

Monday Sit with instructions: Shifting from Our Concerns to Mindfulness

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Experienced Students' Retreat At Insight Retreat Center

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Because this is an experienced students' retreat, I won't be giving basic instructions for practice. The instructions I do give are meant more to augment or support your practice. Instructions will probably have some relationship to the teachings each day. They will also have some relationship to my sense of how the retreat as a whole is developing and unfolding.

You're welcome to take the instructions as suggestions if they support you and augment what you're doing. And if you feel like the instructions or the guidance I give is somehow out of harmony with how you practice, that's a great topic to talk about in practice discussion, and we can explore it together a little bit.

For today I want to emphasize the simplicity of mindfulness. Mindfulness is the simple awareness of what's happening in the present moment. To better understand what it is, it can be helpful to contrast it with other ways the mind operates and ways that we sometimes apply our attention.

Sometimes we apply our attention or bring our presence to our concerns in the mind – the preoccupations, the memories, the plans, and fantasies of the future. We may focus more on the concerns we have about the meditation or our concerns about ourselves, our issues, problems, and challenges.

Being involved in concerns diverts the attention from simple awareness in the present moment. It is useful to recognize when your mind is involved in concerns and when it's involved in simple attention to what's here. Of course, the simple awareness of mindfulness can be aware of the fact that we're involved in concerns. We can be aware of how powerful those concerns are.

Sometimes I'll use the mental note, "Wow," in awe and reverence for how powerful the mind is. "Wow, I'm really caught up in my concerns. This is like a flood which is just taking everything along with it. Boy, was it strong. Wow." I find that labeling it like that, stepping back, and observing it that way – "This is what's happening," with a kind of awe – begins to free me from being caught in the concern. I know the concern but I'm not being the concern.

Begin getting a feel for the simplicity of mindfulness moment by moment, where attention is not pulled into and lost in concerns we have. One area of concern that can be difficult to see is the concerns we have about the meditation itself and concerns about ourselves as a meditator. These are just more concerns. Wow. See that clearly so you can come back to the simplicity of mindfulness.

One advantage of focusing on the breathing, getting a little concentrated or really absorbed in something simple like breathing is that it is like doing something that frees you from your concerns. It is like reading a good book that pulls you out of your daily life concerns because you're absorbed in something else. With breathing, you are becoming absorbed in something that's clearly in the present moment. Breathing is here to support us in the present moment.

It has the advantage of separating us from our concerns. It's the concerned mind that tends to create stress and tension.

So, assuming a posture that supports you in meditation – a posture that maybe evokes some healthy energy and alert effort. It can be very useful to relax your body.

At the very beginning of meditation, maybe just tuning into your body and breathing.

You might notice the shoulders can relax, or the belly. As we get into the meditation, there can be little micro-relaxations, small letting-gos...

There's a degree of relaxation that sometimes shows us when we get caught up in concerns, because the concerns tighten up muscles. The relaxed body is a reference point for noticing when we get pulled into the world of our concerns. Perhaps you'll notice the tensions involved in having concerns. Certainly, we all have concerns that are important to us. But dealing with them is meant to happen at a different time than during our meditation.

Trust the simple mindfulness here and now...
Almost like letting the mind rest in the body breathing...
Relaxing the tension and pressure of the control tower...

In this practice of mindful presence – being present for experience with awareness, setting yourself up to do it continuously, turning it on, turning the light on, and keeping it on – is probably hard to do in general, especially on the first day of the retreat. A lot of our concerns from our daily life come along and visit and are stirred up.

Sometimes it's helpful to think of mindfulness practice as having a rhythm – maybe a rhythm similar to that of sweeping with a broom. Maybe the rhythm follows the breathing. As you exhale, the broom sweeps, and you kind of let the mind return to just simple awareness. Let the concerns sweep away, or fall away, or recede so that in the foreground there's just awareness. The concerns will come back, and then in the next exhale you let go of them again.

It is kind of a gentle sweeping rhythm, almost like a massage for the brain. It's short little bouts of rhythmic, relaxed periods of just being present and then lingering there, staying with it as long as you can. Then awareness probably fades away and concerns and thoughts come back. Then you do it again, and again, and again.

The same way with walking meditation. There's a rhythm there with the steps as you walk. Perhaps one example of this kind of rhythmic repetition of being aware is every time the foot comes down onto the ground again is a time when you sweep the mind of its concerns and preoccupations that have arisen. Then you are there mindful again.

Using the word “concern” doesn't mean that we're denying there are real-life concerns and issues we have. It just means that meditation is not the time to be involved in them. Thinking about them is for another time.

The concerns we have more or less belong to the karmic world, the karmic stream of our life. We're not denying that, but we're trying to awaken the Dharma stream, the stream of awareness. That's a little bit like creating lots of room for everything. We're living in the space, the great space of the room rather than living inside our concerns. Awareness has room for everything, but all those things can be there without our participation, without our fueling them, without getting pulled into that world.

You might find this guidance particularly valuable in a retreat like this during the transition times, the times in between sitting and walking. You might watch your mind in the transition times and see how quickly you get pulled into your concerns, your thoughts, your fantasies, and your ideas. Maybe you don't need to do this as much. Maybe there too, there can be a rhythm of coming back to awareness and staying close to awareness. As the awareness gets stronger, the mind tends to become less stressed, less preoccupied, and less tense. Then we tend to stop fueling the karmic stream.

It has been said that one of the major causes of depression is rumination – over and over again, repetitively thinking the same thoughts that are deflating or discouraging. Resentment can be repetitive thoughts of anger and hurt. A remarkable thing begins to happen when we choose awareness rather than rumination, awareness rather than continued thinking, and awareness rather than being swept along in our thoughts and concerns.

This doesn't mean that we stop thinking or stop being a thoughtful person. It just means that maybe a fair amount of thinking doesn't really serve us on the retreat. It actually serves something else. It serves the karmic stream, not the dharma stream.

In the transition times, you might really try to keep the mindfulness practice going in a relaxed, easy way, so that you're not so completely pulled into the world of thinking, preoccupations, and concerns. You stay close to that place where awareness is concern-free – a place where awareness has room for everything. Then you begin to identify more with the space in the room than you do with the thoughts and the ideas.

Some people find that this kind of care with the transition times in retreats works well if you think of doing just one thing at a time. When you do it, do it intently, carefully, not necessarily slowly, but certainly not hurriedly. A hurried life is fuel for rumination and thoughts. You do one thing at a time. Sometimes it's nice to do it slowly and carefully so that it can really support the ongoing development of the stream of awareness that can stay in the present moment. Then we can begin to benefit from the Dharma stream that gets awakened as we stay here, present and alert.

Tapping into the Dharma stream is a very significant thing to do. My guess is that most of you have given the karma stream enough attention. You could probably use a break.
Thank you.