention has to be very precise, concentrated and still, but almost every thought you have will have a physical aspect, a physical sensation that goes along with it. This physical aspect is sometimes quite obvious, like tightness in the chest. There is often an emotional component to thinking as well. It might be very subtle, but it's there as well. There might be an energetic aspect as well. As we start paying attention to thinking, the naturalness of becoming aware of the bigger picture, that is more than just the content. So what you pointed out, the tightness in the chest, that's part of the bigger package that includes the thought, the thought includes... I'll talk more about it in a little bit.

Student 2: *Part of the time I see pictures flashing like a movie, like a dream, how would you define it? Thinking?*

Gil: Yes. Movies, images, visualizations that happen is considered in Buddhism a form of thought. It's not verbal thought. Some people think more in images than they do in words. That's how they process things. A lot of the same things are true there as you pay attention to the imagery, what the images are is not important to us, but rather what else is part of that package. Other feelings and emotions are part of it. Body sensations are part of it. Tightening in the body... How much energy is there in the images? Is it very energetic very clear very bright or is it very faint, distant, is it really close, are you really pulled into it, are you living in it, are you on that boat, the movie boat? Or are you watching it from a distance. There is so much to notice besides the pictures that are going on. Some people think in images. You can just call it "thinking" or you can call it "seeing" as you wish.

BACK TO TALK:

Thinking is a hugely important part of human life. In meditation practice one of the things we're trying to do is not be pulled along on these boats. One of the many reasons for that is that chances are pretty high that the stress we feel in our lives, the suffering we feel, the anxiety and many things that we are trying to deal with through meditation are perpetuated or strengthened or catalyzed or triggered by what we're thinking about. As we start getting a handle on how to be mindful of thinking, it has a big impact on the rest of our life, the other aspects of our life. It's not always easy. Some people have a very hard time noticing anything to do with thinking. The thinking is very shy as soon as they bring their attention to focus on it. It just kind of evaporates. Some people have very little awareness of what they are thinking about. Some people it's very clear. They live in their world of thought in a very clear way that's an important part of their lives. There are different ways of being, one is not better or worse or right or wrong, it's just how it is for us.

When thinking arises in meditation and it's relatively easy to let go of it, then you are encouraged to just let go of it and come back to your breathing. Sooner or later it's not going to be so easy to let go of your thinking. That takes two forms, one is you simply can't let go of it, the mind is charging ahead thinking, doesn't want to stop at all, can't just let go of it. The other, you might be able to let go momentarily, but as soon as you let go for a moment, it comes back right away. It repeatedly comes back. If either one of those two things happen, then you want to quite contently let go of paying attention to your breathing and then focus on this phenomenon of thinking. Like looking at it right in the eye. "Thinking, I see you." If you're here and the thinking is there, then you're free of it to some degree. If you are the thinking, you think you are the thought, then you're not outside of it, you're not on the riverbank. Look at it straight on, "thinking", and saying the word "thinking" in your mind, very softly, gently, it can help you to look at it in the eye and say "I see you. I know this is what's going on now." So it's a very clear cognizance that thinking is going on. Sometimes this is enough for thinking to just evaporate. Part of the reason for that is that in order for thoughts to turn into thinking and persistent thinking, there has to be fuel for them to put energy into them. If you clearly see it for what it is, "thinking", and give enough attention that is free of the thinking. In a way, you're not fueling it anymore, you're not involved in it anymore. If you're not involved, it dissipates usually, if it's relatively mild.

Sometimes thinking is quite powerful. If you come to sit here and meditate with us some day, and you just robbed the local bank, and the police are chasing after you. Chances are you can't let go of your thoughts that easily, they would be spinning along really fast. Certain activities happen in your life and you can't put it to a stop. That's normal. In the task in meditation there are two things you can do. You can keep letting go and come back to your breath, and let the breath help calm you. As you get calmer, that energy of thinking might dissipate. The other thing you can do, you can actually turn and pay more careful attention to the phenomenon of thinking the process of thinking. Noticing different aspects of it as we did in this meditation. For the purposes of meditation generally we are almost never interested in the content – in the story which goes with the thinking. We don't focus on it, this is for other times and places, not for meditation.

You can notice the physical aspect of it, and when I can't let go of my thinking very easily, I often find that there's a sense of pressure or tightness in the area I call my brain. If I can let go of my thoughts, and soon as I let go of it, if that pressure is there, I just pump out another thought. What helps me is if I go feel the tension in my brain in my forehead, or in my eyes, wherever it might be, and relax it. If I relax it, then the pressure to think is not so great anymore. It's easier to let go of it, and after a while I might not think so much.

It's like this factory of tension or pressure or tightness, as long as it's there, its job is to pump out thoughts. You have to somehow address that. That's why it's very helpful, when thinking is very powerful, to look and see what's going on in the body. When you find something in the body, then you can let go of your thinking. Looking at your thoughts, then you just focus for a while on the physical aspect of it. The bodily things, tensions....do mindfulness on the body around that. If it's not easy to relax, don't make a big deal, an engineering project out of trying to relax. That's not meditation. If it's easy to relax, do it, if it's not easy then be content that what we're doing is mindfulness, just being present for things. Bringing our presence to be present. Feel what it's like. As long as you're present, you're doing the practice. Nothing has to change. You don't have to fix anything. You just want to be present for how things are.

There also can be an emotional aspect to the thinking. People who plan a lot in meditation, there's a very strong correlation, many of them, the planning arises out of anxiety, fear, or apprehension. There is some feeling of anxiety around the planning. There are other causes for planning as well, it can be excitement, or delight, or creativity, or different things, but the majority of times, people find, it has to do with some anxiety. In that case, the anxiety is the factory for the thinking. You can let go of your thoughts as much as you want, but the factory is still going to work overtime, because the factory is on. What you need to do, is then do mindfulness of emotions, feel the fear, as we talked about last week. "Fear, fear...anxiety..." Note it, be aware of it, and feel it in the body. All the things we talked about last week about emotions, you do that. It's like the thinking is the flag that says "Hey you! Pay attention over here." Then we pay attention to the flag, but really what the flag is saying is to pay attention to what is holding the flag, the factory, the emotion. So we can forget about the thoughts and come back and feel.

Both the body, the physical sensations connected to thinking, and the emotions happen in real time, in the current here and now. Thinking also happens in the present moment, but often the content has to do with the past or the future. If you are connected to your body, to your emotions, you are here. If you are caught up in the world of your thoughts, in a sense, you might be somewhere else. We're trying to be here. The emotional aspect of thinking, the physical aspect of thinking, is a great support to being present. It helps anchor us in the present moment.

There can also be energetic experiences with thinking. I find sometimes I can be sitting in meditation, very calm, very centered. My center of gravity, my center of being, of presence, seems to be down here, very nice feeling. Then, some really juicy thought will bubble up, and I'll get into that boat. And as I do that, get into that boat, get involved in it, I can feel that sense of aliveness, vitality, whatever I have, very quickly move up into my upper chest, and sometimes into my head. I feel sometimes a little bit top heavy. This is where my aliveness, my vitality, the energy is up here. So then if I relax and let go, sometimes I feel it go down again. When you're down here, your vitality, your energy is down lower, you're more balanced. Lower center of gravity feels more stable, it's easier to relax. It's interesting to watch how the sense of energy or vitality or aliveness in your body shifts and changes depending on what you're thinking about.

Occasionally it's useful to be more precise in your noting besides saying just "thinking...thinking". If it's really obvious, and you don't have to think about it, and you can just say "planning....planning". You name it. Or "remembering...remembering". And just see it that way. It helps break the seduction or the involvement.

There is one more aspect of thinking that is a very helpful perspective on it, and that is part of the package of all the different things going on as we think, it's also our interest in it. You can notice as you track yourself thinking how interested are you. "Boy, am I ever interested! This is the best fantasy I've ever had." Or, there could be a negative interest where you can be "Aghast! How can I be thinking this." A negative interest. We're caught in it, engaged in it. Sometimes it's the interest that perpetuates and fuels the thinking. Sometimes it's useful to notice the degree of interest that might be there. Sometimes that interest has a physical feeling of reaching forward almost, leaning forward, holding on, wanting, getting involved. You can feel the mind sometimes almost lean into, grab onto, want to get involved in thinking.

If it's relatively mild, the task is to let go of it. If it doesn't let go easily, then we very calmly include this in the meditation practice and note "thinking...thinking." If it persists over time or keeps reoccurring over and over again, then very calmly stay in your place the best you can, look around and notice what else is happening besides the content of what you're thinking about. Notice the physical aspects, the tension that might be there. If you're thinking a lot, the chances are that there is some tension, some pressure. Notice the emotions that are part of it, they can be pleasant emotions, they can be difficult ones. You don't want to be seduced by the pleasant ones. "Finally, I get to have nice emotions..." The pleasant ones will keep you caught up in thought as much as the difficult emotions. The purpose of mindfulness, which you are trying very hard to do, is not to get caught by anything. You don't want to get on the emotion boat either. You can do that at other times. But not in meditation. Because there is something much more important to do in meditation. Then you can also notice the energy qualities connected to it, the intensity of it, the inner voice. Any of you surprised by the tone of your inner voice when you pay attention? At least one of you... four of you... Occasionally people who are surprised, they not only realize they are surprised by the tone, but by whose voice it is. They realize it's not their own. Sometimes it's a parent's voice or sometimes it's some teacher, usually a difficult teacher that somehow they have internalized. Internalized different people. Sometimes these voices, we realize how much we get entangled also with other people in our inner mind. Sometimes seeing all this can help us become free of it. That's the task of meditation, to become free of all this. As you become freer, you'll become more relaxed, more at ease. You'll drop into deeper meditations as a consequence.

QUESTIONS/COMMENTS:

Student 1: *This is related to my previous comment. It seems I'm unable to step back from my thoughts or body emotions. I can sort of step back, but maybe I'm stepping into my thoughts to watch those other two things. Maybe I'm stepping into my thoughts to look at my body and emotions. Do you have any guidance?*

Gil: Some people confuse mindfulness with thoughtfulness. Because it's so much how they orient themselves and understand their world is by thinking about things. People live in that world of thinking so much. That's where they are resident. If the mail carrier is going to bring you mail, they are going to bring to 200 Thinking Place, because that's where you live. Mindfulness is not thinking about something. I don't know if this is a great example, but thinking about a massage and getting a massage is not the same thing. You can get a wonderful massage, and if you are thinking about what the experience is, it's very different than sinking into the muscles allowing yourself to really feel the fingers of the masseuse. It's tactile, it's very present. You don't need to think to feel the tactile experience of the massage. You can look at a sunset, you don't have to think about the sunset to see how grand it is, how wonderful it is. You can have a silent mind. I went to hear a symphony some years ago. During the first half, before the intermission, I wasn't understanding everything that was going on through my thinking. I had a good view of the orchestra pit. I was listening to music and kind of enjoying it, but I was looking at how the violins were being moved, the flutes were going this way, and commenting and judging and thinking. I was so involved in this world of thinking about what I was looking at, I realized after a while I wasn't as deeply connected to the music as I could be, so what I did was I closed my eyes, and the thinking about the musicians and everything faded away, and I got really absorbed in the

music. The music wasn't thinking about the music. After the intermission then I was settled enough, and I could open my eyes and watch as well as listen without being caught by the world of thoughts. There's a kind of silent quality to mindfulness. A silent awareness. It's very important to make that distinction. That silent awareness is intelligent. If you're fully present, you kind of register, you take it in, you know what's going on. You don't have to think about what's happening so much.

Student 1: *But how do I turn off this thinking, so I can listen?*

Gil: If you can't turn it off, your job is to study it. Become very familiar with what it feels like to have your thinking on all the time. What does it feel like physically? What does it feel like energetically? One of the things to look at when you're looking at incessant thinking is notice that the mind is tired. This poor thinking mind....many people's thinking minds are exhausted, so weary. It's been going on and on forever. They don't give it a break. So you can notice that. What does it feel like? What's the subjective sense of always doing that, being that way? A very interesting question to ask. Sometimes in Buddhism we ask ourselves contemplative questions. I'll give you an example of a little contemplation; we'll do it together.

GUIDED CONTEMPLATION:

Close your eyes. For a moment connect to your belly or deep in your torso. Now I'm going to ask a question. Don't think about the question, but see if some response bubbles up from inside.

"What would you be experiencing if you weren't thinking" (Silence)

(bell)

Okay. What came up for you?

Student 2: *As I heard the water flowing and heard some cars go by.*

Gil: Was that nice?

Student 2: *The water was, the cars not so nice.*

Gil: What happens occasionally when you ask that kind of question for people, sometimes the thinking is really a protection from feeling. Because if you think about stuff enough, make stories or fantasies. Some people go to fantasies so they don't have to be present for life, because life is difficult. You have feelings and emotions. And if we had difficult trauma in life, those emotions are deeply embedded in us. So sometimes when you ask that kind of question what we can find out is how much the incessant thinking is a protection. That can open up an interesting door or window into what's going on. I'm not saying that's your case, but that's one of the things to notice.

If you're very careful when you meditate that you don't get caught in the trap of wanting something to go away. Caught in the trap of judging and saying "this shouldn't be there." The basic approach of mindfulness meditation is to "know it". And know it really well. A lot of wisdom comes from familiarity, which is bad news because familiarity means you have to hang out with it for a long time. For your case, you have to get really familiar with that part of yourself. So exploring in different ways can be really helpful. This is an example of something which is perhaps such a big part of you, it is also good to go talk with friends, go for a walk with friends, say, "I have this interesting thing, this thinking mind that's incessant, can I just talk about it and explore it with you? Ask you questions about it?" Find different angles, different perspectives, get familiar with it.

Student 3: *How can I distinguish in between or sorting out that I'm exhausted and tired of having thoughts too much or if I'm truly tired? This is different tiredness. I find I'm battling a lot, and checking out and not being here and not being in the body, and next thing, boom I'm asleep. Every time. This last exercise which was very short, I was able to not think and stay with the movement of my belly the entire time. Is that good?*

Gil: Yes. That's Great.

Student 3: *But the falling asleep is so immense. And then when I think about that I think that 2 out of 3 Americans have problems falling asleep because they are thinking too much. I have the opposite, I'm falling asleep too fast.*

Gil: Also, a high percentage of Americans are also sleep deprived. I like to say that some people need to sleep more than they need to meditate.

Student 3: *I sleep 7 hours so I think it's plenty and I shouldn't be tired, and I'm checking out in the meditation.*

Gil: It's hard to know. People have different sleep needs. Some people need 9 hours. What you might want to try doing is give yourself more sleep for one week, 9 hours or 10 hours. Get as much as your body can possibly use. Then try to meditate, then see if you keep falling asleep. If you keep falling asleep and you know you've had all the sleep you need. Take a nap in the middle of the day. But if you keep falling asleep then there could be other things going on. There's a variety of things that could be going on. There could be (not saying any of these is yours). One could be you are excessively complacent. Kind of given up. No real sense of inner life or vitality or interest in life. Once you've let go of the incessant doing and thinking. There's no deeper kind of motivation or aliveness to fall back on. So you fall asleep. Another is falling asleep a lot is a very powerful protection that some people use so they don't have to be present for themselves. Because being present means they have to feel their emotions and some people's emotions are quite difficult. They can be deep, deep... all kinds of difficult anger, fear, lot of things, sadness, grief...

Student 3: *I think that's more the case. The checking out like avoiding. Would it be the same as avoiding?*

Gil: Yes. That's where the question, if you weren't falling asleep, what would you be experiencing? If you ask that question in the right way, some people suddenly it dawns on them. "Oh, then I'd be really sad!" Then the instruction would be, "Now, start paying attention to sadness." You've connected something really important.

In our meditation circles we have a lot of respect for when people fall asleep because it's a protection, we have a lot of respect for that, we are not in a hurry to overcome that. Kind of a slow gentle way keep doing the best, exploring it, being present, don't want to pop out of it too quickly, because there is an inner wisdom that knows when you're ready.

Student 4: *In your book you mentioned that it works even when it doesn't work. Then, when you were asking to go and to think about your thoughts as they arise to look for your thoughts, so I was thinking about looking for my thoughts, unaware that I was thinking about looking for my thoughts which was finding my thoughts and catching myself in it. So I was actually completing the instruction. The point is that I've noticed in my life even though I meditate, I don't think I meditate. I don't believe it. I probably never meditated.*

Gil: You mean you go through the form?

Student 4: *I go through the form and sit and follow the instructions but I've noticed that although the actual content of my life hasn't changed. I'm at a job I think it stinks. It's a horrible situation, but I feel wonderful. I'm looking at it and I'm saying, well you know, what's been done here? What's been changed here? Actually the content is the same. But the perception and the awareness are different. And I think I could actually continue to the point of my demise quite content. Even though I've never been able to meditate.*

Gil: Careful, meditation might spoil it then. (Laughter). We don't want to spoil what's going on.

There we go. So we say sometimes, in our meditation circles, that the point of mindfulness is not to have a new different kind of experience, but to see our experience in a new way. That's what you've learned to do. You've learned a new perspective even though it stinks. Beautiful.

