

Introduction to Mindfulness Meditation: Breathing

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Gil Fronsdal

There are people still coming in so maybe one of the least important things to say is a little bit about me. I've been a teacher for this community since 1990. I came to study at Stanford. I'd been a monk for 10 years, practicing here in this country, practicing in Japan in Zen monasteries, and practicing in Southeast Asia, Thailand, and Burma. That was my life. Then there was a time in my life to no longer be a monastic, but I wasn't leaving Buddhism. Somehow I ended up at Stanford, studying of all things Buddhist Studies, so I didn't get that far away.

I had also started teacher training with Jack Kornfield, who knew the facilitator for a small sitting group in Palo Alto. He told them, "You can invite Gil to be the teacher," so I came there to start teaching in August 1990.

Slowly over time, things grew and developed until it became active enough for us to buy our own place. At the end of 2001, we bought this place from these wonderful ministers. There was this beautiful couple who really wanted us to buy their church because they were kind of mystical Christians and they sat in silence. And we sit in silence, so they really wanted us to have it. We had a wonderful relationship with them. There was a lot of love and a contemplative, beautiful silence we had together. Now we've been here for 22 years. It's a long time. It's hard to believe.

I have a lot of experience meditating. I started meditating when I was 19. When you do the math, that was half a century ago. It's kind of unbelievable. I've been doing this for a long time. It's something I love doing. It's something that has brought me a tremendous amount of benefit, tremendous healing, tremendous wisdom, tremendous freedom, tremendous capacity for compassion. It's also brought me a lot of ease in my life, so it's been a wonderful journey.

One of my favorite things is to teach this Introduction to Meditation class. For some of you, this may be the beginning of a journey. And for some of you, this continues a journey. I think that this practice of meditation, from the point of view of Buddhism, is one endless journey. Every step is so wonderful to do.

Part of the benefit of mindfulness meditation is something that teaches us about the tremendous value of the next step, the next breath, this moment here. We find fulfillment in a certain way not from the conventional ways of being fulfilled in life, not by having jobs or finding partnership or getting praise or getting wealthy or having wonderful recreational experiences and vacations. There are a lot of things people pursue conventionally in order to be fulfilled, to be happy, that from a Buddhist point of view are kind of fragile. They easily

disappear and they get challenged. For many people, it's not enough to have success and they want more.

There are lots of people in our society who are poor, struggling with oppression and racism and different things. And there too, to be caught in that interactive world and maybe not caught, but kind of trapped in it because of how society is, meditation teaches that there's a kind of a side door to take that doesn't really cure racism, but creates a very different inner landscape that can again be healing, can be freeing, can bring a kind of love and peace that's not dependent on what goes on around us. That provides people with a lot of courage. It provides people with a lot of confidence. It provides people with a much greater sense of fulfillment, that they can be fulfilled and happy without the world around them changing.

I have a book on mindfulness that's available for free on the counter. You're welcome to take one when you leave. There might be more of you than there are books on the counter, but we have lots on the shelves, so we can pull out more. I'm mentioning it because it starts with a story of an ancient world where there was a king. Back then, everyone walked around barefoot. One day the king stubbed his toe or cut his foot, and he ordered his people to carpet the kingdom so he wouldn't hurt himself again. Someone said that there's an easier way than carpeting the kingdom. Just make shoes for everyone, and then you can go anywhere.

So, in a sense, to try to change the whole world to make it perfect for you, so everything is good, is a lot of work. What's much more realistic is to figure out how to wear shoes, so wherever you step it becomes safe for you. Mindfulness is a way to find, maybe it's kind of funny to call it shoes, but everything you touch with your senses, everything you see and hear, everything you think, everything that happens to you, you now have a safety net. You have a capacity, you have a means by which to know it and be with it, that you're protected, you're safe in some deep inner way. That's a lot better than carpeting the world to make it all work for you. And some people are very busy trying to change the world when it's easier to change yourself.

I love teaching this class, and I hope this is nice for you. You get a taste of this joy and how mindfulness can be nice. IMC is a Buddhist center. It is a Buddhist meditation that I'm teaching. We're kind of Buddhist light here. We don't really care whether you're a Buddhist or not. That's not really important. You don't have to adopt Buddhist beliefs, ideas, teachings in order to do this practice. This practice doesn't need Buddhism. Buddhism needs the practice. So if you come to do the practice and you hear me refer to Buddhism and maybe it's weird or something, just know that the Buddhism part is take it or leave it. It's all take it or leave it. This is just a little warning in case some people get a little uncomfortable with the Buddhist references.

