

INTRODUCTORY COURSE IN MINDFULNESS MEDITATION
6TH WEEK – BUILDING ON THE FOUNDATION
by Gil Fronsdal

Sometimes a metaphor can be useful for clarifying and reinforcing the instructions for mindfulness meditation. A classic Buddhist metaphor for a human being is a one-room house with five windows and a door. The windows and door represent the six senses posited by Buddhism: the five primary senses we have in the West plus a sixth sense which perceives what goes on in our minds, our thoughts. Imagine that you are in the middle of the house sitting in an easy chair, relaxed and at ease with nothing to do. The windows are open and the door is open. A cat peeks its head in the door and then goes away. Soon a bird lands on the windowsill and then flies away and then a squirrel runs by. Various animals come and go. Rather than getting up to follow the animal outside or closing the doors and windows, you could stay in our easy chair and simply watch what comes and goes. The instructions for mindfulness meditation is to just stay in the easy chair of awareness and let sensations, emotions, thoughts or attitudes simply appear at the door or window of our sense perceptions. We notice them come and go. The emphasis is on being at ease. We are not trying to force our meditation to become anything. You are encouraged to remain focused on breathing but when compelling experiences come to awareness, neither get involved with them nor close your awareness to them. Explore how to be easefully aware.

Developing mindfulness is a way of living a skillful life. Life can then unfold a lot better, with a lot less stress, and more sense of freedom and wisdom. Once the basic instructions for mindfulness are understood, one can build on this foundation. The two primary ways of doing this are (1) Practicing mindfulness in daily life and (2) Developing more concentration with the mindfulness.

MINDFULNESS IN DAILY LIFE

As in meditation, it is possible to develop greater presence and awareness in our daily lives. Some people find it useful to have cues throughout the day that remind them to notice what is happening in the present, i.e. what they are doing, feeling, or thinking. A common cue is the phone ringing. Rather than rushing to immediately answer the phone, the ringing is a prompt to be mindful. This is also a great way to prepare for the phone conversation.

Some people use walking through doorways as a mindfulness cue. Whenever they walk through a doorway into a different room they notice and pay attention to what is happening with themselves and in the new room. Waiting for traffic lights to turn green can be another cue for a bit of mindfulness.

It can also be useful to bring a heightened mindfulness to particular daily tasks. Some people do this by choosing to eat one meal a day in silence without doing anything else besides eating. Others will do mindfulness while walking – some people will park in a distant parking place so to have a short period of walking meditation. Cleaning can also be a great time to cultivate mindfulness.

A fascinating area for mindfulness is during a conversation. Much can be discovered by listening more actively and tracking one's internal responses and impulses during the conversation. The qualities needed to listen well are the same qualities needed to meditate well.

CONCENTRATION

The second way to build on the foundation of our mindfulness is to develop greater concentration. Concentration helps provide steadiness and strength to mindfulness. If mindfulness is a telescope then concentration is the tripod that gives stability to the telescope so we can see more clearly.

One way to develop concentration is with regularity of practice. One of the most important things is just practicing every day, day after day. Just as young children benefit from routine and repetition in learning, the mind benefits from regularity of practice.

Another way to develop concentration is going on meditation retreats. This allows us to step out of our lives so we can get a better perspective and perhaps better let go of the regular concerns that often entangle us. Retreats are a time to meditate frequently throughout the day and so get more settled than meditating once a day at home. It can be a great delight to have many of our preoccupations fall away. We can make an analogy of living on the Peninsula and not really being aware of the air quality, then one day, the air is crystal clear and we can see the Mt. Hamilton range across the bay. It is so refreshing to suddenly have that clarity. We didn't realize what we were missing because we were so accustomed to the smoggy air. To be really present and not have the mind be murky, foggy or distracted is one of the great delights 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 to 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. IMC offers many retreats throughout the year. At our Redwood City center we offer daylong retreats monthly. In addition, about six times a year we offer residential retreats that last from two days to two weeks in length at other locations in the Bay Area.

WISDOM

Mindfulness coupled with concentration helps with the unfolding of what Buddhism calls wisdom. Wisdom happens when we are present for our lives and see through our concepts, ideas or judgments and instead understand the bigger picture and context of what's happening. Some of the concepts or judgments we use are innocent and appropriate enough. However, some concepts bring with them much suffering. Part of the function of mindfulness is to help us cut through all the concepts, interpretations, and "shoulds" so we can see more clearly. And the more clearly we see, the more choices we will discover for living a wise and satisfying life.

Another function of mindfulness is to reveal the difference between the stress of clinging and the peace of releasing that clinging. An important part of wisdom is then learning how to act with this knowledge so that we become more peaceful and more free.