Student 5: *It's related to sleep. When I'm trying to clear my mind, sometimes I seem to get to a stage similar to what I seem to feel when I'm falling asleep, but I don't actually fall asleep when I'm doing this, but it seems to be sort of similar, so am I just getting too lethargic. Should I up my energy level? What should I be doing?*

Gil: It's quite common, if I understand you. It's quite common that as people get calmer in meditation that the calm becomes soporific. A dropping of energy. Sometimes if we get calm enough the mind begins to drift off into dream like states, much like sleeping. When sleepiness or dullness starts happening a lot, or dreamlike states start happening like that, because you're too calm... It's not that you're too calm by itself, but calm needs to be balanced with energy. So if there is too much calm without enough energy to balance it, people will fall asleep or get dream-like, so the thing is to bring more energy to help balance it out. Sometimes it's as easy as sitting up straighter. Sometimes people like to open their eyes. Sometimes it's applying, awakening, a little more mental effort.

Student 5: *I usually open my eyes then, because that seems to sort of bring me back. Is that ok?*

Gil: Yes.

RETURN TO TALK

So there's one more thing. This is a lot, this thinking, I have a couple of more things to say. One is that if this seems too complicated, it's really enough for a really long time to just stay with the breath. You don't have to do all this, exploration of thoughts, if it seems too complicated. It's something to have in the back of your mind, and in it's own time and place, hopefully you'll remember that instruction and it will become relevant. You don't have to be racing around trying to understand everything. Just keep steady and relaxed, keep coming back to the breath, use your breath, and when it's really compelling, your physical sensations, where they are compelling your emotions, compelling your world of thinking, you can begin exploring in this mindful way. But if you're exploring thinking, there is one more interesting phenomenon about thinking.

If someone walked next to me talking to me as much as I talk to myself, I'd worry about them. I would beg them to stop. (Laughter). I'd pay them to stop. I'd probably call the authorities because I'd be worried about them, and not only because they talk so much, but because it's so repetitive. I can't believe how much the person is saying the same thing over again and over again. What's going on? What's most amazing is that we can say the same thing to ourselves 500 times, and it can be as interesting the 500th time as the first time. We're the ones that should be reported to the authorities. We stay interested. A healthy person would lose interest. What is that interest like? What's it about? A high percentage of the time, the thinking, what keeps us interested, because a lot of those thoughts are self-referential. They have to do without our favorite subject, which is *me, myself, and I*. So, the investigation of thought, it's also to look a little bit, of looking at the content now. So to what degree is

the content all about me. Just notice that, you don't have to judge it, say that it's bad or wrong. If you see how regular that is, just the awareness of that, will begin shifting it.

I had a little sense of this when I lived in Japan. I was living in a monastery in Japan, learning Japanese. I was trying to speak Japanese like I speak English, which doesn't work so well, because they have a whole different structure for the sentences. But the Japanese don't very often use pronouns, like "I, and you, and we". They have pronouns they can use. They don't often use it. Just understand by context what people are saying. Like if we're all going to go now. I would say "Go". I would not say "us", "let us go". "I'm going now," rather than saying "Going?" It's clear I'm the one who is going. Everyone else is sitting down. I don't have to say I. It's kind of like that. They don't use the "I" pronoun very much in Japan. The usual way of saying it is 3 syllables long, can you believe it? It takes a while to get out of your mouth. Here I was learning Japanese, trying to speak it, speaking it like I speak English, which means that every sentence starts with "I". So I'd be saying "watashi wa" that's how you say "I", that's 4 syllables, and the monks would look at me. I got so self-conscious, I became so aware of how much my language was self-referential. I had no idea. When I was just in America speaking English because we all do it. It's invisible to us. It was very instructive to me. It helped free me up quite a bit from that attachment to self and self-preoccupation. You might look at your thoughts that way as well. See what's going on there. Then, if once you see the self-referential nature of it, there might be more going on that just the thoughts of self, there might be emotions connected to that wonderful self, that are self-referential. There might be body sensations, clinging and tightness, all kinds of things going on. There is a lot to notice.

When you do mindfulness practice you begin really valuing and loving noticing what's going on. Like you're a naturalist. Your field studies are yourself.

There's a chapter in my book on thinking you might want to explore. Try out these instructions during the week, see how they work for you in meditation, but you might want to start focusing on thinking at other times and see what you can learn about yourself beyond the content of the thoughts. When you're driving your car, talking to friends... Next week we're going to talk about something very different, somewhat very different, but very profound in Buddhist context, which is mindfulness of the mind, with the idea that "thinking" is just a small little corner of the mind. The mind is much bigger, there's much more going on. So we will do Mindfulness of the Mind.

Mindfulness of Mind (Week 5)

Transcribed and Lightly Edited from a Talk by Gil Fronsdal 10/29/08

Good evening everyone. Welcome back to our fifth week of our six-week series. I used to not teach this topic as part of the intro class, but I was inspired about a year and a half ago that this is a very important, significant aspect of mindfulness practice that I thought would benefit those taking this introductory class.

The topic for today is “mindfulness of the mind”. As an introduction to the topic, I’d like to tell you a Buddhist story, a fable from the time of the Buddha. From the traditional Indian and Buddhist world view, cosmology or mythology, there’s a god named Brahma, one of the great gods from the heavenly realm, who rules over his heavenly realm.

One day, there was a *yakksha*, which is kind of like a mischievous tree spirit, an ugly runt of a *yakksha*, like an ugly little runt of a troll. It came and sat on Brahma’s throne. This is a great god, in the Indian pantheon there is no greater god, he’s a pretty big figure up there. And he went and sat on Brahma’s throne one day when he was away on his travels.

Now all the other gods who were around about the heavenly court, thought this is wrong, this ugly little runt of a *yakksha* shouldn’t be sitting on the great Brahma’s throne, so they got kind of angry. And they said “You have to get off that throne.” As they said that, he started growing bigger and bigger. And they got even more angry and he wouldn’t budge. And they yelled louder and told him to get down. Who are you to sit up there? And as they continued with their ranting and raving and fury at him sitting where he shouldn’t be, he kept getting bigger and bigger and more and more beautiful until he was a beautiful great *yakksha*. So these court gods were confused and went to Brahma and asked what they should do.

They told Brahma that this little runt of a *yakksha* climbed up and was sitting on his throne and he won’t get down. He won’t get off and not only that, but he keeps getting bigger and more beautiful.

And Brahma said, “Oh.... I know what to do.” And he went back and stood in front of his own throne and he bowed deeply to the *yakksha*, and said “it’s so nice to see you, I hope you’re comfortable up there and you should come visit more often, my dear friend,” and as he said that, the *yakksha* got smaller and smaller until finally he went poof, and disappeared. At that, Brahma went up and sat on his own throne.

And he said to his court, that *yakksha*, that tree spirit, is an anger eating *yakksha*. The more angry you get the bigger it gets, so what you have to do is bring your kindness to it and then it goes away. It feeds on your anger, what you have to do is bring kindness to it and it dissolves away.

So do you have your own anger-eating *yakksha*? What do you feed, and what gets bigger and more beautiful as you get angry?

This fable points to the idea of our relationship to our experience, how we relate to our experience has a big impact on ourselves. So if you get angry with someone, if you get angry enough, you don’t become beautiful. You might get big in your fury. But generally, it’s understood that when people get really angry, they get ugly. Anger isn’t a beauty treatment.

To feed something inside of us, doesn’t just feed our physicality, it conditions our mind and our heart, and how we relate to the world. If you get angry a lot, it can color everyone you see and everything you touch. You can be angry with one person, but it fills you with a mood of anger and then when you go walking down the street, everyone irritates you, “How could they walk that way! They’re stepping on too many cracks!” [laughs] It gets ridiculous sometimes, because we are so irritated.

So, we're feeding not only how we are in the moment, but sometimes we're feeding a habit and that habit develops over time. There are other habits (or states) to feed. So, if you're kind, if that's your disposition, your default, if you're feeling relaxed and generous, then, as you go down the street, that attitude affects how you see people and how you see yourself. So, not only can you be kind or loving in the moment to a particular person, but it also affects your mood and how you are. And how you are affects how you see the world around you. And it also affects the habits that get formed; how you condition your mind.

In Buddhism, there is the emphasis on taking responsibility not only for your choices in the moment, but also for how those choices shape your overall state of being. Your state of mind, your mood, your overall attitude that you have about your life as you go through it. Not only the overall mood for the day, or the hour, but also the predisposition you have to fall back into certain states or attitudes of mind.

So, if you develop a habit of going around being angry, then you're more likely to fall into that groove at some other time. If you're always being afraid or anxious, you may not only be anxious about a particular thing, but it could affect your overall attitude towards everything, not just in that moment or hour.

Right now, my impression is that in the last two weeks, there is a lot more anxiety in people. They may say that they are anxious about the economy or work, but it's spilling out and expressing itself in all kinds of other ways in their life. They may not even be sure what they're anxious about, it's just an underlying feeling of anxiety.

So, if you're anxious about a particular thing, it can affect your whole mood. But it also affects how we get shaped or conditioned for the future; how we tend to be more disposed to the habits that are being formed. So, if you keep reinforcing the fear, and living from there, you're more likely to fall into those patterns in the future as well.

So, in Buddhist practice, mindfulness has a role in all three of these realms. Mindfulness has a role by putting us in the present moment, and being relaxed enough, calm enough in the present moment to see the impulses that arise in us. To see the motivations. To see what we want to say, what we want to do, what we want to think. To track it enough and to be present enough to say, "wait a minute, I don't have to act on that, I have a choice here." If we don't slow down enough and have strong enough mindfulness, we don't see that we have any choice.

So, you're walking down the street, and you walk by an ice cream parlor and the next thing you know you're holding an ice cream cone in your hand. Where was the choice? "All I knew is that I was just walking down the street, and then I had this ice cream. I didn't choose that." Of course, you chose it, but maybe there wasn't enough mindfulness, but the powers of desire were so strong and they took over, and you were in a kind of trance when that happened.

It can happen much more clearly with anger. People can say things very spontaneously in anger that they would never do if they were in their right mind and thought about it. But, they are so worked up, so triggered that it comes out of their mouths or even sometimes comes out of their hand, as they hit someone.

So, in that kind of situation, you don't see choice. There is a phenomenal amount of people in society that don't see their places of choice. If you don't see where you have choice, then you have no choice. If you see the place of choice, you have choice. Mindfulness practice expands the range of places that you have choice, where you can choose in your life. So it's not such a mystery why you have the ice cream cone, or why something happens to you.

Mindfulness helps to put you into a place of choice and that helps you with wiser choices in the present moment. As you choose to behave, act and even think in different ways, it can have an effect on your overall mood and attitude with which you approach your life. As you begin exercising that choice, it also

can have a profound effect on how you condition yourself; how you predispose yourself as you go forward in your life into the future. So mindfulness has effects on all of these.

For today, the topic is, in Buddhist terminology, called Mindfulness of Mind. Maybe in English, we would say, mindfulness of attitude, or overall mood, or the overall state that we are in.

I'm sorry I'm picking on anger so much today. It may be irritating to you that I'm using it as an example. [laughter] If you're walking down the street, and you see someone walking towards you that's really angry, you can almost see the steam coming from them and feel the mood or grumpiness from afar. Or if you see someone who is really carefree, happy and delighted, you can feel that mood or atmosphere of that person. You sense how they are. So, the mindfulness of the mind has to do with the overall mood or attitude with which we go through life.

But, that attitude that we have can also be invisible to us. Because it's so much a part and parcel of the atmosphere that we're in. For example, fish can't see the water that it's swimming in. It's like a dirty windshield... you're so focused on driving and the road that you don't notice. You not only don't notice that you can't see very clearly because it's so dirty, but you also don't notice the strain that it has on your eyes and mind to try to see through the dusty windshield. So, the attitude can be that way; you don't notice the effect it has on you; on how you perceive the world around you.

The last thing I'll say about this before we meditate is to give an analogy: It's the nature of being a human being, that human beings have problems. Do any of you not have any problems? Problems come along.

You have one problem, then another problem. Right now I have a car problem, hopefully next week it won't be there. But then I'm sure I'll have another problem; something else will come along. Some difficulty, something that I'll have to take care of.

If we labeled our problems with the letter X [like in mathematics, equations may contain a variable X, which can represent any number], what can fill that space of X can change a lot, but the attitude or relationship that you have towards your problems can be constant.

Some people have common default attitudes every time there's a problem: "Oh boy, not again, this is impossible" or "I'm not gonna pay attention, I'm going to escape" or "I'm going to lash out and blame someone" or "I'm gonna get depressed" or "This is too much" or "Oh boy, I love problems! I love problem solving, it's like a puzzle, they're great!"

So, there's X that changes all the time, and what changes less often is how you might relate to various problems. It's easy to be blinded by the problems, and not notice the relationship we have with the problems; the attitude we have towards these things. Some people will have underlying pervasive attitudes that they carry with them that affect everything that they touch.

So, this is the analogy: If a fly lands on an ant, it's probably a big deal for the ant. The fly is heavy, bigger than the ant. The ant can't move around easily and can't get into his hole because this big thing is stuck on it, and it's a big deal. If the same fly lands on an elephant, the elephant could not care less. When you have problems, are you more like the ant, or more like the elephant?

There are times when we are fragile, tense, vulnerable or upset, etc. And the smallest little thing can push us over or do us in. We're like the ant. And other times when you're happy, contented, energetic, present, full, etc. If the same kind of things happen you hardly notice. "Problem? Fly on my back? I guess there's a fly there, but maybe I don't have to do anything about it." So the attitude that we hold ourselves with, or how we feel about ourselves, or the mood or state that we're in can have a big impact on how we relate to our world; how we relate to our problems, our blessings (the fortunate things that

happen to us). It's a variable that can be adjusted and changed. The mood, state or attitude, how we relate to things, how we are in relationship to all things is not fixed.

One of the things that mindfulness can do is help us become mindful, not only of the overall state that we're in, but also, the choices that influence the state, mood and situation we're in.

Last week, we talked of mindfulness of thinking. One of the effects of being really preoccupied in thoughts and caught up in your thinking... if you notice the next time that you're really preoccupied, you'll probably feel something like a constricting of awareness, a tightening up of awareness, a narrowing of awareness, maybe even a darkening. If you feel the mind, it may feel as if it's darkening down. If you let go of your preoccupation, there can be a lightening, opening up feeling, an expansive feeling that goes on there. So the state of awareness can be contracted or expansive. You can be aware of whether it's contracted or expansive.

The state of the mind can have a big impact on the overall state of our mood. A very expansive sense of mind can give us an expansive sense of being. A contracted mind can give us a very contracted sense of being. If you have an expansive sense of being, you can be the elephant. If you have a contracted sense of being, caught up in something, then you can be like the ant.

So let's meditate.

GUIDED MEDITATION:

Take a comfortable, alert posture, gently closing your eyes. It's helpful in the beginning of a sitting to spend a little bit of time getting into your posture. Maybe swaying back and forth; sideways; wiggling the spine. Perhaps feeling how the weight your body might move through the spine. And especially for those not using a backrest, maybe you can find a way to feel the way the weight of the body travel down the center of your spine. Because, in that case, the spine can support the weight instead of the muscles holding you up.

In the beginning of a sitting, it can be helpful to take a few long, slow deep breaths. As you breathe in deeply, feel the stretching of your ribcage, shoulders and belly almost like a massage from the inside. As you exhale, just relax, let go, and settle in.

Deep breath in... Long breath out...

And then letting your breath, return to normal. Take a few moments to scan through your body to see if there are any obvious places of holding or tension that you can either relax or if you can't relax and let go of the holding, perhaps there could be a softening around it. A lightening up around it.

Then, within your body, as part of your body, become aware of the body's experience of breathing. Feeling how the body might expand and contract. Parts of the body lift, and fall as you breathe, or the sensations of the air coming in and out through the nostrils.

Letting go, the best you can, of your thoughts and concerns from the day in order to settle into the experience of breathing. As if the breathing is your home base.

When you notice that you're drifting off in thought, just notice that. Be relaxed about it, just notice that's happened, and be mindful of that. Then without commentary or judgment, begin again with your breathing. Begin again being aware, breathing in and breathing out.

[silence]

As you're sitting here, what's your overall mood or state? What's the overall, general state of being? There are many things you might notice like that. Are you tired or alert? Do you feel contracted, or expanded? Calm or agitated? Fuzzy or clear, crisp?

Anxious or relaxed? Interested or bored? Patient or impatient?

Being aware of this overall state, how does it affect you? How does it affect how you see what's going on and how you relate to it? How are you influenced by the state that you're in?

As you're mindful of all this, can you shift your identity; shift what you identify yourself with from your mood or your attitude to the mindfulness, the awareness that knows and recognizes the state you're in?

[silence]

Then, shifting gears a little bit, with whatever you're noticing now, with whatever is happening now, what is your attitude towards that? How are you relating; what is your relationship to what is happening with meditation for you or the situation you're in now, the thoughts you have, the feelings you have?

What's the relationship or the attitude? Are you for it, or against it? Are you liking it, or not liking it?... Are you enjoying it or are you resisting? ... Is there a wanting or not wanting? ... What's your attitude towards what's happening? ... It might even be your attitude to me giving you this question.

Then, can you shift your identity; shift yourself from kind of "being the attitude", believing the attitude, to being mindful of it? Can you step out away from it and watch it?

Then, taking a deep breath or two, return more fully to your breathing. For the last two minutes of the sitting, just stay with your breathing as best you can. Not letting yourself be swept away through your attitude, your mood, your state. Stay with your breathing.