The way this course works is it is five weeks and the instructions are progressive. Today we'll talk about some basic ideas of meditation posture and then meditation on breathing. With that as a foundation, hopefully, you'll practice a little bit at home. Next week we'll build on that to do mindfulness of the body.

The body is phenomenally important, so much so that it may be unfortunate that they translated the ancient Indian word *sati* into English as mindfulness. I would have preferred they had chosen bodyfulness because to really learn how to be embodied as part of mindfulness, as part of where our attention and awareness resides, is central to this whole journey that we're on.

The third week is mindfulness of emotions. People have complicated relationships with their emotions, but to be a human being is to have emotions. Some people have them strong and sometimes people have them weak, but they're still an important part of life. And so the idea is to fold emotions into the practice, not to push them away, not to try to deny them or have shame around them or feel like you shouldn't have some. When you do mindful meditation, mindfulness is an amazing place where you can really open to the inner emotional life in a particular way that's very healthy for the inner life of ours.

The fourth week we'll talk about mindfulness of thinking. For some people who meditate, there's a war between thinking and meditation because they think so much and they think they shouldn't be thinking. When we do mindfulness meditation, there's no divide like that. Certainly, sometimes the mind gets very quiet, almost like it doesn't think at all, and that's quite nice. But, in mindfulness practice, we're not living in a divide between how things should be and how things actually are. We're always being present for how things are as they are.

If we're thinking a lot, then the idea is to learn how to bring mindfulness to that in a way that's beneficial for us, how to bring attention and awareness to it so we're not caught in the thoughts, we're not being driven and pushed around by the thoughts or troubled by our thoughts. We learn how to be mindful of them. But you don't have to stop thinking. We don't want to set up this strong dichotomy, strong separation, of thinking is wrong and meditation is supposed to be silent. So we'll talk about that in the fourth week.

The reason we wait for the fourth week to talk about thinking is that it's a lot easier to have this useful attention to thinking if first you know how to be mindful of breathing, you know how to be present for your body, and you know how to be present for emotions. Those three then really are a huge support for mindfulness of thinking.

The fifth week will be how to pull all these together so they work together as a whole, not only in meditation but also outside in our daily lives. One of the benefits of learning mindfulness comes from not keeping the mindfulness to meditation, but learning how to bring a higher quality attention, awareness, into our daily activities in life so the benefits of meditation are carried with us into our lives and the way we live. And then, from a Buddhist point of view, we learn how to live with much more freedom in our lives than many people experience when they're caught in their attachments, caught in their fears, caught in their ambitions or preoccupations.

That's the path we'll take. I'll do some teaching. Most days we'll probably do one or two short periods of meditation, and then there'll be a chance for some questions. Hopefully, you'll feel well-engaged in all this.

The other thing that I want to say as an introduction to this kind of mindfulness meditation is that many people find it challenging. Many people find it challenging to sit quietly and to have their mind be quiet or sit still because they're restless or something. When you do this meditation, I'd like to encourage you to consider that it's impossible to fail or you simply don't bother with the orientation that you're doing it right or wrong or you're succeeding or not succeeding. It's a waste of time to have those thoughts when you meditate. So it's fine. Whatever happens to you when you meditate, the approach here is it's fine. It's just one more thing to be mindful of, one more thing to be aware of, to really recognize it.

This is a practice of recognizing what is. As I said earlier, it is a practice of recognizing what is, not recognizing what you think it should be. Many people want things to happen, and they should happen. Many people are suffering and have challenges in their lives so, of course, we want to be happy. But the path here in this mindfulness tradition is to find that by learning how to be present for this experience now in a productive way, in a useful way. To really learn the art of how do we show up for our life in the moment, no matter what's happening to us.

That's why you can't fail because you just get to be where you are. Then there is the journey of discovering: "Well, how do I have a productive, how do I have a useful attention to this? How do I hold this with care, with compassion? How do I hold it with ease? How can I be relaxed even with this, as opposed to fighting it, or justifying it, or all kinds of complicated things that we do?"

Please come in anywhere. Sit in a chair. You arrived at a good time because we're kind of starting now. I thought a nice way of beginning is to do something really short to give you a taste of what's possible. It doesn't have to be a long meditation to benefit from this mindfulness practice. You can do it in the posture you're in. You don't have to change your posture because this can be done in daily life as well. It doesn't require anything more than just a few seconds. I call it the three breath journey, and that is to close your eyes and just hang out with three breaths. You can count them: one, two, three. With your eyes closed, just stay there with three breaths. So why don't you try that?

Maybe that was three breaths. What happened in the course of three breaths? Did anything change for you? Or is it nothing changed, like "Why did I do that?" Does anybody want to share?

Participant 1: Kind of nice and relaxing.

Gil: Great. Someone else?

Participant 2: I just noticed distractions.

Gil: You noticed distraction. That's one of the primary things we're trying to do is to notice what's happening for us. Do you think it was useful to notice that?

Participant 2: Yeah, I noticed it and was able to refocus on breathing.

Gil: And that was a nice thing to do?

Participant 2: It was.

Gil: Great. How so?

Participant 2: Just the sense that I don't have to be at the mercy of what's going on around me or what thought comes into my head.

Gil: Great. Lovely. That's a great lesson.

Participant 3: I felt a little bit like once I paid attention to my breath, I wanted to control it. Then it just took me a bit to try and relax and have it come at its own rhythm. I don't think I accomplished that in three breaths though.

Gil: In the way that we do mindfulness, it's enough just to notice you're trying to control it. You don't have to stop doing it. The stopping will take care of itself. If you clearly see what's happening, that's all we're doing – the main thing in mindfulness practice. And then it's remarkable if you stay like that, very simple, and just say, "Oh, it's like that. It's like that," something begins happening without you having to fix it. That's a cool thing to see happen.

I think it's fantastic that you saw you were trying to control it. I apologize if I completely misunderstand or something, but what I see is when people report right away that they're trying to control their breathing, it represents a tendency that's playing out in their lives in other ways as well. It's a good tendency to see. This is a good place to see it and kind of work with it and find another way.

Participant 4: Time slowed down for me.

Gil: Time slowed down for you in three breaths. Very nice.

That didn't take long, did it? Some of you found it was nice. Imagine if you did that once an hour through the day, it'd probably change your day quite a bit. Three breaths don't take long. How many times in your daily life are you just waiting for something to happen? That's where you could take three breaths. "Oh, I don't have to wait. I can do three breaths." And then see what happens.

Mindfulness can be that easy. We're going to meditate for longer, but I think getting the message (that it can be that simple), and doing the three breath journey repeatedly over the day, whenever it seems nice, you start building up a familiarity with all these little tricks of the mind, the body, how you are, how things can shift. You develop a capacity to let go of whatever you're caught up in in the moment to some small degree. And to have those lessons accumulate over time can be very helpful in any life we live.

We practice meditation, which is sitting quietly for some extended period of time. The classic idea of meditation is to sit on the floor cross-legged. It's not necessary to do that. Those of you who are going to do your meditation in a chair, you can be reassured or be inspired that in Buddhist lore, Buddhist mythology, the next Buddha will be a chair sitter. Maybe you. But there's something nice about sitting on the floor because it's easier to have the stability of a tripod. Your two knees and your bottom create a nice foundation and a low center of gravity that lets the upper torso relax and settle.

Many years ago, I read a study that the two human postures that allow the human body to relax the most is in yoga what's called the corpse posture, where you're lying on the back, and sitting in full lotus like this, upright. There's something about the alignment of these postures that allows for deep relaxation over time, so it's nice to do this if you can. The way it's usually done is you want to be elevated a bit. And depending on how open your hips are will figure into how high you want to sit. If you're tight in the hips, the higher you want to sit. If you're really loose, you can sit pretty low. But you want to have enough height so that there is a teeny bit of a curve in the lower part of your back. For most people, it's kind of the natural curve that's retained, but just a teeny bit, not overarched, just a little bit. So there's a teeny bit of movement in the spine that helps to push the rest of your torso upright and alert.

There's also sitting on your knees, like the gentleman here. You're sitting on top of a cushion that way. Some people find that works really well for them. The gentleman here is sitting on a bench. We have these benches in the back in the corner there. Some people love sitting on those benches, and that's easier than cross-legged for some people. But it gets you a low center of gravity.

If you're sitting in a chair, the classic instruction is to have both feet flat on the ground in front of you. Have the feet parallel to each other and the legs and the knees slightly lower than the hips because if the knees are above the hips, it tends to push out the spine in the lower back, which causes trouble over time.