Silence

Bell

RETURN TO TALK:

I have here in front of me, this meditation bell that I just rang. It's possible to just focus on that, but also, it's possible to notice the environment that this bell is in. And our experience of paying attention to the bell could be influenced by the environment that we're in. If this room was phenomenally dirty, messy and the trash was never picked up... you could hardly see the bell because of the trash everywhere. That atmosphere of the messy, dirty room would affect how we experience the bell in some ways.

If you come here to the meditation hall some day and nobody is here, I think it's quite a beautiful, peaceful, quiet, expansive room to be in... you see the bell and it is part of this exquisite thing. Like a single Japanese flower in a Japanese flower arrangement in this quiet, empty room, it can be quite exquisite. As opposed to the same, single flower arrangement, that you stick on one of the shelves in the 7-11 grocery store. It has a different feeling for what it looks like.

The atmosphere or the environment in which something exists can affect how we relate to something. So the same thing applies to ourselves. We can focus on the details of our lives, the details of our thoughts, our feelings, our body sensations, what's going on in our body. We can focus on our breathing itself. We can focus on the details, but the mindfulness of the mind is including within that an awareness of what the environment is in which these details are occurring.

It's very easy for some people to get blinded by the details and not notice the overall atmosphere, the environment in which it occurs. So, mindfulness of the mind has to do with this overall state that we are in.

It can be very helpful to notice that, because it has such a big influence in how we are, the choices we make and how we think. If we can step out of it, and we can notice, "Oh, look at that! I am really feeling shaky today, I'm really vulnerable." Maybe something dramatic happened, and I feel really vulnerable. "Oh, I better take that into account." As opposed to not noticing the environment of vulnerability, and then stumbling through and wondering why things are so hard. So ask, "What's going on here?"

Do we feel expansive, like an elephant, or do we feel tiny, small and insignificant? I've known people who have been quite petite and in their petiteness, they were really big. Their persona, their sense of being was huge. I know people who were quite small or short as adults, and I actually didn't notice that they were short, because somehow their presence was so big.

Then I've known adults who are really tall and big, and they felt really small. They felt timid or something. There was a very small sense of self there. Again, it has to do with the environment that's there. It's a different feeling about what it's like to be alive and be ourselves.

I want to say more about this, but I'd like to hear from you a little bit. So, in the meditation now, were you able to step back and get a sense of your overall mood, attitude or state of being that you had? If so, what did you discover, and what happened to you when you took that into account; when you could see that and be aware of it. It would be nice if someone could break the ice.

COMMENTS/QUESTIONS:

Student 1: *I found that it was difficult and one of the things I found difficult was precision. I found it very easy to identify my attitude as "positive" or "negative". You offered a number of options, I noticed whichever one the bad one was. And then I realized I don't really feel those bad things. I can sort of identify a [dissatisfied sound].*

Gil: **There is a resistance or something?**

Student 1: *I didn't have a precise differentiation; it was more like [a general negative feeling].*

Gil: Great! It's significant just to know that. I don't know exactly what it was, some kind of generalized resistance or some kind of grumpiness about everything. So, when you're aware of that, how is it different for you to be aware of it, vs. not being aware of it?

Student 1: *The awareness of it was very pleasant.*

Gil: [The feeling] was unpleasant, but the awareness of it was pleasant. Fantastic! So where would you rather be?

Student 1: *Definitely in the awareness ! [laughs]*

Gil: Great, thank you! Someone else?

Student 2: *I was having a hard time with this meditation because I can't distinguish between mindfulness of the mind vs. emotion or thought.*

Gil: I'll answer that question first, then maybe make a comment about the meditation.

There is a big overlap between them, but the difference is that there can be an emotional response that is a particular detail within the bigger environment. It doesn't have to color how we

are. So the grumpy person walking down the street might see someone in distress, and in that moment seeing the person in distress might actually be kind and helpful, but their overall grumpiness is still intact.

Or someone might be quite happy and carefree, and feeling expansive walking down the street, and then they see someone spits a big wad of spit right onto the crosswalk button that they were about to push [laughing]. They still stay pretty expansive, but for a moment there's an irritation or annoyance that bubbles up, but that annoyance is just a little piece of who they are instead of defining who they are. So an emotion can be a subset or small part, whereas a state or mood is the overall gestalt. Make sense?

Student 2: *A little bit.*

Gil: So, it's possible to have anger as a particular factor or function of the mind. And then it's possible to have anger as the overall atmosphere for our mind as well. But, the anger doesn't have to affect the attitude or atmosphere. So, that's the difference, but there is overlap there.

Now a comment about your meditation. You say that you found this hard. So the attitude that you were supposed to pay attention to is: "This is hard. I'm having a difficult time here. I'm struggling with this." Did you notice that?

Student 2: *Actually, I think 'hard' was a label I was putting on it after the fact. During the experience itself I was aware that I had been in a problem-solving pattern of thought all day, and I was still in that problem-solving pattern of thought. So, that's what I became aware of, and becoming aware of it was pleasant. But, I couldn't connect this experience with what you said before, and what you were trying to teach.*

Gil: Ok, it's not that easy to understand, not that easy for me to explain.

Still, you noticed not so much the overall mood, but that the overall momentum of the thinking mind was problem solving. And noticing that was pleasant, like [student 1] said. What was it like in and of itself to be involved in that problem solving? Was that pleasant itself?

Student 2: *No, it wasn't pleasant or unpleasant, but it was singular or narrow minded.*

Gil: So you could feel that your mood or attitude or overall way of being was kind of narrowed, and it was more pleasant to be aware. And in the state of awareness were you a little more expansive?

Student 2: Yes.

Gil: So you noticed that difference. Noticing differences is very helpful for the inner life of the mind. Because as we notice differences, almost naturally we can choose to go in directions that are healthy and helpful for us. So if you notice a difference between being narrowed down and expansive. A difference between caught up in something that's unpleasant, and a way of being aware that is pleasant, then I think it's a natural thing to go towards that which is more helpful.

So, the more distinctions we can make, the more we can move towards health and freedom.

Student 3: *One thing that was very powerful for me was when you mentioned that we have choices. I found the mood or attitude that was coming up for me, which is not new for me, is a kind of general tiredness. It's not perpetual, but there are certain times of certain days where I can just tell, "alright, I'm in that mode". In fact, I'm not a morning person so it's often in the morning. But sometimes it's the evening, like tonight. It's something that I've been aware of, but when I'm in that mode, it seems to take over. Just reminding myself that I'm in that mode, and I realize it, but I still have choices about actions*

that I take when I'm that space. That was very powerful for me. I'll have to see how to apply that in day to day living when I leave here tonight.

Gil: Great! If you have choice, you have more freedom.

Student 4: Does one have a choice, for example, to be angry or not?

Gil: Sometimes, you have a choice and sometimes it doesn't seem like you have a choice, but if you can be more mindful you would see there actually is a choice. Sometimes, who knows why we're angry? Or, maybe we had a choice at the first moment, but we didn't see it, and now it's so powerful that it has to just play itself out, the momentum has to unwind. Now that I'm angry, it's just "there".

So, it's an interesting question. I don't want to say that we always have choice about these things. But mindfulness shows us how we have more and more choice. Most people have a lot more choice than they realize. There is a lot more choice potentially available if we wake up more and see more clearly.

When I was in my 20s, when I felt attracted to some woman, I would fall in love periodically. I got really interested to see where the choice was. Where the decision was to fall in love, and if there was a decision. I had to be very attentive and be careful. The assumption is, "wow, it's chemistry, it just happened and I'm in love!". That there's no choice, that the person is so attractive. But if I really paid a lot of attention I could see that there was a certain degree of pleasure and satisfaction, and a feeling of something beautiful and nice. Then there would be a choice in my mind, "Oh, I want that. I want more of that. I want to be connected to that." And that choice would then translate into what might be called, "falling in love". But there was a choice, if I was quiet, still and concentrated enough to see. Falling in love, most people don't think it's a choice, they don't want it to be a choice. Because that's, "just the way things should be", until it sours. [laughs] "How did I do that? What was I thinking? I wish someone had showed me where the choice was!"

BRIEF GUIDED MEDITATION:

So, just for a moment if you will, please close your eyes. Just as you are, you don't have to change your posture... What would you say is your attitude right now? It doesn't have to be special or precise. What attitude is the one that's most operating for you right now?

Then, can you shift back and forth a few times, between being the attitude, being in the attitude, believing the attitude on the one hand, and then shifting to stepping out of the attitude and being mindful and knowing it's there. Being the watcher of it.

If you can do this, notice how different it feels to be in the attitude, believing the attitude vs. stepping back from it and just seeing it there.

Ok, open your eyes. Were some of you able to shift back and forth between those two modes of being? Did that make sense for some of you? Can you tell us what you noticed?

BACK TO QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS

Student 5: I noticed that the mood I was in was receptive. Then if I noticed myself being receptive, I'm detached from it. It felt pleasant to be receptive, I want to get information, knowledge and insight. It felt pleasant to be in it. Then out of it, it was not as pleasant because I was observing it. Then, I thought that you don't just selectively detach yourself from things depending on whether you like them or not.

Gil: There's nothing wrong with having pleasure and being in receptive mode. But, when we meditate, what we're trying to do is not cling or hold on to or indulge any particular thing. We don't want to indulge or linger in that attitude. It's good to be receptive, but if you're leaning into it or holding on to it, it's difficult to meditate. So with the stepping back, it doesn't have to go away, you just become aware of it. Oddly enough, you're in some ways more receptive when you're in this mindful state, even though in the short term it might seem less pleasant because you were being soothed by it or something.

Student 6: I noticed a very similar sensation. When I stepped back, I felt like there was an energetic color shift. When I was there in the feeling of openness and receptivity there was a clarity to it. When I stepped back and was a watcher, it felt as though I disassociated myself, and in that disassociation, the color changed, and I felt a "blueness". I don't know if that makes sense, but that was my experience.

Gil: So, some people are very visual, and some people experience things in color like that. Great! Thank you.

Student 7: I discovered that I was in a slightly depressed mood when I checked in, which was kind of surprising because I didn't think I was. It felt kind of heavy and kind of unpleasant. Then, when I did the shift, immediately, it was very light and airy. I could kind of look at this blob of depression as if it were on the floor, and I wasn't part of it. I was much more freed and it was kind of like that expansiveness that you were talking about.

Gil: Great, beautiful. Very nice. I remember once when I was driving back down here from San Francisco at 10 in the evening, and I had a horrible headache. I felt nauseous because it was really bad. I was driving and so miserable, "poor me, maybe I'm not going to make it, maybe I should pull over, it's so far to drive." Then after a while I thought, "Oh, Gil, you teach mindfulness, [laughs] maybe you should try it." So, I started bringing my mindfulness to what was going on, the pain, my self-pity and all these things. And as I did that, the pain didn't go away, but it was a lot easier to be with. Some of the nausea went away and I felt a lot better very quickly. It was quite dramatic in some ways. Once I started feeling some distance or freedom or spaciousness about it all, I got complacent, and let my mindfulness stop, and then the pain was still there, so it was again, "Oh poor Gil, it hurts so much, I feel so nauseous, Oh I should be mindful!" Then I'd pull up the mindfulness again, and I could manage just fine. It was fun to watch this kind of movement of losing my mindfulness and bringing it back up. It was really consequential in that situation, because I got home fine.

Student 8: So how do you know if you're disassociating or detaching.

Gil: In Buddhist English we don't use the word detached, we use the word non-attached. I don't know exactly why, but detached has a negative connotation, where non-attached is not supposed to be negative connotation. I don't know what you feel [about that wording]. Disassociated means that you're not connected to what's going on. It means you're really separated and aloof, and there is a wall between you and it. You're shut down, somehow. Probably if you're disassociated, you're not connected to your body; you're not connected to your emotions.

When you're mindful and not attached, there's this dual thing that goes on. It's a little bit hard in language to describe this. It's like two things are happening at once. One is that there is an increased intimacy and feeling of connection to what's happening. And, at the same time, there's a feeling of being independent of what we're connected to. So, we're really there, and we're also free of what's there.

If you're too much the observer, too much stepped back, too far away, then we lose that sense of connection. But if we're too connected and involved, then there's no wisdom and understanding there. So as we get less attached, less preoccupied, or caught up by things, then the way in which "caught-upness" or attachment or clinging or agitation of the mind which clouds our experience, separates us from the experience, squeezes the experience... all of that falls away, then there's a clear perception, a clear and cleaner contact with what's going on. That cleaner contact can feel quite intimate.

But still, that intimacy feels independent of what you're aware of. So the sense of being an observer gives a sense of independence. So, both are kind of going on. Does that make sense?

Student 8: It begins to make sense; I think I'll just sit with it.

Gil: When we're mindful of something, we use the language of being an observer, for example. But you don't want to be too much in the watching mode. You also want to feel the experience. So, some meditation teachers will avoid any language associated with seeing. Like, "watch your experience, observe your experience". Because it lends itself to being separated from your experience in a way that sometimes is not so helpful. So instead they'll use language like "feel your experience, sense your experience, rest in the experience" to bring that close together. But that language sometimes doesn't allow people to be independent of the experience, to see it in greater clarity and be present.

If you're going to err, I would err on the side of feeling instead of seeing. We want to be connected to what's happening.

Student 9: This is only the third time I've tried this so I'm really new to it all. What I did notice is one of the first times I've ever felt this: I got this sense of pleasant drift. It was like jumping into a great big feather bed on a cold night and getting really comfortable and cozy. But, then I also noticed as the meditation went on, [I started with that pleasant sensation, but as you mentioned the various feelings, like being tired, I seemed to begin to feel each one of them that you mentioned.]

Gil: I should have ended with, "Am I happy?" [laugh]

Student 9: So the question is, what am I really? Or am I being whatever is suggested?

Gil: It might be, especially if you were in a very relaxed floating mode, the power of suggestion can be quite strong, and just saying a word can invoke that state. Or it might be "all of the above" but you're selecting out of the collection of things as you hear the words. A person can be both tired and excited and happy and eager and all those things can be true. Also, if I say the word "eager", I trigger the eagerness that wasn't there before and the suggestion can evoke it. If you're more relaxed some people are more suggestible in the relaxed state. That's why in hypnosis, the power of suggestion is so strong.

In mindfulness meditation, we don't want to use suggestion to evoke anything. This is just an exercise here to give you some sense. It's really the opposite of evoking or suggesting or making something happen, it's more the noticing what is happening. As you continue, you'll just notice what's happening, and it will clarify and become clearer for you in a sense, who you are and what's going on. It will give you a kind of ballast, grounding or centering in the midst of all of the changes that go on in your life. The awareness will offer clarity or stability that lets you not be swept away by things. Does that make sense?

Student 9: Yes.

So, in terms of meditation practice, the overall attitude or state of being that you have when you sit down to meditate will also affect your meditation and how it unfolds. It will affect how you relate to the meditation and what's going on as the meditation proceeds. So, if you don't pay attention and you sit down to meditation without noticing, "Oh, I'm grumpy", then somehow that grumpiness can keep affecting you as you go along and derail you from your meditation. But if you notice, "I'm grumpy", then you take that into account, and you'll be much more likely to notice when the mind drifts off into grumpy kind of thoughts and catch it and come back. You might notice how much your mood affects what you want, and how you respond to different things that happen as you meditate.

Taking into account the overall state that you have while you meditate might actually make the meditation easier, even if the overall state might be unpleasant. Because then, you can factor that in to help you stay on track.

Student 10: If you have an emotion, you label it, and give it room. Do you do the same thing for an overall mood or state?

Gil: Yes, you can do that, it's fascinating to do it. Especially if it's strong. Sometimes there are very strong states of mind, consciousness or being that are so clearly there, that you want to bring mindfulness to it. Even if it's not that strong, sometimes it's useful to just explore it a little bit, and hold it in awareness. Especially if you feel like it's influencing you a lot, then you want to stop and be present for it for a while, feel it, feel how big it is. Does it feel like it's as big as your body? Sometimes, certain states feel like they're actually bigger than your body, "Oh, look at that! I didn't realize it was that big."

Student 10: [Sometimes a mood] feels huge and dark.

Gil: So, then you can feel the hugeness of it, "how big is it?" and "how dark can it really be?" Just feel it, and be with it. What happens when I feel the hugeness and darkness and be present for that and see what happens. It can be fun.

BACK TO TALK:

What I'm trying to convey today, mindfulness of the mind, attitude, mood that might be there. It's a little bit hard to convey. So some of you might be confused by this, or it might not make a lot of sense. If that's the case, don't worry about it.

To just do the first week's instructions of coming back to your breath and being with your breath is enough for a year of meditation practice. Just doing that is very significant and helpful. Exploring that first week's instructions as you go forward for awhile, might actually be better than racing through these six weeks the way we're doing. Or it might be that the first and second week, just doing that is enough. It's simple, it's straightforward... being aware of the breath and being aware of what's going on in the body, going back and forth that's enough.