If you need extra help, we have a variety of cushions. If you're short, you can put a cushion underneath your feet. If you're tall, then you want to maybe put a cushion on the seat of your chair so that you get the right kind of way in which your knees are just a little bit lower than the hips – not a lot lower and not higher.

Some people like to have their legs out wide, like in a triangle, and they feel stable that way. But the idea is to have a feeling of stability in the feet, that you're really here in a strong way, so

you're rooted here with the feet firmly on the ground. And then if possible, to sit as alert, as upright, in the chair as you can.

Some people find it really nice not to use the backrest. There's an extra alertness that comes when you're not resting your body against something, but you're holding it up yourself. It supports being really present here. Sometimes when people are using a backrest too much, it's kind of like you're being supported and some people are lulled into being a little bit complacent and not engaged fully in the practice.

Do whatever you need to do so that you're comfortable to do the practice, but the point is not to be super comfortable. Don't try to find the most comfortable posture so that you can relax as much as you can because you think meditation is all about relaxing. That's not the point of mindfulness. Relaxation is certainly a byproduct of this practice and it's really helpful up to a point. But if it's over-emphasized and if that's the be-all and end-all of what you're trying to do when you're meditating, you're missing out on the benefits that come from developing a calm but clear awareness.

What we're looking for is a balance between calmness and alertness. If you over-emphasize calmness, then you lose the alertness. If you over-emphasize alertness, then you might lose the calmness, which may be a little bit stressful. So it is to find the balance, and some of that is found through the posture. The idea is to have a posture that supports both calmness and alertness.

In our tradition, we meditate with the eyes closed, but some people prefer meditating with the eyes open which is fine to do. In our tradition, we emphasize having the eyes kind of half-open looking 45 degrees down to the floor with a very loose focus, like you're looking at a mountain in the distance.

The hands can be in many ways. In the last decade or so, I've been having my hands on my thighs this way. For decades before that, I had my hands together like this when I meditated. Sometimes it goes back and forth still. One of the things you have to look out for is that your hands are not so far forward that they're pulling your shoulders forward. Many of us are on the computer all day and are leaning forward already so we want to not be constantly kind of pulling over. Bring the hands back so that the elbows are right along the sides of the body.

If you're sitting with the hands together somehow here, rather than resting them on the ankle, which sometimes pulls you forward also, get something so your hands are resting higher up. This kind of keeps the chest a little more open and relaxed.

That's kind of the basics. There's more I could say, but that's plenty I think for our purposes tonight. Let's try it. I'll do a guided meditation on beginning the meditation, which is just getting started. Every meditation has a period of preparation, of getting warmed up for it. Then we'll switch over to do a few minutes of mindfulness of breathing. We have lots of cushions there. If

you want to get more cushions and make yourself more comfortable, you're welcome to do that.

Assuming a posture that for you is a comfortable posture that helps you sit upright. Gently closing your eyes. And the first task is to just relax the surface tension of the day. One way to do that is to take a few deeper breaths, not too deep, but deep enough to really feel your body stretch and expand your torso. Then as you exhale, to relax your body. The deep inhales are a way to feel connected, to start making a connection to your immediate experience of your body. The exhale is a time to relax into your body.

Then letting your breathing return to normal, but continue the process of relaxing on the exhale, starting with the muscles of your face. As you exhale, softening the forehead and around the eyes.

As you exhale, softening the shoulders.

As you exhale, relaxing the belly.

And in the next few exhailes, softening your whole body.

There's one more place that's nice to relax: any tension, tightness, or pressure you might feel that's connected to your thinking – maybe behind the forehead, middle of the head, in the shoulders, sometimes in the chest – wherever there might be some tightness connected to thinking, the thinking muscle. For the next three exhailes, relax that thinking, relax the thinking muscle.

Then notice now where in your body is the experience of breathing most pronounced for you, where is it easiest to feel the movements in the body as you breathe. For some people, it's the movements of the chest. For some people, it's the movements of the belly, the diaphragm. Some people enjoy feeling the movement of the air going in and out through the nostrils. And some people like experiencing all those together, somehow the whole experience of breathing in the body.

In a sense, we're looking to notice how the body, your body, experiences breathing. Whatever way you're breathing is completely fine. It's not about how you're breathing. It's about how you stay connected to it, aware of breathing. Instead of attention going to reinforce thinking, we use our attention to reinforce being present here and now in our bodies as we breathe.