So if you find this is getting too complicated, "boy this Gil guy he says, breath then body then emotions, then thoughts, then this strange thing called overall state, and there's so much to pay attention to here, I feel like I'm juggling while I'm meditating, how am I ever going to get relaxed? I can't even remember it all!" So if it's like that, just forget it all, and go back just to your breathing. The breathing is the default. Stay with your breathing, stay with your breathing, until some of these other realms or experiences become so glaringly obvious that you go, "Oh, I better pay attention to this." So, if emotion becomes so clear, then you can do what I'm talking about. But you don't have to be wondering, what am I supposed to be doing now?

Go back to your breath, be with your breath, trust your breath. It might be at some point as you go along, that these instructions about the attitude or overall atmosphere or state of being is helpful because it becomes so glaringly present. One interesting place it becomes very present and is useful and important to notice is when your meditation gets really strong.

Strong states of meditation primarily are characterized by very strong changes in our overall mood, atmosphere, attitude, state of mind or state of being. Very radically different states of being than we normally would be walking down the street, going to work. And we say, "Wow, this is a whole different state of being I'm in. Gil talked about that different state of being. Let me feel this." Then, bring mindfulness, and be attentive to that. Then it might be obvious and useful.

So, I'm laying out the instructions here, but you don't have to memorize it all, or second-guess where you're supposed to be. If it's not obvious, then be with the breath. Make sense? That way it's really simple. It's supposed to be simple.

If it's not simple it's not mindfulness.

If you're saying, "what should I do next, am I supposed to be digging in here, stepping back, and looking at it, am I supposed to be feeling it?" That's not simple. If you're making things that complicated, then very simply notice how complicated it's gotten, and just go back to the breathing and be with the breath.

So, thank you very much for today!

Mindfulness of the Quality of the Heart-Mind (Week 5 – optional)

Transcribed and Lightly Edited from a Talk by Gil Fronsdal on 11/4/07

So I just mentioned that my Introduction to Mindfulness Class, with this Wednesday being the last evening, is somewhat unusual in that I'm teaching a sixth week. Usually the Intro Class is five weeks long but this time around I was inspired to add one week to it. So I would like to talk about what I added. Some of you have taken the Intro Class and you would have missed this part of the introduction because I didn't teach it before.

As I think many of you know, the basic idea of mindfulness is to learn to pay attention to what is happening in the present moment. And for many people, it's a challenge to really maintain attention in the present moment, in the lived experience, in the experience of life as we're living it. There is such a strong tendency of the mind to relive the past, or rehearse the future, or be in fantasy about the present. And to really have a quality presence, a stable here—to really notice what is happening here—is somewhat unusual. And even for people who are in the present moment fairly well—for instance, many of you probably were pretty well in the present moment driving here; if you drove here, you couldn't be too far away from what was happening—but the quality of that attention may not be as strong as it's possible to be. And one of the things we're trying to do in mindfulness practice is to strengthen the capacity for the attention to be stabilized in the present moment so we can see much more clearly what is here.

So when we teach mindfulness, we often teach about some of the areas of your life that you could pay attention to. It is kind of like giving a map of the terrain of a territory, and once you have the map it is easier to find your way in it. We could just give the instructions very briefly and say "Pay attention," but that's pretty vague. What are you supposed to pay attention to? So we draw the map and the map we give here at IMC in the Intro Class generally begins with mindfulness of breathing. Mindfulness of breathing is a very good place to stabilize and train the attention to be in the present moment. Your breathing is always in the present moment.

Then the next instruction has to do with mindfulness of the body and the body is also always in the present. Your body is not going to be anywhere else, so if you are connected to your body, you are connected to the present moment. And much of our life is expressed through our body so being embodied is a very helpful practice for cultivating attention. It's also an antidote to the idea that attention or mindfulness is all about the mind—some disembodied kind of attention. A lot of the attention or awareness we are cultivating could be said to be mediated through the body. The Zen master Dogen talked about the four foundations of mindfulness and he said "Mindfulness of the body is the body's mindfulness." So it's not so much that you're mindful of the body as it is that the body itself has a sensitivity and awareness. And then in the third week I usually talk about mindfulness of feelings or emotions; a huge part of human life. Then the fourth week is mindfulness of thinking.

So the way I often teach is that these four areas are part of the terrain; the territory being pointed to. What I added this time around was another area that is not just another thing for the mind to focus on. Rather it is, in a sense, to turn the attention around and notice the mind itself—not just the content of the mind, the thoughts and the feelings or something like that—but to turn around and actually look at the quality of the mind, the mood of the mind, the state that the mind is in. And sometimes it's not so easy to notice the overall state or mood or quality of the mind because we are focusing so much on the details of what's happening. If there is something that we really want, we might be focusing on the thing that we want. If there is something we're trying to avoid, we may be focusing on avoiding that thing. But we don't pay attention to the quality of the mind. Maybe this is somewhat like if you take your hand and want to grasp something because you really want that thing or if you want to push that thing away. You're

focusing on what you are trying to accomplish, not the degree of tension in your hand. And so you might be surprised at the end of the day at how tired your hand is because there might have been a lot of extra effort in the hand in grasping or pushing away. But if you paid attention to what's happening in the hand, the quality of the muscles in the hands, you might notice: "Oh, there's a lot of extra tension in the way I grasp or in the way I push. Maybe I didn't need to do it that way." Or "I didn't even notice I was grasping, look at that." And so you're turning away from the objects you want or don't want and looking at the quality of the mind.

Now to get at this in a little different way: I like to say that there are two things always happening in any given moment. There is what is happening, which is the definition of mindfulness; paying attention to what is happening in the present moment. And there's also your relationship to what's happening. So in almost everything that's going on, we have a relationship to what's going on. We're for it or against it. We have some opinions, judgments, ideas about what's happening. We bring ourself as a certain kind of individual, a sense of self, self-identity. We measure what's happening according to how it benefits us or how it takes away from us. We come with some motivation, some attitude, something we want. It can be quite beautiful. It could be that what we want is compassion; we want to help someone. So that's the attitude; that's the relationship we have. Someone's suffering and we want to help. Or we see the beautiful bell here at IMC and think, "I want that bell." There's the sound of the bell, and the relationship to it is "I want," "I want something." So in almost every possible thing we could pay attention to, we can notice that there is also embedded in that, or holding that, or entangled with it, is the way we relate to it, our attitude to it, the way we approach it, what we want, and how we are motivated in relationship to it. And so to turn the attention around or take a backwards step and look: "What's the relationship I have to this experience?" Or "What's the attitude I have toward the experience?" And that attitude can be in relationship to the specific aspect of what is happening here and now.

So I'm driving on the freeway and the traffic is slowed down—that's what's happening. And then there's the attitude about slowed traffic on the freeway. And that attitude might be specific to that particular day. I might be late to get somewhere. So there could be the attitude of irritation: "The world is holding me up. Doesn't the world realize I'm an important person, and I have important places to go?" Or it might be that the attitude comes with a long history of being stuck in traffic on 101. So there is the frustration of having this repeated problem with the traffic. The added frustration is there as well. So it's not just what's specific to today but it has to do with the much bigger picture of what is happening. And if we don't notice the attitude we have to what's happening, then that attitude can be there and fester. It can build up stress and tension. And one of the things many of you can realize is that when relatively mild tension or stress is chronically held or chronically reinforced throughout the day, it can build and build and build. And even though it is innocent enough in the moment having it build up all through the day can result at the end of the day in a lot of tension or a headache.

So there is a specific attitude and the same thing in meditation practice. And in meditation practice, in particular, I've found that for many people and also for myself, I can be very focused on the instructions: "I'm supposed to be with the breath. Oh there is a pain. Oh I have to be with the pain, pay attention to the pain. Oh there's an emotion. I'm supposed to be with the emotion, that's what I was told to do. Pay attention to the emotion, feel that emotion. Oh there's thinking. Look at thinking." So I'm engaged in focusing in this way and it might not occur to me to turn around and look at how I'm focusing. What is the attitude with the focus? Because the way of focusing is not the practice, the practice is to look at the breath, right? But actually how we're looking, how we're paying attention, how we're present, the attitude that comes with it, is a very important part of the mindfulness practice. And I've known a lot of people for whom, especially on longer retreats, it becomes obvious that they have an attitude about how to be mindful or how to pay attention which is a little bit off. And in practicing half an hour or an hour every morning meditating at home, that little attitude, the stresses of that attitude, the fault, the weakness of that attitude, does not stand out enough. But try meditating all day for several days in a row or a week and the weak links begin to crack or break.

So I've had the experience on my early retreats where I went in with an attitude about meditation that was "Me, me, the great doer, the great agent, the great successful meditator. I am in charge here and I'm going to get concentrated and I'm going to focus on the breath and really zero in." I'd been meditating at home for 40 minutes at a time and basically I was kind of stressed out and just the fact that I stopped and wasn't running around with my life was relaxing. I just was unwinding a little bit. And I took credit for it because "I'm the one who is meditating, I'm the good concentrator, look what I did." But I didn't do anything. I just stopped and my muscles relaxed. So I took credit for it. Then I would go on retreat and that initial relaxing would settle away and the attitude of "Me! I'm supposed to concentrate. I'm the one who concentrates," was still operating. And that attitude just didn't work for getting settled, getting peaceful, really being present in a quality way. And so on retreat this stood out and was highlighted for me in a very painful way. It didn't occur to me to turn the attention around and look at my attitude. And so in my unfortunate circumstances, I had to burn and crash. Meditation is not usually associated with burning and crashing but you know I burned and crashed finally because I was trying so hard to push and push and trying to focus. The more I tried, the less it worked, and so finally I just gave up. And when I gave up that's when the meditation started. That's when it began unfolding for me.

So that's a rather unfortunate story to illustrate that it is possible to ignore the attitude because you're trying to accomplish something. I think that meditation practice unfolds much more peacefully, much more smoothly, if periodically (not every minute) you turn around and see: "What's my attitude? What's my approach? What's my relationship to the meditation? What's my relationship to the breath, to myself, as I'm doing this?" Include that in the field of what's happening. And the relationship and attitude we have is also connected to the overall state of the mind.

And I would say that in Buddhist spirituality, the heart of Buddhism, is not so much about what is happening in terms of the breath, the feelings, the thoughts, or about sounds or whatever we say that's happening. The heart of Buddhism really lies in the relationship we have to whatever is happening. That means that, at least in a sense, we're not trying to change what's happening. We're trying to discover a new relationship that is healthy, wholesome, and ultimately a relationship that is liberated or freed. So we're always trying to go back and look, that's where the heart of it is—in the relationship. The relationship we have, the attitude we have to what is going on, is so central to who we are that, in my interpretation of the teachings of the Buddha, this is called "the mind." The mind is characterized by this attitude or relationship we have to our experience.

The word for mind or mind-state is "citta" and citta in Buddhist language also means heart or it can mean heart-mind or mind-heart. I like this because if you say mind; for some people that doesn't seem very warm. But if you say heart; for people that is core or central to who they want to be, who they are. Citta is central to the third foundation of mindfulness that the Buddha taught. The third foundation of mindfulness was not thinking or emotions. (Some people think that I'm teaching the Four Foundations of Mindfulness when I teach breath, body, feelings, and thoughts in the Intro Class. That is not actually the case, even though there happen to be four.) The Buddha has different foundations and the third foundation of mindfulness for the Buddha is mindfulness of the citta or the mind-state, the overall state or attitude that characterizes the mind. And that attitude is sometimes specific to a particular event but sometimes an attitude of the mind is actually much more like a disposition that we carry with us regardless of what's happening in the moment. So there might be an attitude of impatience. Regardless of where you go that sense of impatience is there with you. Or there might be an attitude of aversion and so no matter where we are that aversion is there. And perhaps even though a particular moment is characterized by desire or delight in a particular thing, the background mood is still there—a background mood of aversion. It may be masked for the moment, but give it half a chance and it will resurface. There could be a background mood of compassion or kindness that may not be operating in the moment because it is superseded by something in the moment. But if that thing in the moment goes away then the background attitude comes back to this default of compassion. So where does the mind go as a default? What's the background attitude that we have? And this background attitude is for some people at the heart of what makes them tick; what motivates their life; and for many people, what causes suffering. It is where people are trapped

or caught in their suffering or in their life. So to turn around and look at the attitude is not just to look at the attitude of the moment but if you are stable and calm and begin to look clearly, it begins to surface and show an underlying attitude that might be very pervasive.

When I taught this subject in my Intro Class on Wednesday, there was someone who spoke up and said that he was surprised to realize that fear or anxiety was always there for him. He had no idea. He knew there was an issue in his life around anxiety, but he had no idea that it was always there. And that's not uncommon for people to come and tell me that they were surprised to discover a background attitude or mood. Sometimes what's there in the background is not so healthy or helpful. It also can be connected to a belief—a belief about what the world is like. It can be a belief that the world is a threatening a place, or a belief that to be successful in life you have to have a lot of things, or you have to look smart, or you have to look beautiful, or people have to like you, or a belief that the world is here to serve you or the world is here to benefit you. The attitude is often connected to beliefs about ourselves.

So in the teachings of the Buddha, it is the third foundation of mindfulness that focuses on this quality of the mind, the state of the mind, or the overall mood. So the way that this is talked about in the ancient instruction is: “How does a person abide mindful of the mind as mind? Here a person understands mind affected by lust as mind affected by lust and the mind unaffected by lust as a mind unaffected by lust.” Lust can be expanded to include greed or craving or desire. So there can be a strong desire that is not just a desire of the moment, the particular thing in the mind, but actually colors the whole mind. The whole mind is suffused with this attitude of desire, a background of desire, filled with desire. You can see people sometimes and notice “Wow, that person's on fire with lust. Look at that! It's so obvious, and he doesn't even realize it.” So it's not just simply a desire that arises for the moment but a desire that colors the whole state. So it's possible to know for oneself when craving or clinging or lust is present and to know when it's not. “One understands a mind affected by hate as mind affected by hate and the mind unaffected by hate as a mind unaffected by hate.”

So there is a dichotomy being looked at; the presence and absence; either it's there or it's not there. You can't be partially pregnant they say. So either there is desire in the mind or there's not desire. There's not partial desire because partial desire is desire. The instruction here is simply to notice the presence and absence of these things. And it's very instructive that it doesn't say “Notice the mind is characterized by lust, and then criticize yourself for that.” It doesn't say “Notice the mind is filled with hate and then hate yourself for that, or justify the hatred.” It is very simple—just notice the presence and absence. And there is an advantage in noticing the absence. Absence is kind of a strange thing, because absence is like nothing is there, right? You're supposed to pay attention to what's there. But if something has been present for a while—a strong mood or mental state or attitude—it's very helpful or instructive to get a sense of what the mind feels like when it's not there. And for one thing, knowing when it's not there, really recognizing, “Oh it's not there now” reinforces the value of it not being there. Perhaps you can feel that when the mind is not driven by hate, when the hate is no longer there, there is a higher quality of mind. It's a more satisfying mind, a more peaceful mind. And so it's nice to see what the mind is like when it's not filled with hate. Then when the hate reappears, that contrast helps to highlight it, helps you understand more deeply what's going on. Also, the more you can appreciate the absence of something, the more it's like getting a massage. You're getting used to the experience of not being caught in the grip of a particular mood or attitude.

So then it goes on and says “One understands a mind affected by delusion is a mind affected by delusion, and a mind unaffected by delusion as a mind unaffected by delusion, and one understands a contracted mind as a contracted mind and a distracted mind as a distracted mind.” So it's possible to sit down to meditate for example, and realize, “Wow, my mind is really distracted.” And 5 minute later “Oh, yeah, I'm really distracted today. That was 5 minutes where I wasn't even present.” So then you can get curious. What does a distracted mind feel like? And this is as opposed to criticizing and pushing it away and “Oh I'm not supposed to be distracted, I'm supposed to be focused on the breath.” Maybe the breath is not the point. The important place now is to turn the attention around to look at the quality of the mind

or the heart and see “Oh, the quality is one of distractibility, of being contracted, being scattered, being fragmented.” And then to take that in because taking it in, feeling it, being present for it, helps us to not be caught in the midst of it, caught in the grip of it. Taking it in is, in some degree, healing. And the way I like to describe that is that if we give our system space, air, room, then things have a chance to unfold, unravel, dissolve, evolve in whatever way that they are supposed to evolve, dissolve, unravel. But if we’re claustrophobic in the mind, if we’re so preoccupied and concerned, upset, and pushing it away, and lost in thought, there’s no room for things to unwind. And mindfulness has the function of creating room in the mind, space in the mind. So if you notice, “Oh this is a distracted mind” and you step back and make room for that and stay present and feel what that is like, then you are making room and perhaps that distracted mind can settle itself, can relax.

And then it goes on: “One understands an exalted mind as exalted mind and an unexalted mind as an unexalted mind.” And exalted mind is translated as a mind that is starting to get concentrated and is coming into a little bit of an altered state. Not in its normal state of being distracted or preoccupied, the mind has become spacious, light, open, soft, and malleable. So the quality of the mind is beginning to shift to a higher quality of heart or mind. And you can know “Oh this is a good quality.” And I would say, the most precious thing that any of us has is the quality of our mind, the good quality of our mind or our heart. And the most beautiful thing that I’ve ever seen in this universe of ours is not art, is not some beautiful thing in nature, not looking deep into the galaxies in the beautiful way we can these days. But rather, the most beautiful thing I’ve seen is the purified heart, the liberated heart, a settled, peaceful heart. And I think that’s something that all of us have access to, something that is a possibility for all of us.

I remember a little story. When I went to Nepal to practice I had very little money. I think I had \$300 to my name. There I was in Nepal to practice. I’d gone to Asia for the duration. It was the end of the line for me. Nothing else had any meaning for me. I was gone to practice. And the teacher that I wanted to practice with was doing a month-long retreat in Nepal and so I went there to practice with him with my \$300. I had a few days to wait before the retreat started so I was walking around Kathmandu. In Kathmandu, they have these kind of tourist shops that sell a lot of Buddhist art. And in the windows is Buddhist art and there was one window where there was a statue of the Buddha that really spoke to me. It really struck me. It was \$100. And so I went around for a couple of days, “Should I buy it? It really speaks to me. It’s meaningful for me.” So I was going around debating in my mind about spending a third of my wealth to buy a Buddha. “That seems too much.” So I was wandering. Then lo and behold out of the blue something happened. I made a phone call back to Berkeley where my girlfriend lived and her roommate said, “Oh. She left yesterday for Nepal to be with you.” I said, “Oh. Kathmandu is big.” How do you find Gil? How was she supposed to find me? And so I went out to the airport and put a big note on the bulletin board hoping that she’d see it. And eventually we were connected. So she showed up but she had even less money than I did. And so here we were, the two of us in Kathmandu, and me thinking about buying this Buddha. And then my decision was that I would not buy the Buddha because the most beautiful thing I knew was a purified heart. And I would save my money to help her so she could practice in Asia. I think that’s a nice story!

So to know the beauty of one’s own heart. So to be the caretaker, the custodian of your own heart, of your own mind. To take it seriously. It’s a really precious resource, a precious part of who we are, and it’s very easy to take it for granted. It’s very easy to lose touch with it. It’s easy to get caught up in the day-to-day concerns. Even in meditation it’s easy to get caught up in the ideas we have about what’s supposed to be happening and to get caught up trying to accomplish something and to not take in, or stay aware of, the quality of this heart-mind that’s always here. The heart-mind always has a quality, almost always has an attitude, and almost always has a relationship to the details or to the big picture. There is an attitude or relationship to life itself or what our life is about or who we are. So to inquire what is this attitude, what is this relationship that we have, what is this quality of mind-heart that’s here. And then it’s important to remember that the instructions that the Buddha gave place no emphasis whatsoever on judging or criticizing or being upset with what you see. It’s really a phenomenal thing, it’s really an

amazing thing, to just see how it is to be present and to see clearly. It's so phenomenal to see clearly without judgment, without criticism, without trying to change it. I understand that kind of seeing as a kind of love, so even if what we see within us is unfortunate and maybe does not speak very well about who we are or what's going on, there's a way of being present for that, seeing it, and allowing it to be there. Seeing it very clearly, and not being caught in it is actually an act of love in relationship to what we see. And slowly, I believe that what will happen is that we keep coming back, and trying to find that place of being present, and seeing the attitude that we have. We step back and we see the attitude, a very little bit at first perhaps. We're stepping out of the gravitational pull, out of the orbit of that attitude. We're not caught by it and the act of seeing helps us to step out of it and because we're not in it, the unhealthy attitudes and approaches begin to settle away, relax away, and amazingly enough, as we step back, the beautiful qualities of the mind-heart have a chance to shine and grow and become bigger and bigger. One of the miracles of the human heart is that the act of attention—careful steady, ongoing mindfulness—has a way of unraveling those forces in the heart that cause suffering, and tends to augment or feed or nourish those forces in the heart that are the best in us.

So your attitude, your relationship, and the quality of your mind are part of the introductory instructions in mindfulness. So we have a few minutes. Does anyone have any questions or comments? Now I wonder what attitude is out there. What relationship do you have with this?

Student 1: *Thank you. So I get what you're saying and why it's important. What I don't get is how you examine the attitude except maybe through the first four things. Maybe by becoming aware of those things, you can understand or get that attitude.*

Gil: Great. Thank you. Yes, I think that the more that we've cultivated mindfulness of breath, body, emotions, and thoughts, the more access we have to noticing the attitude. The attitude is often in some degree being manifested through those things. So the more embodied we are, the more we can notice the feeling tone. So these instructions are all closely connected. But for some people it is possible, if they are sensitive enough, to turn around and look at the quality of the mindfulness. Being mindful and noticing what's here sometimes comes together with baggage. Being mindful sometimes comes together with other approaches or attitudes. So there might be a sense of trying to push, or of pressure in the mind, or resistance, or "Oh no, I don't want to pay attention to that." So a feeling of pulling back. Or the mind is contracted. Sometimes I feel like my mind is really tight and small, it's caught up in a little world of concerns. Sometimes my mind is bigger than this room. It's like "Wow, I can handle anything. Bring it on. It's so big, there's space for everything." And that sense of space is there. Is that helpful?

Student 2: *Kind of on the same topic of the contracted versus the expanded mind: It's easy to be expanded when you are in a group like this. People are positive and you're talking about purified mind and you can get in the mood and really feel it. And then you go visit some friends who are making \$20,000 a year and they're really struggling. And you're trying to say "But if you just had a purified mind you would be happy." It's really hard to maintain that sense of openness and beauty when people are really suffering. So you feel like pulling in and not sharing because you're going to make them feel bad or inadequate. How do you maintain the expansiveness when other people are suffering?*

Gil: So again, we want to look at our attitude. It could be that we have a wonderful, expansive mind and the attitude towards that expansive mind is "I want to keep this. I want this. This is important. I finally got it. And everyone should have this." There can be an attitude like that. So I think for you, rather than trying to maintain it, I think what's more important is to bring mindfulness to what's happening for you in those kinds of situations. What attitudes, what relationship do you have, to their pain, their suffering, their demands? What attitude and relationship to where you're at? What beliefs do you have connected to it? Try to understand what's going on with you.

Probably there's a lot to unpack, to understand about yourself, in that relationship. And it might take awhile to unpack everything that's going on but until you unpack it you might not be able to go into those situations without being pulled into something or getting hooked. So how are you getting hooked? For me, one of the ways I've gotten hooked plenty of times is my sense of responsibility, my Achilles heel, my sense of responsibility. I'm responsible somehow for this person's well-being so I have to get in there, adjust, and fix. So I've had to learn to have an appropriate sense of responsibility. Partly, for me, that's meant to back away from feeling responsible for other peoples' suffering. I can try to be helpful but I'm not responsible.

Student 2: *But can you go into that situation—for example, you know that if they had a better understanding of finances and how to plan their money better, they would do better and they would feel better. But they aren't ready for that, so you say "Well okay I can't help them." Can you still feel compassionate and mindful of their suffering if you make the decision that you can't help them?*

Gil: If you really can't help them, you would feel a lot better accepting that as fact than trying to help them knowing you can't. Right? So yes, you could still have a lot of compassion and care for them but realize regardless of your care and compassion and your willingness to help you can't help right now. I can't help them figure out their finances, but what can I do? Maybe it's enough to be there and empathic with them. Maybe it's enough to tell them "This is really hard. I'm sorry for you." Maybe it's enough just to sit there on the couch with them and cry. This is really hard and no one's every cried with them. "Oh, this is more serious than I thought. Maybe I better do something; someone's crying."

So the Buddhist practice that's most connected to what you're talking about here is equanimity. And the practice of equanimity is the practice of staying balanced or non-reactive in a situation where we can't make a difference. We have to realize that other people are responsible for their choices and even if we're trying to help or even if we have other wishes for them, we're not going to be caught, reactively, by the choices they make.

Student 2: *Then the last piece. How do you truly convince yourself you're trying because saying "I can't" is always easier because then you can stop. How do you convince yourself that you really, honestly are being expansive and have done the most you can do, rather than "Well, I tried for a couple of hours and that's the most I feel like for today so now I'll decide I can't and so I'll quit."*

Gil: It's hard. I wish there were easy solutions to life and I think that sometimes it takes a lot of attention to ourselves. I think the more mindful you are, the more you can pick up the cues in your own heart and mind to know what's going on with you. And so at least you're not messing up the scene or yourself. You're coming as clean as you can be to the situation. That's helpful. Try to do your work. And it sometimes takes years to be clean enough to go into very difficult situations. And so then it's a matter of trying to do the very best we can. And sometimes doing the best we can, we do together with help from others. So you're asking here, but perhaps going for a walk with a friend, or talking with a therapist about these kinds of dynamics. Try to get to the bottom of some of the important issues for you before you enter into a difficult situation. There's a lot of things that can be done, and doing them depends on how much time and homework you want to do. Sounds like an important one. Sounds really tricky and difficult and it sounds like it could be really rich for you. It sounds like potentially a great opportunity for you to delve into some of the core beliefs that you have, and that affect the quality of your own heart.

So we should stop now. If some of you would like to come and talk afterwards, that will be fine. I'll stay a little bit. So I hope that each of you can appreciate how beautiful your heart is when it's really left alone. Thank you.

Mindfulness of Daily Life (Week 6)

Transcribed and Lightly Edited - from a Talk by Gil Fronsdal 2/13/08

Question: *My mind drifts a lot with my eyes shut, it's easier to focus with my eyes open, I've been trying to do a little bit of both during sessions. Is this good... bad?*

Gil: Either is fine, whatever works best for you. Some people teach this practice with keeping the eyes open or half-open not looking at anything in particular. I know for me it's been better at times keeping them open. Whatever works best for you is fine. Chances are as a person gets more concentrated or still, it works a little better to be able to reduce the sensory input that comes through the eyes. You can get quite concentrated with the eyes open, but the more concentrated you get, it's natural to close your eyes and get more absorbed in the focus of concentration. If you are listening to a sound in the distance, it's natural to close your eyes to listen to a faint sound in the distance.

For some people the instructions I'm giving here these last five weeks can seem like a lot to keep track of and a lot of doing. It can seem as if the instructions are prescriptive, that I'm prescribing what you're supposed to do. "I have to keep track of all these things in my body, my breath, my feelings, my thoughts, my attitude now. Give me a break! All this stuff! There's all this doing!" The instructions are not meant to be so much prescriptive; they're meant more to be descriptive. Meaning that if you're present, these are the areas of your life that you will tend to notice. It is up to you to understand it. It's up to you to be open and to be really here. Then you will notice your breath, your body, your feelings, your thoughts and hopefully your attitude as well as the mind.

The classic Buddhist description for a human being or the metaphor for a human being is a one-room house. The one room house has five windows and a door. In Buddhism there are six sense doors: the five sense doors we have in the West and then Buddhism posits a sixth sense door which is a sense door that perceives what goes on in our minds, our thoughts. The house has five windows and a door. Imagine that in the middle of the house there is an easy chair and you're sitting there. You are sitting there quite relaxed and at ease; nothing to do, nothing to get, nothing to be, just sitting there. The windows are open and the door is open. Coming in front of the door is a stray cat. It peeks its head in the door and then goes away. A bird lands in the windowsill, looks at you and flies away. A squirrel runs across the door and you see the deer in the yard or something. Various animals come and go. The neighbors walk by. They all come and go.

You could stay in your easy chair and just watch what comes to the door. Or you could get up and follow something out into the yard. Or you can get up and peer out the door; "What's out there?" You can get involved with what's out there. The instructions for meditation is to just stay in your easy chair and let things simply appear at whatever door or window they appear in. Let them be there. Notice them when they're there and when they go away, let them go. The emphasis is on being at ease. You're not trying to accomplish anything; you're not trying to force your meditation to become anything, but staying at ease and allowing things just to occur in an easy way.

All kinds of things will happen. There will be a sound outside, let the sound come to you; you don't have to go to it. An itch will occur, let the itch arise. You don't have to do anything about it, just let it be there, be present for it, see it when it's there. A thought arises, just be aware of the thought. A sensation in your body arises, be there for that. The trick is to try to stay in your easy chair. Some people can't stay there. They are so restless or so eager to fix things or do things or accomplish things that they'll get up and get engaged. Some people have other strategies: they just turn the chair around and face the wall. They don't want to deal with anything, even what comes through the door. The idea is to stay present.

When something is at the door or window, be really present for it, take it in, allow it to be there, offer your presence to it. When it goes away, let it go away.

The analogy of sitting in an easy chair doesn't work so well if the mind is really scattered, if the mind is wandering off in thought all the time. You need to have some kind of stability in order to stay in that easy chair. That's why we use the breath as the foundation of meditation practice. One of the functions of the breath is to create stability and help the mind calm down and help the mind not be so scattered running around after all these thoughts. It may take a while for the mind to calm down. Once the mind has calmed down, you metaphorically take the easy chair and allow things to arise and pass as they wish.

In our tradition, we call this **choiceless awareness**. You don't choose what arises, you don't choose what you pay attention to, once you're here and present you allow, choicelessly, whatever arises to be there. You're not in conflict with anything. You're not trying to manipulate anything or hold on to anything; just letting things be. In that radical letting-things-be, you let yourself be. Many people don't have much experience with letting themselves just be. We're always trying to fix ourselves or improve ourselves or defend ourselves or whatever. Just be. Then the meditation practice unfolds and deepens with that sense of beingness.

GUIDED MEDITATION

So, let's try it. Take a meditative posture. It is just a metaphor that you sit back in an easy chair. You're supposed to take a good, alert posture for this. Part of the reason for that is that in the long term, you can actually get more relaxed in your body if you have an upright posture than you can if you lean against the easy chair. It is counterintuitive, but it's the case. Be a little bit careful with your posture. Notice your spine and let your spine be a little bit straighter, more alert and upright than maybe you would have it. Some people find it help to wiggle or rock back and forth a little bit when they first sit down to help settle into your body, be connected to your body.

And because after a busy day people's minds are often scattered, preoccupied, there's a number of things we can do to help us arrive here and now. And one of those things is to take a few long slow deep breaths, using the big in-breaths as a way of connecting to yourself physically. As you exhale more fully, relax, let go. As you exhale, settle in to your body, settle into your seat or chair. One of the things we're trying to do is have our mind and body be at the same place at the same time. If you're thinking about earlier today or what's happening tomorrow, into fantasyland, and your mind we say is elsewhere, not here where the body is. You can't bring your body to the past or the future, what we can do is bring the mind here into the body so they are coordinated, they are working together. Mind and body in the same place at the same time. Then letting yourself breathe normally. It can be helpful to scan through your body to see if there are any obvious places you can soften or relax. You can soften your belly, so the belly hangs forward. Some people find it helpful to soften around the shoulders and the shoulder blades. If there is any holding in the area of the heart, you can soften around that. Some people carry tension in their face, their jaw, their forehead. Relax it if you can. If you can't relax it, maybe you can soften around it.

Keeping your spine upright, see if from the inside you can set yourself at ease. Set yourself at ease in your body. At least be easy with any discomfort there is in the body. Let yourself be at ease in your mind. If you are uneasy in some way, try to ease up. Hold it lightly, the discomforts of your mind.

Then connect to your breathing. Notice how your body experiences breathing. See if you can hang in there. Tracking one breath after another. Allowing the breathing to help settle you, quiet you, bringing you into the present. When the mind wanders off in thought, gently bring it back to the breathing. Begin again with mindfulness of breathing. Like a small flat rock, slowly sinks into the water to the bottom of the lake. Let yourself ride or watch the breathing. As if it's a little rock that's letting you settle -- into the floor of your being. Here and now.

Silence.

Being with your breathing, offering your breathing the kind of presence that you would give to a good friend. When you're listening to someone carefully. Really present.

Silence.

Continue to stay with your breathing. When some other experience becomes compelling or arises strongly, see if you can stay in your easy chair, and allow it to arise at the door or the window. Let it be there. Be present for it, however long it wants to stay, be present. When it goes away, let it go. Sound of traffic arises, gets strong, it comes into your awareness, note it, be aware of it, let it go. Sensations of your body, feelings and emotions. Certain thoughts might arise and become obvious in awareness. Stay in your easy chair, don't get involved in the thoughts. Just know that they are there. Let go of them if it's easy. See if you can stay at ease with whatever is going on. Be aware. Be present for what is.

Silence

If you find yourself drifting in thought, notice how different it feels to have been drifting in thought compared to knowing it clearly, being present for that. Whenever you can, keep coming back to presence, to awareness, to what is. In the middle of it all, breathing in mindfully, breathing out mindfully.

Silence

Notice how you are. The quality of your mind. See if you can notice a difference between letting the mind be whatever way it is, your attitude whatever way it happens to be, without awareness, versus really being present and knowing this is how it is. Being mindful.

Silence

[Bell]

RESUME TALK:

The suggestion is that life unfolds a lot better, certainly with a lot less stress, but also with a lot more sense of freedom and wisdom, if we start being present for our life in a careful way. And that is what meditation is trying to help us do: to be really present, rather than the mind carrying us away in all kinds of ways, to be really present for our breath. Breathing has a very profound spiritual aspect to it the more we can get connected to our breathing. To be present for our body, to be in our body, connected to our body, to be connected or present for our emotional life, connected, but not entangled. To be present for it, to be present for our cognitive life, the thinking we have and not entangled with it, but present, but not engaged. Breath, body, emotions, thoughts, the state of the mind, that's what we've covered these first five weeks of the course. The question is how to go further with this. Is it more than just being present?

There are two primary ways to go further after you have the basic idea of what the practice is. Practice it in daily life and develop more concentration or stability together with the mindfulness.