Sooner or later you'll notice your mind is distracted, pulled into a world of thoughts. You're not doing meditation wrong when that happens. It's okay. What the meditation is, what we do then, is just to recognize clearly, "I'm thinking." Recognizing your thinking is not staying on the train of thoughts, but stepping away ("Oh, look at that") and then beginning again with your breathing.

If the thinking mind is strong, then you might start all over again with the little exercises in relaxing the body, in relaxing the thinking mind. If you find yourself drifting off in thoughts often, strongly, you can always do the three breath journey. Just be content with three breaths. And then maybe do it again.

As we come to near the end of this meditation, you might pause briefly from being with your breathing or trying to be with your breath, and instead see if you can recognize how you feel right now. How are you? And see if in whatever way you are, you can let it be enough just to know it, just to recognize, "Oh, this is how I am," without adding anything more to that – any judgments, commentary, or reactions to it. "Oh, this is how it is."

In whatever way you are, in the middle of it now, return to your breathing as if you're breathing into the middle of how you are or out of the middle. Allowing yourself to be the way you are, but centered on your breathing.

To end the meditation, again, take a few long, slow, deep breaths, and as you breathe in deeply, feel your body more fully. Reconnect more fully to your body. Feel your body against your cushion, the chair, the floor. Then when you're ready, you can open your eyes.

[meditation bell rings]

Many years ago, I was on a meditation retreat up in the Santa Cruz Mountains. I had a break from the schedule, and I was sitting on the bank of a small creek with very clear water. As I looked at the water, it was very shallow but very clear. I looked at it and said, "I don't think the water is moving, but it's a creek so it's probably moving." Then I took a stick and put it vertically into the water. A little wake, little waves, formed on the edges of the stick. "Oh, yes, the water is moving, and this is the direction it's moving."

Sometimes, in our lives, we don't see what's happening to us very clearly. We're caught up in our thoughts. We're caught up in our activities, our feelings, what's going on. We're so involved in it, we don't quite know what's happening. But it's useful to have a reference point from which we can see, "Oh, look at that." In meditation, the breathing is that reference point.

If you sit down and try to follow a series of breaths in a row, and you very quickly realize you can't, "My mind is out of control," and you didn't know that until you started to be with your breathing, then the meditation has been successful. Not successful at following the breath, but that's not necessarily the point. The point is to see yourself more clearly: "Oh, look at that. My mind is out of control." And, in our tradition, we say that if you have a mind that's out of control, it's better to know it than not know it.

Having that reference point, trying to be with the breath and not being able to because the mind is spinning or preoccupied, or feelings and emotions are bubbling up, or reactions, or being bored, commentary about what's happening ("this is the best thing since peanut butter"), then all those things are taking you away from the simplicity of just being here. So rather than

being upset that it's taking you away from the simplicity of just being with your breathing, the whole point is to be able to see yourself clearly: "Look at that. I'm thinking about peanut butter all the time when I meditate. Isn't that fascinating? What's going on with me? I had no idea. Now that I think about it, I realize I'm thinking about peanut butter all day." It's probably not peanut butter, but for some people, that's what they do. There's some equivalent. And so it's a way of highlighting and seeing ourselves, getting to know ourselves better.

So if you try to sit down to be with the breathing and it doesn't work, that's okay. The meditation works if you see what it is that's distracting you. "Oh, that's what it is." Some people get so frustrated because they can't stay present for the breathing, and that's unfortunate because that's not the point. The main point is to see ourselves clearly.

But if you're able to stay with the breath, the breath classically is, for most people, not everyone, a calming influence on us. And if you can stay with the breathing, breathe mindfully, it tends to calm the nervous system. Some people find that exhaling a little bit longer than usual helps that calming of the system down.

Many people live tense lives, tense preoccupied lives, so it's good to calm. The calming effect sometimes is contagious, kind of like: "Oh, this is interesting. I want to stay with this because it feels good." And then you're kind of in the world of breathing which can be nice.

To stay with breathing, sometimes you get calmer, quieter. Some people really like meditation because the mind gets quieter, the tensions in the body tend to fade away over time, mostly because we're not reinforcing them anymore. But in daily life, we go around thinking the same things, having the same emotional responses and reactions, and so the tension is just being reinforced. If there's fear all the time, and every place we go we're afraid of something, before you know it, our shoulders are up by the ears. And we don't even know it because that's just normal. Then we sit down to meditate and we're no longer living in that fear world, slowly the shoulders begin to relax because they're not being reinforced. As we stay with the breathing and just relax with it, that supports this movement of no longer feeding our reactivity, feeding our preoccupations.