In daily life the metaphor or analogy of the easy chair works a little bit, but it also fails in that it suggests that someone practicing mindfulness is kind of passive, just sits there and lets life happen. You're not going to sit in easy chairs as you go about your life. Mindfulness is about being easy, being open, being present to what's here, not being caught, not being stressed by things. It's not withdrawal. It's actually allowing us to connect more fully with our life, to be present for our life. I like the word "contact" or "connectedness". That we're connected like when we bring two hands together, they're connected, but

they're not entangled, not tied up with each other. Like if I were to interlace my fingers together, they're connected, they have contact. I could have my hands apart and not feel the contact. The presence of mindfulness has a quality of being really present, almost like you're making contact with whatever the experience is, even if you're present listening to someone else talk, you're not necessarily touching them physically, but you're there in some way that you're really there, present for that. Your mind isn't wandering off in to thoughts, planning what you're going to say next or caught up in judging them, you're just there, fully there, present.

Life tends to unfold a lot less stressful, with much greater ease when we are present for our life as we go about it. A big part of deepening mindfulness meditation practice is to begin applying or doing that practice in daily life as well. Not limiting it to meditation. In fact, we say that the line between the mind when it meditates and the mind when it's going about its life is an arbitrary line. There is no real difference – it's the same mind. As we start discovering a higher quality of mind through meditation, then it becomes natural to have that higher quality of mind or relaxed mind, be present in daily life as well. Then bring that same mindfulness practice to daily life. Be present for our lives. Pay attention to what's going on, here and now.

Now there are a variety of ways this could be done, but to give you a little example of how this could be done, a practical way: some people have found it very helpful to put stickers on different places in the house like on the phone or the light switches or on drawers, door handles, different places. When they see those stickers, those dots, they say "Oh! Pay attention. What's going on right now?"

Or some people when their phone rings. Some people's attitude towards the phone ringing is that it is important to answer the phone as soon as possible, the fewer rings, the better. I don't know why. A mindful approach would be "Let it ring" for a few times. People aren't going to hang up after three or four rings. Let it ring and take two or three rings to be present, check in with yourself. How are you right then? What's happening here and now? How are you feeling? What are your concerns? When you have a better sense of who you are when you enter into the conversation with someone on the phone, you'll be more connected to yourself and thereby more connected with them. Find out what's going on.

For a long time, I used doorframes as my mindfulness cue, reminder. Whenever I walked through a doorframe I was walking into a new space. I would use the doorframe. "Oh, what's happening?" Sometimes I would pay attention to what was happening with me and I would be surprised, "Oh! I didn't know I was rushing, I didn't know I was feeling that way." I didn't know I was not paying attention. Sometimes I would pay attention to the room I was walking in to "What's happening here, what's going on?" Some people use different things as cues, as reminders. Bring yourself into the present moment and notice what's happening here.

Another thing that people have used when they're driving a lot is traffic lights. When you're waiting for the light to turn green. Nothing has to happen, but now there are people on phones, so there are important things happening, but if you're not on the phone, then be present with what's going on, how are you feeling? What's happening? Notice. Practice noticing, practice mindfulness. You don't get deeply calm, but you just notice. Probably what you will find is that if you notice what is happening, your life will start getting richer and you will take more responsibility, you will reclaim your life, take more responsibility for how you want to be in your life. Too many live their life without taking any healthy responsibility or choice about how they want to be. They're just kind of rushing and doing this and that and letting the mind drive the show. If you stop and pay attention you have a chance to make some choices. So you're driving your car, you stop at the red light and you find yourself really impatient for the light to turn green. Is that how you want to live your life? By being present you can ask yourself that question. If your answer is "yes", then go be impatient (but not near me when you drive). Maybe you say, "This is not how I want to live my life." What difference does it make, how does it help things while I'm waiting for the light to turn green? Maybe I can breathe deeply and relax for these few seconds.

As we bring more presence we have more choice. As we have more choice we can look and make choices that are wiser, better for how we want to live our lives, how we want to engage with things.

Some people like to practice mindfulness in conversation. There is a lot to be discovered about yourself if you pay attention to how you are in conversation. One thing to discover maybe with some people is how little they really listen. Listening sometimes is considered a synonym with mindfulness. The qualities you need to really listen well are the same qualities needed to be mindful well. So you may experiment in a conversation with people to be in more of a listening mode, be a good listener as opposed to a good speaker. Do you notice that you interrupt? Do you notice that your opinion is more important than what you're hearing? What's going on there?

Mindfulness and speech can also be looking a little bit about being present enough to have some sense occasionally of why you are saying what you are going to say. Why do you say that? A lot of people speak without ever questioning why they're going to say what they're going to say. "I'm going to say it! It's important!" For example, "I had dinner today at the absolutely best Chinese restaurant". Why am I saying that? Why would I say that? It could be because I'm enthusiastic about the good food and I'm overdoing it by saying "the best", exaggerating a little bit. Who knows if it is the best? Or it could be that I want to impress you with what a great choice in restaurants I made. By saying that it is the best is like "look at me, I had a good time". It is saying something about me, not just about the food. Maybe that is a silly example, but why do we say what we say?

To be present for yourself and notice what your thoughts or feelings are, gives a lot of information, and sometimes that information will save you from a lot of mistakes. It's said that it takes years to make a good friend and one sentence to lose the friendship. Be careful, be present, and make wise choices.

Some people find it very helpful to extend mindfulness to daily life because it helps keep their life calmer, more peaceful. Some people choose particular activities to bring more mindfulness to. Some people like to drive mindfully. That is a quality time to be with yourself. Turn off the radio and turn off the cell phone for sure. This is quality time to be present. It is probably helpful for the drivers around you too.

Some people find something as simple as, if you're driving to work, for example, and you have to walk from the parking lot to the place of work, park a little bit further away perhaps. Use the walk from your car to your office as a place to practice walking meditation, walking mindfulness, being present, as opposed to letting the mind have free reign to rush ahead to the day, what needs to happen and all that. Be present. So that when you arrive at work you are more likely to be more present with what's happening and therefore make wiser choices, rather than getting caught up in it all right away.

Some people find it nice to choose different activities for different weeks that they're going to focus on practicing mindfulness in daily life. Washing dishes: "OK, whenever I'm washing dishes this week, I'm going to be present." If the mind wanders away, it wanders away. I come back and am really there with the experience of being with the dishes and myself. Or another way might be cleaning. "Whenever I clean my house I'm going to be really present." Some people find it nice to do it when they eat. Some people find it nice to at least once a week to eat alone, in silence so you can really practice being present for your eating. It's a whole different world. For some people there are a lot of complicated emotions around eating. If you can really stop and be silent and be present, take your time when you eat, a lot of that can unravel and become clear. It might be shopping; it might be all kinds of things you might choose. If you choose different things over different weeks then after you've done it for a week, then it becomes a little bit like second nature. It becomes a little bit like a habit or you're a little bit more familiar with that domain. Slowly over the years with different activities your daily life becomes richer, more full, you have a deeper connection with all the different things you do. Then that feeds back to your meditation. You continue doing your daily meditation practice. The more you practice mindfulness in daily life, the stronger your meditation practice becomes, and the more it supports it. That's very nice.

That's one whole way to develop mindfulness: practice applied to daily life, not just meditation. The other way, is to develop a stronger concentration so that when you're mindful of something you're not just mindful in some simple way or mindful in a kind of normal way, but you actually have a mind that is really still and it has a real ability to focus and be present in a really careful way. Probably you know the difference between someone who is vaguely present for you and someone who is really, really present for you, connected and there for you, really focused. Sometimes some of the depth of what mindfulness can do for you comes when you have a real focus, are really here. Sometimes we say that concentration provides the three legs of the tripod for mindfulness. Mindfulness is the telescope that looks and concentration is the tripod that gives the stability to the telescope so you can see really clearly. If you try to hold a big telescope to look at a star it doesn't work very well. You have to have it on a tripod. Concentration provides the stability.

How do we develop more concentration, have more stability to go along with the mindfulness? One way is the regularity of practice. Probably one of the most important things is just practicing every day, day in and day out. The first few years I practiced I didn't meditate on Sunday. I took a day off. That's because when I was introduced to meditation it was at the San Francisco Zen Center and they meditated a lot there, no one ever explained to me why, but they didn't meditate on Sunday. I took that as an example, so I didn't meditate on Sunday (now I meditate on Sunday), but to have the regularity of six days a week. The mind benefits from regularity. It is like a little kid, a 3-year old or a 2-year old and having a regular schedule really helps the kid. They are more likely to do what you want and not act out. The mind is like a little kid sometimes. To have that regularity helps the mind, supports the mind. And you say, "No, I want to do this and that, this is important". But your mind is really like a 2-year old. A 2-year old mind really does well with regularity. So do it regularly. That's one aspect.

There are many things to say about developing concentration, but the other way in which our tradition develops concentration with the practice is by doing retreats. It is kind of obvious maybe coming here, but we are really a kind of retreat culture kind of group, at least some of us. Most spiritual traditions have something like going on retreats; forty days in the desert or vision quests where the Native Americans went into the wilderness for a while by themselves. Going on retreat is an ancient thing in Buddhism. Spending time stepping out of your life as you normally live. You can get a better look at things. Sometimes you stay always in the midst of your life. You know you don't see things clearly. That's why some people go on vacation is to get out of their life and see things anew, get a new perspective, get fresh air, let things go a little bit. So we go on retreat and spend longer periods of time meditating. By meditating longer through the day it allows the mind to settle more and let go more of the everyday concerns that often keep us preoccupied. As those preoccupations fall away you can get concentrated and still and be really present. It is one of the great delights of life is to have all the preoccupations fall away. The mind is not inclined to think about the future, the past, other things, worries, ambitions, desires, and all that stuff. The mind finally comes to rest. Not in some kind of sleepy way, but it is luminously clear. It is here and it's not going anywhere. It is such an amazing pleasure. I don't know what to compare it to in order to have it make sense to some of you. What comes to mind is that you can go around, drive around here on the peninsula for weeks and months and not really notice the air quality. Then one day it's crystal clear air and you can see the Mt. Hamilton range across the bay, see clearly, and it is such a delight, it is so great, so refreshing to have that clarity suddenly. You didn't realize what you missed, you didn't know you didn't have it because you were so used to the smoggy air. So to be really present and not have the mind be murky or foggy or distracted is one of the great things of life. So that's more likely to happen. It happens slowly over time if you practice everyday at home. It happens quicker and deeper when you go on retreat.

In our tradition we have a variety of retreats. Here at IMC for example, the shortest retreat we have is what is called a half-day retreat, which we do Wednesday mornings from 9:30 to 12:15. That works for some people. Then we have daylong retreats on Saturday that go from 9:00 to 4:30, sometimes they're longer. Then we also have, in our wider Vipassana tradition we put on residential retreats. Some people go away for a weekend or for a week or for ten days, sometimes longer, a month. These meditation

retreats that we put on are done in silence so there's no talking during the retreat. Which for the novices is frightening. "How can I manage that? Why would I want to?" Sometimes it is kind of hard in the beginning, but almost always after ten days of silence, most people, novices, don't want to give it up: "No, no, I have to talk? I don't want to!", whereas they went in kicking and screaming. It is so sweet.

Speech activates a lot of our concerns about how we are in relationship to other people, how other people see us, how I present myself, what I need to accomplish, and a lot of different things. It is very complicated, the whole social world we live in. By not engaging in speech for a length of time, it allows a lot of the social concerns and obsessions and neuroses to fall away. So it's easier to settle into a deeper, quieter, more intimate place with ourselves.

We do the retreats in silence. We also try to do them with as minimal extra activity as possible. There's a little bit of work you do everyday to help with the chores of the retreat center, but there is no television, no books, no journaling, you don't play golf. You're there and this is what you're doing.

Some people do long retreats. The longest retreat I did like that was eight months and it was, I would say, it qualifies as the best time of my life, among the best times of my life. It is counter-intuitive, right? I didn't have a clue what was on television those months. It was a pretty deprived life, but it was the best. I was so happy. I had more sustained happiness during that time of my life than probably any other time in my life, sustained joy and happiness and rapture and delight. Time went really fast. I couldn't believe how fast it went and yet nothing was happening. Meditating, meditating, meditating. I'm not recommending necessarily that you go for a long time like that, but just to let you know that one of the ways of deepening this practice is to bring it to retreat. If you're new to all this you don't necessarily want to do it right away, but you start doing a regular practice. And probably if you do it regularly, after a while, at some point, you will feel at some time, "Oh yeah, I think I would like to do more of this. This feels right." Then you might consider a retreat.

We couple mindfulness with concentration. Concentration allows us to see more deeply. Not just to have stillness of mind or greater clarity, but to see more deeply. One of the things that it helps us see through are the concepts we tend to use to interpret our life. Much of life is seen through concepts, ideas. Some of them are innocent enough and appropriate: the ideas of man or woman. But, for example, someone might see you through the concept of someone's spouse if that's the case. I know there are a number of spouses who don't want to be seen as the spouse. "I'm not a spouse, I'm me!" That's not how they want to be seen, they want to be seen as their own sake, not as someone's spouse. So it's very clear that they're being seen through a concept. Probably all of you have had the experience of being seen through someone else's concepts. Maybe they have you pegged from some past experience. Once, just once, you were a little bit irritated and that person happened to see you that day. Now they always relate to you as the angry one. "But, but, but!...." There is a lot of pain in our society because of how people see each other through concepts, ideas, judgments and all that. And we see ourselves that way, through concepts and judgments. We have all these opinions of how things should be and we see things through the opinion of how things should be. Opinions, concepts, stories, the mind is a story-making, opinionated thing. Part of the function of mindfulness is to help us cut through all the concepts, all the "shoulds", and all the interpretations so we can see what is really here.

I want to demonstrate this for you in a way that maybe you will never forget and hopefully remember at the right time to save you a lot of grief. I need some things to demonstrate with [picks leaves from nearby plants]. Look at this. This is a leaf. It's a leaf that's what, about two inches long? It's just a leaf. It is what it is. And we put a lot of store in Buddhism in just seeing things as they actually are in and of themselves. We call it sometimes the "thusness" or the "suchness" of something. See if you can just see the suchness of the leaf, the leaf in and of itself. Perhaps if you're lucky you're not comparing it to past leaves or future leaves or perfect leaves, just the leaf by itself. Then something very interesting can happen when I lift up another leaf and put it next to it. This leaf now in my left hand is what, five inches long? The first one was two inches. Now I can say something I couldn't say before. Now I can say that

the first leaf is the small leaf and the second leaf is the big leaf. Right? It's pretty clear right? It's not a difficult concept. But now watch the magic..... small, big, small, big, now watch the sleight of hand, how it works. I put this one down and pick this one up. This one is about one inch long, right? Now which one is the big one and which one is the little one? The one that was little before is now the big one, right? Isn't that magic? Isn't that amazing?

Things like big and small do not reside in things. Things are not inherently big or small. Things are big or small in relationship to what we compare them to, through comparisons. "Big" and "small" are concepts that we add to an experience. It's not inherent in the experience itself. There are a lot of concepts like this that are not inherent, but are added. Often "good" and "bad" are added. It turns out that a lot of the ways in which human beings tend to suffer around their sense of self, about who they are, belong to the category of comparison, comparative concepts. "I'm not short enough. I'm not tall enough." I lived in Japan for a while and I was too tall. I felt awkward. I know people who are short and they think, "I'm too short".

When I was thirteen it was 1967 and some of you are old enough to remember this period..... Anyway, it was 1967 and that summer I was living in Italy, in a small provincial city in Italy. I had been living in California and I had the longest hair of any boy because long hair was the thing to do. And I was the only one with blue jeans in town. I was hip; I was ahead of the times; I was cool. I felt a certain kind of good energy about myself: cool, hip, energy. The only longhaired boy in town. Then I went back to Los Angeles at the end of the summer and I had missed a lot of what happened in the summer of '67. When I got back to LA my friends in school all had much longer hair than I did and their blue jeans weren't just blue jeans, they had figured out how to cut them up and sew them up and put them through the washing machine one hundred times and bleach them. Some of them actually put their blue jeans on the road so cars would drive over them. I just had blue jeans. So my sense of self diminished. All I did was cross the Atlantic and now I felt low down. I was pulling my hair in school to try to get it to grow faster. I felt really bad. My sense of vitality or deflation had to do with whom I was comparing myself to. "Is my nose too big; too small?" "Am I smart enough; am I not smart enough?" All this stuff!

What mindfulness can help us do is to see concepts for what they are; not buy in to them if they're not useful, not be caught by them. It really helps if we're concentrated and still so we can really have a penetrating ability in the mindfulness. Concentration really helps us drop below the concept level. It's hard to do that sometimes if we're just doing mindfulness without proper stillness of mind.

It's very freeing to become free of all these concepts, all these comparisons and judgments and ideas and "shoulds" and "shouldn'ts." It is really freeing and it creates a much higher quality of being, a much higher quality of life. It also gives a lot more choice about which concepts we choose to live by. Unless we're mindful, some of these concepts appear to just be the way the universe was built. "I'm just a klutz. That's the way the universe is built. This is the way things should be". "People should always give me the right of way. Isn't that how it should be?" Or whatever. We have all these concepts that we feel are inherent to the universe. But they're not. They're constructions of the mind. It's very freeing to have the ability to cut through it.