As we get calmer, we start seeing deeper layers of our reactivity, deeper layers of the operating principles, what makes us run, and what's driving us, which is often happening out of sight from ordinary life. We see some of the common patterns of emotions that really are influencing us, driving us, or affecting us. We see some of the beliefs, thoughts, and assumptions we have that are kind of hidden because we're so much in the surface mind, so busy and activated.

So there's a value to getting quieter and quieter because it allows us to see what's happening with us clearer and clearer. I'm emphasizing this so you don't set up breath meditation as something you can do and fail at. There's no failing. You do it the best you can, and then you learn from how you're not doing it. Then you're 100% doing meditation accurately. "Oh, look at that! That's why I keep losing the breath because I'm much more interested in peanut butter.

Who would have guessed? Wow, I'm like a peanut butter junkie. Boy, I better stop eating peanut butter for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. That's going to consume all my waking hours."

I'm being silly with that, but it's not a silly phenomenon that people get preoccupied with all kinds of things. That's what they think about all the time or are concerned with all the time.

Sometimes it's kind of sad. We have a society that feeds us fear. Society has social constructs that really reinforce fear and feelings of inadequacy of who we are. Then people take it very personally. It's a personal failure. It's really society that's kind of teaching this to us. And some people are caught up in some level of anxiety all the time. To be able to just see it, and breathe with it, and relax with it is life-changing if it's an alternative to always being caught up in it.

Some people come to meditation and discover that they had no idea how that was pervasive. "I'm always anxious. I didn't know." It's sad, but it's really inspiring to finally see it. The principle in this practice here is that it's much better if you see what you're doing, see what's driving you, than not knowing it at all.

Once you see it, the idea is to be really simple with it. There's no need in this meditation to judge yourself, no need to feel like anything that you do when you're sitting quietly in this kind of meditation posture is wrong. It's just something else to see. It's something else to know and to hold, kind of like you're your best friend.

Maybe some of you have had the experience of either being someone's friend or someone being your friend where one of the people is upset about something. You sit on a bench and your friend just listens to you. They are just there; they accompany you. They don't try to fix you or try to solve anything. They're a really good listener, and something in your system relaxes with that.

The idea in meditation is we're being our own friend. We're just listening, we're just being with how we are, so that something in our nervous system can relax. The idea is to be simple, to be that friend: "Oh, that's how it is. Okay, let's go back to breathing in the middle of it. Let's go back because maybe there's more to discover. Let's go back and breathe. Breathe."

Then sometimes maybe you breathe for not three breaths, but 10 breaths. Maybe sometimes you start feeling at some point where you stay long enough with a series of breaths that you kind of get in the groove with it and it just feels like you're starting getting concentrated, "Oh, this is really good." And it just feels very sweet. There's all this wonderful sweetness, actually a kind of inner beauty where the breath feels really beautiful. You feel really beautiful inside. That comes from being absorbed or being really kind of tuned in to the breath over time.

That's one of the byproducts that can happen. Don't try to make that happen. Anytime you try to make something happen in meditation, then guess what? That's the opportunity to say: "Look at that. I'm trying to make something happen. Turns out I'm trying to do that all day long. I do it all day long, trying to make something happen, fix something, adjust something, improve

something. Now I'm doing it in meditation. Of course, I'm doing it in meditation. Look at that. Now I can see it much more clearly. Even here I'm doing it. Wow, I guess meditation's working. I see it." As opposed to: "Oh no, I can't meditate. I'm a terrible meditator because I'm always trying."

This kind of attitude, "Now I'm not doing it right, I'm a terrible meditator," is one of those odd things that's a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you have that belief, it kind of becomes true. But you don't have to believe it. Don't go that way. Meditation is a radically different paradigm of how to be with oneself – just to know this is how it is.

Now I'll take some questions about any of this we've done so far. But before I do that I want to say something I forgot. My voice is kind of quiet so if you have trouble hearing me, you can raise your hand and ask us to turn up the volume. We also have hearing assistant devices just outside there on the counter. You can go now if you want one or anytime you come here. Those hearing assistant devices work well to augment the sound.

Any questions about anything or concerns about anything so far?

Participant 1: I've meditated for a few years now. Somebody once told me that when you eat and then meditate after, it's not good because your concentration... it wouldn't work. I never listened to that, but I always meditate in the morning before I eat. Today we ate right before we came here, and I realized does that have some kind of truth in it? Or is it just, I don't know...