Mindfulness coupled with concentration is one of the things that can help with the unfolding of what Buddhism calls wisdom, a deepening of wisdom. Wisdom happens when we cut through the concepts or see through them and understand the bigger picture of what's going on. Does this make sense?

QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS

Student 1: *I'm confused with the concept of "cut-through."*

Gil: It happens naturally. You don't have to be looking or trying to cut through. If you get still enough and are present enough with what is, the mind will cut through by itself.

Student 1 continued: *<poor sound quality>*

Gil: There's nothing wrong with analyzing and breaking things apart, but most people do too much of that and it keeps their mind agitated and busy manipulating. Generally, for most people, practice unfolds better if we step out of the fixing mode or trying to make something mode or the looking and analyzing mode and just try to be fully present. If you're present, things will unfold. The natural unfolding of things tends to be better for people. Also, one of the interesting things that happens with that is that if you're analyzing or you're trying to fix or cut though, it's subtly or grossly reinforces the notion that you're in charge: your ego, your small self. There is actually something much more profound that can happen when we let go of the usual identity of us in charge. You actually go deeper in meditation and deeper into the world of wisdom and freedom when you don't always feel like you're at the controls and it's all up to you. Make sense?

Are there any other questions? Protests? Your mind will protest some of these things for sure. "What do you mean let go of shoulds? The shoulds should be there!"

Student 2: *The analogy of the house, I'm sitting on the comfort chair and the squirrel shows up and sometimes the squirrel shows up and I'm distracted with a certain thought and a few minutes pass by before I get back. "Wow, there I was thinking about something else". I catch myself, I bring myself back to the breath, I see the squirrel, but I feel bad for the time that I lost because 20 minutes is just 20 minutes and now there is 12 minutes left. It is interesting that I've been doing this regularly, 20 minutes in the morning and 20 minutes in the evening since January and I intend to continue this way. But the meditation is getting more boring because of that game I'm playing: being hard on myself. I'm just wondering if you have some techniques or suggestions for how to just.....*

Gil: Good question. No moment of mindfulness is ever wasted. It is always good. If you wander away for twenty minutes and then you came back for a moment, that moment is great. It is better to celebrate that moment than follow that moment with "Oh, no! I was lost again!" It is very interesting: the first moment when you notice your mind had been away for twenty minutes, that first moment is usually suffering-free, judgment-free, but our judgment tends to be that [finger snap] fast. That first moment is quite pure and what we like to do is extend the purity of that moment; have that moment get longer before we add the judgment to it. But what it sounds like to me is that you're treating the squirrel as a squirrel coming to a window but somehow your mind, what your mind does is something much more It is somehow outside the scope of the meditation.

To say it in a different way: your mind wandering away is just another squirrel at a different window. Your judging it as being bad is just a different kind of squirrel at a different window. All we have is stuff appearing in windows. Rather than saying that you shouldn't be judging, say "Oh, look! Look at that squirrel! It has a judgment flavor, this is what judgment is like. Can I be present for judgment? Gil tells me to be present for judgment; OK, I've never really been present for judgment before. I've always had an antagonistic relationship with it or I've believed it. It ran the show, but I'm being asked to just be present for what it is like to be judging. I get to study what it is like to be judgmental. Wow, it feels this way in my jaws, it feels this way in my shoulders, my brain feels contracted now, the speed of my thoughts is going faster, there is a fear that is connected to my judgment. Wow! There's a lot of stuff! I didn't know there was so much going on!"

What we try to do, whenever we can, is rather than leaving something off the stage to fester we invite everything on to the stage of mindfulness. To say it in a different way: whatever is bothering us we turn around and look at that. My guess is that you haven't done that. You're trying to cope with it and deal with it and come back and be with the one squirrel and not really turning around and looking at the mind that wanders away, look at the mind that judges. Is this making sense to you? Do you think you can do that turning and include that as part of the mindfulness?

Student 2: *I want to try to. The only thing that comes to mind still unanswered is the question of that voice that catches myself going “Oy, I just wandered, I forgot to focus on the breath, I forgot to be aware of the now, I went off the to the future or to plan or to memory.” Sometimes it catches up after six minutes instead of right away, which is where I’d like it to be.*

Gil: It takes time. It’s called a practice. Two things: one is how you are with yourself when you notice the mind has drifted off; that’s a really profound place of deep practice, important practice. The tendency for a lot of people is to have all their attitudes and judgments about themselves and how they should be successful, accomplished and all that come into play there. For you to work with that and find a compassionate way to be with yourself, more accepting, an easier way to be with all that could have an implication not only for meditation, but even outside of meditation. The fact that you had been gone for 12 minutes doesn’t really matter. It matters when you wake up that you engage with how you are, what’s going on; when you wake up and all this judgment kicks in. I really want to repeat that it is a very significant place to pay attention to, and just be glad you have the chance. If you do that, slowly, you will probably find yourself becoming more mindful more often, sooner, not drifting off.

After you’ve worked through the judgment thing and you’re more at ease and more compassionate about the fact that you’ve wandered off, then you can also turn it around and look at what is the mind like that keeps drifting off. You might find that there is a lot of tension in your mind. You can actually feel it physically sometimes. Rather than just letting go of your thoughts and ideas you come back to the breath. What you need to do is spend a little bit of time softening the tension or pressure that is almost physical that is there with the thinking brain. The thinking brain is like a muscle, the thinking muscle. If anger, sadness, pressure or tension is the fuel, the factory, for thinking, then you can let go of thoughts forever and the factory just produces more thoughts. Once the judgment is fixed, judgment and negative thinking about all this has fallen away, then you want to have the chance to see what’s going on with this thinking muscle. Emotionally, physically, tension-wise and then be present for that. As you’re present for that, you’re present. Then it settles and with time it’s not going to be such a big obstacle.

What I’m saying isn’t easy to do. It’s really easy to be a teacher. It’s easy to say “This is how you do it”, it’s not so easy to do this practice, in fact. I’d be delighted to talk to you further about this if you try and make an effort and engage with this. I’d like to hear how it goes and if you have further questions I’d be happy to engage them.

The cliché is that mindfulness is really easy, what’s hard is to remember to do it.

Student 3: *For me, it is very easy to lose concentration with my exhale.*

Gil: You can be present for your inhale, but with the exhale the mind wanders away? <yes> That is a great observation. Most people will have some phase of breathing that is more clear than another phase. Sometimes it is the in breath that is more clear and sometimes it is the out breath that is more clear. If some part or phase of breathing is not so clear, that is the more likely place the mind is going to wander off. That is probably what you will find if you pay attention. So if you know you have that pattern, then when you get to the beginning of the out breath you want to remind yourself “hang in there ‘til the end” and then the in breath comes and you can go with that. So that’s helpful. There are a few people occasionally who have trouble with the out breath because the out breath is a kind of letting go, letting go of control. For some people it is very difficult to let go of control. They get afraid so they don’t want to breathe out all the way. I don’t know if something like that is going on for you. Most people have less awareness of their out breath, it is less clear, than the in breath; that is the most common pattern. If you know that

pattern, then you can make amends and remember to stay present longer every time you breathe out.

Student 3: *Thank you. I'm a Leo and I want to be in control of everything, always. That's a really good tip to remind myself to let go.*

Gil: Sometimes if you get really calm in meditation there can be a long gap between the out breath and the in breath or between the in breath and the out breath. Since there is a gap, the mind is not connected and the idle mind will get in trouble. It is important to notice that there is a long gap and to remember to stay present. It's a little bit complicated for this class, but one of the instructions is that if there is a long gap at the end of the out breath go feel something tangible in your body during the gap, like the hands touching or the knees touching the mat or something. Just something that is tactile, tangible, contact point. So you're connected to something physical; so you're not letting the mind think whatever it wants. When the in breath begins then you start again with the in breath.

Student 4: *When we did the exercise you said, "Be present, be here with mind and body". So what I was doing was inhaling and saying "this is the mind" and exhaling and then I could feel my body. I had a couple of moments where I was, "Wow, it feels beautiful", but then [flying away sound]. Then I thought, "OK, it's not working, but that's OK". I had a root canal done and there is a lot of pressure and pain so I was thinking "OK, pain, pain, pain." I tried, but it didn't come back. The question I have is: when you say not judging yourself, but kind of becoming passive. I was not judging myself, not being with my mind and body, but how do I know that I'm not just being passive and letting my mind run and it's all in vain?*

Gil: I'm not sure you paid attention. You look around. Look at it. I'm not sure there is a simple way, it is a more complicated way. You're asking how do you know when your mind is not so present and is wandering away? <yeah> Either you know, or you don't know. If you don't know, then you don't have any problem. But maybe this is a better answer: a lot of it comes with practice. The more you practice, the more your awareness gets stronger and stronger and you notice more stuff and you're more present with things and you're more at peace with things. One of the things that is very, very helpful with being more present for your mind is to be more present for your body. The more you're embodied, the more you are in your body, the easier it is to work with your mind. It's counter-intuitive, most people think they should go directly to their mind, but be more in your body. So when I said "have your mind and your body in the same place" it was kind of like where your attention is. Your attention needs to be with your body. Bring your attention and your body together as opposed to letting your attention wander off into yesterday and tomorrow.

RETURN TO TALK

I want to say a couple more words and then I can stay behind for other questions people have. Just a couple of simple things: One is to welcome you to IMC those of you who are new here for this course and to say that we have no membership at IMC. No formal membership. Anybody who wants to be a member is a member. You're welcome to be a part of this community in any kind of way you want. By design we made the place informal so it's easy to come and go. Come if it works, go if it doesn't. There are all kinds of different programs we have throughout the week and year. You're welcome to come to any of it you'd like. By now you understand that everything we do here is offered freely so that makes it really easy to come. If you'd like to be a part of our community, then you are. There is no other way than that. Please come.

Mental Noting

Transcribed and Lightly Edited from a talk by Gil Fronsdal 7/20/08

So the core practice that we do here at IMC is mindfulness practice and mindfulness has different functions. It helps us to be present for what's going on so we can understand what's going on better. It helps us be present so that we have access to a deeper connection to what is here, more than just understanding. Deeper connection to ourselves and some of the sublime feelings that can be operating for us and that we are often not in touch with if we go around being distracted. And mindfulness has a function to help us become free, to liberate us from the ways we get entangled in our lives, the ways we get caught up in things in mild ways and also very profound ways, a deep entanglement with self for example. And mindfulness is understood, at least in the Buddhist tradition, to be a very powerful practice. Mindfulness is practiced in different ways; there are different tools to support the mindfulness practice. Today I'd like to talk about one of the tools of mindfulness practice that is usually called "mental noting" or "labeling." It's a fascinating topic, fascinating practice. People have different points of view and opinions about this particular tool so if you can, if you have an opinion already, either pro or against/ you might bracket that, put that aside and listen to the points of view I have here today and then you can reassemble your opinions afterwards.

One of the big challenges for mindfulness practice is our thinking. For some people thinking is a very powerful force that keeps us distracted, keeps us in the future and prevents us from really being present in a quality way. And mental noting is a very simple way in which we use thinking to stay present rather than having thinking carry us away. And it's using a very primitive aspect of thinking, the very simple naming of an experience, a simple word that names an experience. It's not discursive thinking like thinking about the experience, analyzing it, and judging it, and having conversations in our minds about it with people. It's – we hear a sound, and it's just 'hearing.' We label it, it's that simple. It's not "Oh, that was someone coughing and I bet they have a cold and I bet now I'll catch it. I should go see my doctor tomorrow and I can't afford my doctor." You know, the mind runs off. And then you forget that you are here. So it's very simple.

One of the functions of mental noting is that if you don't think in meditation, if you're trying not to think, the idle mind will get in trouble. And the tendency to think is so strong, so we use a very primitive form of thinking to stay present. Stay here "hearing, hearing, seeing, tasting, touching, thinking, feeling" in order to stay here, stay present.

And so we're involved with words, and we're labeling or identifying what the experience is that we are having here and now. And that activity of labeling is controversial for good reason. So first I want to read what I think is a marvelous quote, a passage by Helen Keller when she discovered words. Helen Keller was deaf, dumb, and blind, so she had tactile contact with the world, but she couldn't see and she couldn't hear. So that's a pretty big handicap. So she had a teacher when she was a child who was trying to teach her in spite of that. She writes "Someone" (it was her teacher but she didn't know that), "Someone was drawing water" (from a faucet I guess), "and my teacher placed my hand under the spout. As the cool stream gushed over my hand she spelled into the other hand, the word 'water' first slowly then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motion of her fingers. Suddenly, I felt a misty consciousness as something forgotten and somehow the mystery of mine which was revealed to me. I knew then that 'w-a-t-e-r' meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope; set it free." Remarkable, huh? A little insight in someone who doesn't have the contact with the world that many of us take for granted. And here this dawn of consciousness, this dawn of knowing, of recognition through someone writing a word on her hand, spelling out the letters. And from there she went to college, became a great writer, wrote a story of her own life, became one of the great American heroines.

So here the tremendous power of words, of language will set us free to be able to maneuver our lives, have contact with other people, have relationships. So much of what we know about human life and our relationships and our sense of self is mediated through words. And so as we cultivate a vocabulary we also cultivate a life. It is as if Helen Keller's language cultivated a soul. It's quite a powerful thing to have contact with language. Many of us are adults and we've forgotten the mystery, the marvel of it. Maybe children are too young to understand the marvel of it as they start learning the words. And there are things that exist only because we speak them. Maybe a good example is appreciation. We might appreciate someone but when we name it, we say it, then something is born. The other person hears the appreciation and their gratitude is born. Something happens in them. Certain words are very profound. For example, a promise or a commitment, a wedding commitment, wedding vows. You don't just sit there dumb, quiet, at the wedding when you say "Will you take this person..." Internally, you know you say 'Yes.' Not "I don't believe in words so I'm not going to say 'yes.'" That doesn't quite work. "Yes" says something very powerful.

So some things come alive when we give them words. And sometimes that's true for ourselves inner life as well. On the other hand we have a wonderful passage by Rachel Naomi Remen in *Kitchen Table Wisdom*. She writes: "A label is a mask life wears. We put labels on life all the time 'right, wrong, success, failure, lucky, unlucky.' These may be as limiting a way of seeing things as 'diabetic, epileptic, manic-depressive, or even invalid.' Labeling sets up an expectation of life that is often so compelling that we can no longer see things as they really are. This expectation often gives a false sense of familiarity towards something that is really new and unprecedented. We are in relationship with our expectations and not with life itself. We may need to take our labels and even our experts far more lightly. Like a diagnosis, a label is an attempt to control and manage uncertainty. It may allow us the security and comfort of mental closure and encourage us not to think about things again but life never comes through closure. Life is a process, even mystery. Life is known only by those who have found a way to be comfortable with change and the unknown. Given the nature of life there may be no security but only adventure."

So she speaks of, and many have spoken about, the way in which if we can get too caught up in labels and names that can distance us from our life; distance us from our experience; put a veil over our experience. And, through mindfulness practice, I've become very aware of how the thinking mind paints my reality and puts kind of a veil over what's actually there. And you can see it in something very simple. I'll give you an example of one of the first times I saw it. I was at the Zen Monastery at Tassajara and they had these wonderful hot baths there; hot springs. And so we would go there every day at bath time to bathe, get clean, soak in the hot tub. It was very nice. And then one day I went to the bathhouse and there was this huge frame with five or six one-gallon jars of incubating yoghurt in the hot tub. So I looked at that and I said, "Is this a bath or is this a yoghurt incubator?" "What is it?" Of course, it's both. But you know a lot of things can morph depending how we use them; how we see them. We can see things from different points of view. And so you can label things too tightly. So I saw "Oh it's my mind that creates that, in some sense. I can see it this way one way and my mind can create a perception that sees it another way."

So there is a tremendous creative potential of the mind to project onto things. We do it on people all the time. We have labels for people. "Oh that's a bad person. That's a dangerous person. That's a desirable person." And so labels can also cause problems. Still, in mindfulness practice, we use mental noting, very simple. And the idea behind mental noting is that it is not supposed to be interpretive in some abstract way. It's not meant to be judgmental. It's a training to name what's happening in the most simple way of our direct experience. So we hear a car outside, "hearing." That simple—as opposed to "Oh I wonder what year that car was made. I wonder what brand. I wonder who is driving it. I wonder why they built IMC in a place where there is traffic." And the mind goes off thinking about as opposed to just "hearing, hearing." Keeping it that simple.

So this very simple labeling. And it has a number of different functions. One function is that it's meant to be a fuller acknowledgment of what is. And I hope that you've all had the experience of acknowledging something and in the acknowledgment something inside of you relaxes. "Oh, now I see it." So it can be as simple as someone telling you "Oh, you seem to be having a hard day today." "Oh yeah." Then you relax. Someone sees you; acknowledges you. They named it, "a hard day." But you feel seen in some way and that simple acknowledgment being seen helps something relax or open; it's helpful in some way. That full acknowledgement can help keep us honest. I think of mindfulness as being a form of truth-telling and I see that for me when I sit down to meditate that there are times when I'm not so in touch with myself in some subtle way. But when I sit down to meditate and close my eyes it's a chance for me to find out what is really going on with me in some deep way. And sometimes I find out that I'm uneasy about something. I didn't realize I was uneasy until I sat down to meditate. Then I say to myself, "Oh, Gil you're uneasy." That's not some great abstraction. It's a very general experience. And then "Oh, now that I've recognized that, now I can explore that, I can get to know it, I can find out what's going on in some deeper way."