Gil: It's very interesting what you say. The idea of mindfulness meditation is to learn to become your own teacher. The way you become your own teacher is to experiment with that. Sometimes meditate before you eat, like before breakfast, and see how that is. Sometimes do it afterwards. And then see what works for you. Some people find that it's easier to be present for meditation if their stomach is not full. Other people find that only by eating a little bit first do they have the energy and clarity to be able to practice attention. So different people are different this way. Rather than me telling you what it should be, it's much better if you discover for yourself by trial and error different things. Is that okay?

Participant 1: Thank you.

Gil: There is a long tradition of meditators meditating first thing in the morning, kind of before everyone else is awake. It can be so sweet. It's still, very quiet. There are not many cars on the road. It may be dark. It feels like there's all this support for just being present and quiet and calm. Some people find the advantage of meditating as soon after they wake up is that the momentum of daily concerns hasn't built up. So some people find that it's a really nice time. Other people find that it's terrible to meditate first thing in the morning. They're just so anxious, and they can't wait for their cup of coffee. So the idea is to learn how it works for you.

There was a long period in my life when I meditated twice a day. When I was in college, I meditated first thing in the morning and 40 minutes before I went to bed in the evening. That

was my rhythm. That was a great rhythm for me. There was another period of time when I meditated first thing in the morning and then when I came back from work at six o'clock. That was really great, to come back from work and just kind of clear out. The first half of the meditation was clearing out all the momentum and stuff of the workday. The second half of the meditation I had the benefit of being cleared out, and now I was sitting there really clear. Now I was clear for the rest of the evening. I was refreshed and clear and renewed for the evening. So the idea is to experiment and find out what's nice.

Participant 2: I was actually going to ask about meditating in the morning and the trade-offs between there being nothing to be worried about yet, the day has just started. But you addressed it.

Gil: If a person has lots of time and ability, it's great to do it two times a day, just because at different times a day you have different benefits in different ways. But most people can't do it. A lot of people work and have responsibilities, so once a day is plenty.

Participant 3: When I heard that when I first started, that you can't fail at meditating, I remember interpreting that as whenever I sat down, I would just do whatever, let my mind go wherever. Now I know a little better. But would you say that that's... I don't want to use "fail," but are you not really meditating if you just let your mind go all over the place?

Gil: Yes. It's possible to sit down and not meditate. You know, sit there and just daydream. "I can't fail," and I'm thinking about going to Disneyland and buying more peanut butter.

Participant 3: Those were my first days, yeah.

Gil: There are people who have wasted years of their lives because somehow they got the idea that they're allowed to think anything they want, "Everything's okay in meditation." They're just drifting off in thought and planning vacations and all that. Maybe it's nice to do, but it's not meditating.

The core thing of mindfulness is to really recognize, "Oh, I'm planning a vacation; this is what's happening now." But it's not just recognizing it lightly. It's to recognize it with such clarity that it's the equivalent of... It happened to me once when I was younger when I was in a crowd of people arguing about something. For some reason, I had to leave. When I came back a couple of minutes later, they were still arguing, but I was like 10 feet away. I stood there looking at them, and I was no longer in the argument. I was no longer invested. I was no longer caught. I was just watching them from a distance: "Wow, that's quite something. They've kind of lost themselves in this argument. They're not listening to each other." But I was no longer caught in it. So it's like taking a step back from your life and really seeing it.

And it's not like a checklist approach. You know, "Oh, distracted. Let's continue thinking about the distraction." It's like, "Oh, look at that." Stepping back: "I'm planning vacations. This is what planning vacations is like."

What you'll see, as we go through these weeks, is that in order to see it more clearly, you start feeling the sensations and physicality, the body side, what happens when you're thinking about vacations. Then you start recognizing the emotions that are driving it. Then you start recognizing the thoughts that are driving it. The whole ecology of what we're doing starts becoming open, so the act of recognition is seeing the big picture of our life – what's really all the details of what's happening. And as you do that, you're no longer caught in it. You're starting to become free. And in that freedom, the whole system will begin to relax and become calmer and more clear. Does that make sense?

Participant 3: Yes, thank you.

Gil: So there is a kind of purpose and momentum in all this. But if you really like the idea of failing, yes, I mean, if you're really just sitting here daydreaming and not paying any attention to what's going on, then of course you failed meditating. But as soon as you are paying attention, then you can't fail.