Sometimes there are things we don't want to see about ourselves or see about different situations and it can be very powerful to name them. Family dynamics. Uncle So-and-So is an addict. No one's supposed to say that ! Then finally someone says it. Or the story of the emperor who has no clothes. Finally the little kid says "He's naked." Then everyone saw it. In fact, that is the way it is.

So sometimes this simple labeling, naming something, can be very, very powerful – a truth-telling act. It can free something inside of us in doing that. So I see labeling as a full acknowledgment of what is here. "Oh this is what's happening." Another function of the labeling is: if a person practices continuity of noting – so just keep noting – not fast, but just a slow easy way, "Hearing, hearing, thinking, thinking, worried, worried, delighted, delighted, itch, itch" it can be that mundane. It doesn't have to be sublime. That continuity keeps us in the present moment and the continuity of the noting helps us stay continuously in the present moment which is the big challenge of mindfulness practice because the mind so easily leaves the present moment. If you have the continuity of mindfulness a person is much less likely to get distracted or is much more likely to notice when they do get distracted. I've known people, myself as well, who thought "I'm pretty present when I meditate, thank you. Things are going well. I'm calm, I'm present." And then I started my mental noting, just naming what is here, or back in my Zen times, I used to count my breath. And I'd take up the counting and then I'd notice, I'd get to '2.' I'm supposed to get to 10. And I'd get to '2.' Or I'd start doing the mental noting. "Hearing, listening, itching, aching, thinking." Whatever, just do it like that. And then I'd notice after awhile I'd stop doing it. "Oh I better start doing it again." Then "Oh I stopped doing it." And I said "Oh you know I'm not as present as I thought I was. The forces of distraction are actually quite strong here, and I was fooled into thinking that I was present because I was calm." Make sense?

So it kind of helps to know where we are at in our practice keeping the continuity going. Sometimes when we're more fully present for what's here, and there's more continuity, there is a greater chance for a deeper understanding of what is here. So it's not necessarily inherent in the labeling that there is greater understanding but many people find that in labeling something there's greater understanding. One way it works is that, say you're sitting here and you're noting the breath, "Breathing in, breathing out, breathing in, breathing out." And then "I really want ice cream." Note, "Thinking, thinking, breathing in, breathing out, hearing, hearing, I want ice cream." "Breathing in, breathing out, feeling an ache in my knee, I really want ice cream." It might encourage you after awhile that there's a pattern where your mind keeps coming back to the same theme over and over again and unless you label it you might not see how regular the pattern is. So, in other words, a person might not recognize that they're caught by some concern or some feeling or emotion unless they can track it over time and see how often it is occurring. So, for example, it might be anxiety. Maybe a person doesn't realize how anxious they are, they start noting all their experiences and they see that every third note is anxiety. "Wow, I had no idea that it was such a common theme for me." So the continuity of noting gives information that can be very helpful.

One of the ways that mental noting helps us is as I alluded to before, it is a form of very primitive thinking that is an alternative to discursive thinking. So it's a way of helping the mind to not get caught up in conversations in the mind, in discursive thinking. And it's much easier to see deeply into our experience here and now if we are not caught up in discursive thinking. So the mental noting is an alternative. If you find yourself caught up in a lot of thinking, that might be a really useful time to start using the mental noting. And I do that a lot. If I sit down to meditate and my mind is still busy with my day and it's hard for me to be present, one of the ways that I help me get settled down is to start using mental noting. And for me I often settle down pretty quickly that way.

Another function of mental noting is that it pulls us out of being entangled or caught by our experience. If you keep thinking about something over and over again, you're entangled. If you let go of the thought and you come right back, you're entangled. Or maybe you can't even let go of it, you're so concerned or wrapped up around certain feelings, certain things, you're entangled or caught by them. And one of the great potentials of mindfulness is to show us how much we're entangled. Some people don't realize how entangled they are until they start paying attention. So the mental noting is a way to help us get disentangled, to pull us out of the entanglement. And it works in different ways so if you're thinking about ice cream "I want ice cream, I want ice cream." And "I need to stop thinking about ice cream, I'm supposed to be doing my job here. So you say "Oh, wanting." Very simple label. There's wanting going on. And as you say "wanting" the mind keeps wanting to go back to thinking about ice cream flavors and to stop doing the noting. And you can feel sometimes this push and pull between maintaining the mature, stable mental noting versus keeping thinking about the theme. So then you are entangled. So you keep going back to the label until the recognition of there being wanting is stronger than being pulled into the current of wanting thoughts or wanting feelings. So, "Oh, I feel that tremendous draw towards wanting. Wanting is happening now. Yes this is wanting. Wanting, wanting." Until you feel yourself disentangled, pulled out, step out on dry ground and see the experience there, become free of it.

One of the great stories in the Buddhist tradition of this is after the Buddha was enlightened and Mara came to see Buddha. Mara is seen as the personification of these forces of temptation, difficult emotional states that might arise for a person. It's interesting that after the Buddha was enlightened, Mara still comes to visit the Buddha. You'd think the Buddha was free of those things. What's interesting is how the Buddha responds to the presence of Mara, to temptation. All he does is he says "Mara, I see you." It's kind of like labeling. "Mara, there you are." Very simple. It is not for Mara, not against Mara, doesn't attach Mara, doesn't run away, doesn't invite Mara for tea, just says, "I see you." And then in the stories, every time the Buddha does that, Mara runs away. There's something very powerful about being able to see very clearly and call something what it is. "Desire, I see you." "Hate, I see you." If you see it clearly enough you're probably not going to be in the hate. You step out of it. Or you might see "I really want to be in the hate. I prefer to be there." "Hate, hate, there's hating here." You feel it pull then you can decide where you really want to be. We say in our tradition that mental noting is to help us identify what's going on without identifying with something. You don't want to identify with it, so one of the very powerful places for this is with pain. To label pain, to note pain. If you call it "my pain" there can be a qualitative difference in the mind with that versus saying "pain." Adding the idea of "my pain" on top of the pain creates more entanglement with the experience. If it's just pain, there's a little bit more distance from it, freedom from it. So one of the functions of mental noting is to help us disentangle from our experience, to become free of it.

So I wanted to read a psychological article so you don't have to take a Buddhist teacher's word for all this. The article is entitled, Grief and the Mindfulness Approach: Death, dying and bereavement counseling. So this is a clinical article.

"In one case a divorced woman would have bouts of depression and anxiety when she remembered her ex-husband's bizarre sexual demands. She was trained to label her thoughts as 'remembering, remembering,' and within a few days she could see the causal relationship between the thoughts and the anxiety and depression." Pretty good. The causal connection between thoughts. Thought arises, emotion

follows, feelings follow. If you see that connection, then it's possible to sometimes stop the chain before it spirals out.

"Another woman, who was hospitalized for manic-depression and schizophrenia was instructed to watch the second hand of a clock and when her mind went off the clock, to name the distraction. Soon she realized that most of her distractions were related to the past." So here's an example of if you label regularly you start seeing the themes that keep reappearing, the patterns. "She was then instructed to label them as 'remembering, remembering.' With this technique, she learned to identify herself with the objective watcher of her disturbing thoughts instead of the depressed thinker." Okay? So she pulled herself away to identify but not identify with. "Soon she began to gain insight into the nature of her illness and was released from hospital."

"Another woman, who was hospitalized for anxiety, depression, and inability to function adequately rebelled against any suggestion of introspection. As she was a Mormon, the word 'Buddhist' or 'meditation' was not mentioned. As the therapist interacted with her, it became evident that much of her day was spent fantasizing an imagining to avoid the anxiety of her life. The habit of fantasizing was discussed with her and then she was asked to undertake a psychological procedure. To her surprise she was asked to bake a cake. However she had to do it extremely mindfully with minute attention to detail. When the persistent fantasies would arise, she was instructed to just observe them. After a while she found that she could intentionally return to the present moment and so function more adequately. She also began to gain insight into the nature of her anxiety and depression." So the last person was not asked to name it, but still to identify the fantasies and to disentangle herself from those fantasies. And then that brought her a lot of benefit.

Another benefit of labeling is that as we practice continuity of noting, as we get disentangled from the experience, we may find it interesting to notice the tone of the inner voice that does the noting. Sometimes the tone is harsh, sometimes it is complacent or bored. There can be an attitude that comes along with the noting. Perhaps it's not a neutral matter-of-fact noting. So if we have pain, and we're noting the pain, it might be "Ahhh that pain, pain!" We're entangled, we're involved. Or if there's some real pleasure in meditation going on, and the person labels it as "Pllllleeeaaassssuuurrrre," that's also being involved. And if we pay attention to the attitude, the tone of the labeling, we can sometimes notice the way we are caught in it. And the idea is to be very simple and matter-of-fact. Just "hearing, pain, pleasure." Just simple.

As we practice this continuity of noting and as we get a little bit disentangled from the experience and as we stay more equanimous or neutral about what we are labeling, we may find that we are becoming more fluid or receptive in our awareness. Or experience flows through us much more fluidly. We're not stopping or blocking or resisting or running away from experience. We're much more receptive and willing to be open to experience as it is. And this is a very important part of mindfulness. Mindfulness is not meant to create a distance between us and experience that is hard or separate, like "I'm keeping things at bay," but rather it's purpose is to be open to experiencing more fully.

So, the trick with the noting is how do we note in such a way that we stay soft and receptive? Some people note in a very hard way and they create a kind of artificial distance that is not so helpful. In this same spirit then is another function of the noting which is to train us in non-judgmental awareness. It is not an easy training but it is a training to learn how to recognize something without judging it, without being for or against it, without saying it's good or bad. Just very simple—this is the experience. And this can be very helpful for people who judge themselves very negatively, for example, for some of their inner mental tendencies. You might have murderous rage about something and feel like you're an awful person. And in the mental noting, you learn to recognize and name it, "rage, rage, rage, rage," without adding on "I'm an awful person because of it." Or, there are a whole slew of things that might come up. We might judge our experience positively, "I'm a great person. I'm the first saint at IMC." And, no, you don't have to go that far, you can just simply say, "Oh, a generous thought happened." It was a generous

thought or a kind thought, just that.

So we train in a non-judgmental and non-abstract kind of recognizing—just what's there. So these are some of the functions of noting. There are some dangers with mental noting. I don't want to champion noting without mentioning the dangers as well. Some people will use the mental noting mechanically as a way of actually creating a barrier between themselves and their experience or a way of trying to control their experience. The might use noting as a way of not experiencing what's really here. I've known people who have kept a running monologue of noting, "noting, noting, noting, noting," so they wouldn't have to feel what's really going on. Or to feel like they're in control, because if they stopped the noting then their minds would be out of control. It's a way of keeping these very powerful psychological forces at bay as opposed to discovering how to be free with them. So the mental noting can cause problems for people or be done in the wrong way. Also, sometimes if the mental noting is done too much, it's at a courser level of the mind and some of the more sublime, or more subtle movements in our hearts and our minds don't have a chance to show themselves. So we might not get to know ourselves as deeply if we keep the noting going too much.

Still it can be very helpful. Some people find that noting continuously is very helpful. When I was on my long retreats, I was taught to note all the time. All my waking hours I was supposed to be involved in noting my experience, labeling what was going on, all the time. And it took me awhile to learn how to do it. It was like riding a bicycle. It was very awkward at first and I'd done a lot of meditation practice before this in which I didn't do the noting. It was like "What's this? Now I'm getting busy in my mind where I used to be really quiet in my mind. Now I'm noting all the time." But I diligently did it anyway—my teachers told me to do it. And after a while, it became second nature like riding a bike. After a while you can ride the bike without holding the handle bars if you get good enough at it. So after a while I could note without the handle bars. I could just note. It became easy and very supportive of my practice. And it became very very helpful for me. And I attribute a lot of the depth I had in my practice to the continuity of the mental noting. For me, it worked really well.

There are other people for whom mental noting does not work so well. So to be studying with a teacher who says you have to do mental noting and that's what you do, can sometimes pose a problem. They end up doing something that does not really work for their particular mind. Some people find that rather than noting continuously, it can be helpful to note at particular times, particular things. It can be helpful to note maybe at the beginning of meditation, because at the start, the mind is distracted a lot. Or it can be particularly useful to note when the mind is getting really concentrated, but when the mind has a little tendency to waver from the concentration. The very subtle noting is like a nudge, keeps us here, keeps us here. The noting is like a soft frame around the experience to keep us with the experience, keep us right there. So then it's really useful. Some people find it's helpful to note the experience of particular things, like thinking. They are very quiet in their mind generally, then every time the mind goes off into thinking, it's very helpful to note, "thinking, thinking" and that can interrupt the getting lost in the current of thinking, pulling us back and disentangling us a little bit. Some people find that's very helpful. Other people find it is very helpful to note emotions, every emotion, because emotions are where they get tangled—"oh, happy, sad, angry." Noting pulls them back into the present moment. For some people it's helpful to note the feeling tone of the experience—"pleasant, unpleasant." Some people find it helpful to use mental noting when things are out of control in their life. (And none of you, of course!) But there are times when there are very powerful forces within us, powerful forces of desire or addiction, powerful forces of hate, powerful forces of self-loathing, powerful forces on inside of us. And it's really humbling to understand how the mind can have a mind of its own. "It's not my choosing to be swept away this way." Sometimes this might be a time when the noting becomes a lifeline for certain people. And they use the noting because without the noting it is too easy to get caught up and start acting in ways that later they very much regret. It becomes a tool, it becomes a refuge, it becomes a lifeline to stay balanced, to stay protected from getting swept away. Then finally, some people only note that which takes them away from the breath. They're focusing on the breath as the primary meditation object, and whenever something takes them away from the breath, they note that and then they come back. And they're silently with the

breath but they note the distractions. That can be helpful.

There is also the question of precision versus vagueness in the noting. Should I be precise? Some people will spend a lot of time thinking about what the right label should be. And that's not useful. If there's a precise label that is obvious, then precision may cut through things and provide insight. But only if the label is obvious. Don't think about it. It's okay to have a vague label. Part of the function of the label is just to keep you present. So it can be as vague as "oh this is an experience." What does that mean? But you have an experience and you stay present for that. Or one of the great labels is "chaos." "I don't know what's going on but it's chaotic; it's chaos." At least you're labeling, you're there to that degree and then you can start getting closer based on that. It doesn't have to be very precise. So whatever is obvious and easy that helps frame the experience, keeps you present, keeps you there. Then with mindfulness, since you're practicing mindfulness over a long period of time, hopefully, if something keeps appearing over and over again, the mind, through familiarity, will be able to recognize the more precise, accurate label in its own time. You don't have to be thinking about it.

I'm almost finished; I realize I'm talking over. I hope this has not been trying for you to listen to all of this. If it has been difficult for you to listen to it because it's boring, what you do is label "boring." And then you can see—are you entangled in the boredom, can you become free of the boredom? That's what I did. I did about six or seven weeks of a retreat in Thailand and for some reason, I have no idea, my teacher took me out of retreat to see a gaudy funeral for a Thai General in Bangkok. And I couldn't understand anything; it was in Thai, and I was really bored. And after a while, I said, "Wait a minute! I've just been on retreat for six weeks." And I started labeling, "boredom, feeling present," and very quickly the boredom vanished. So in that spirit, you are responsible for how you feel here in these talks! If you start thinking, "This is going on and on; it's never going to end; now he is going on some tangent." So I apologize.

So I want to finish with this. As the mind gets stiller and stiller, more concentrated in meditation, it's important to adjust the loudness, the intensity of the labeling we do. It's almost as if there are different layers of thinking we can have; different layers of intensity. And the normal thinking mind is a certain level, but as the mind gets calmer and calmer, the labeling gets calmer and calmer, more subtle, more quiet, quieter and quieter in the mind. Just a whisper in the mind. A little whisper. And whisper is important because the primary thing we are doing in mindfulness is not the mental labeling. We say, in our tradition, 5% is the labeling, 95% is experiencing what's there. Some people turn it around and it's 95% labeling, and 5% experience. Five percent labeling is what we do. And then I found that at some times when my mindfulness got quiet enough, my mind got really still, I still found it very helpful to label. The mental noting was still useful, but it got to where I was just saying "yes" to everything. "Yes, yes." And just that "yes" was enough to keep me present, to keep me from wandering off. And at some point I got quiet enough that I just grunted at everything. My mental label was a grunt or a "hm." That helped me just stay there, stay there, stay there. So the mental note doesn't have to be so precise with a word even; it's just a kind of a way, just a verbalization, just an inner kind of way of saying, "stay here, stay here, stay here."

And at some point as you become familiar with this world of mental noting, you've been given your chance to learn it; to learn to ride the bicycle, you're fluid with it enough, then hopefully you'll also know when to stop doing it. Or maybe you'll find out you're not that kind of person; you shouldn't be doing it. But I would encourage all of you not to jump to the conclusion that you are one of those people for whom mental noting does not work. Give it a serious try. Experiment with it, explore it. What we've found is that—this is a strange statistic that should be taken very lightly—but the people who use the mental noting in their meditation tend in a greater percentage to make more progress in their practice than the people who don't. Now some people who don't note make great progress. But there's a tendency in this direction. So give it a try.