Participant 3: Thank you.

Participant 4: I've been meditating for a while, but I wanted to sort of contrast the experience of mindfulness versus another technique. What I've noticed with the technique that you're teaching, which is just keep going back to the breath, what I find is at least for a while I'm wondering what is it about the breath? There's no drama, there's no nothing. Why should I keep going back? There's a certain boredom that starts coming in. And then slowly what I notice are the dynamics that I start settling down and become calmer, and then I can focus on the breath a lot better. Does that make any sense?

Gil: I think so. There are many, many ways of meditating. There are different kinds of meditation practice. In Buddhism, we have different meditation practices that people do. Some meditation practices are focusing much more on concentration rather than mindfulness. In Buddhism, there are two major movements of meditation: the mindfulness movement and the concentration movement. Some people do one or the other. Some people combine them in a certain way. Kind of what we do here at IMC is combine them.

Some people begin with concentration. Concentration is much easier to fail because you're either concentrated or you're not. The mind wanders off and you fail. You have to come back, come back. The advantage of the concentration approach – come back and come back, come back – is it's really simple. You don't have to think about what you're doing. You don't have to recognize anything, just start again, start again, come back. For some people, something really begins to relax when it's that simple and you're no longer feeding the distractions.

For some people, it works better to do concentration first and then mindfulness. For some people, it works better to do mindfulness first and then concentration. Mindfulness turns out to be a phenomenally useful meditation practice to learn to be able to do any other kind of

meditation practice or contemplative practice, prayer, or spiritual practice people do. A lot of people who follow a non-Buddhist religious tradition have come to learn mindfulness so they can do their own religion better because they see clearly what the mind is doing. They see how they get caught. They see how they can learn how to be more present for what they're doing. Is this an adequate answer for you or do you want to ask again?

Participant 4: No, I think that's okay. I have to kind of practice it some more to understand. I tend to try and concentrate which is the problem.

Gil: Yeah. The concentration approach was what you did before?

Participant 4: Yeah. I've been trying to do mindfulness also. But I tend to start trying to stay on the breath, and then it goes away. Then I wonder why it's difficult to stay there.

Gil: Yeah, so what I'm suggesting here is stay a little bit on the breath, but when you find your mind wandering off, take the time to recognize, "Oh, that's what's happening." And then begin again at the breathing. But always take your time: "Oh, this is what's happening. This is why I'm distracted. This is what I'm caught up in." And then begin again with the breathing until the next thing.

Over time, some of the reasons for being distracted will quiet down because you've seen it, you know it. And maybe you're not so tempted anymore. "Okay. Come back. Come back." Then maybe rather than being with two breaths, you're with four, six, eight breaths. And once you can get into like maybe... I mean, without forcing it, without trying too hard, if you can stay with 20 or 30 breaths in a row, at some point you might feel like I said earlier, you get in the groove, the sweetness of that.

The human system that we have loves to be absorbed. Some of you may have read... I don't think people read novels anymore. Now there's Netflix. But some of you have probably read a novel and it's just so enjoyable to read it. Or you do a craft or play a musical instrument and you kind of get absorbed in what you're doing. Or cooking and you get absorbed in what you're doing. It's just so nice to do it. Everything else kind of gets forgotten. This idea of just everything forgotten and just really doing your one thing, kind of being in the groove of that, is really good for this psychophysical system of ours. It feels really nice and sweet to do it. The same thing can happen with breathing. At some point, when we no longer get pulled away into all these things because we've recognized them, we've learned to settle them, we've learned to relax, at some point, 20, 30, 40 breaths, who knows how long it takes, but the whole system begins to gather around the breathing, and it's usually called concentration. It gets concentrated on the breath but gathered around.

Believe it or not, it's like better than reading a good novel. In principle or just hearing that, it seems ridiculous, right? The breath, how can that be interesting? But what's interesting is not the breath. What's interesting is the mind's ability to get concentrated and focused, and not a few meditators feel a lot of joy. There's something that produces joy, a sense of well-being, for

our system to be unified into an absorbed state. Most people live fragmented lives, and this meditation helps us to stop being fragmented and brings everything together so it can be unified in harmony. That's where the sweetness comes.

Participant 5: I find that when I'm trying to come back to the breathing, I get off in a little tangent in my mind. I have this tendency to sort of visualize this person who is doing this motion in and out for the breathing. But I don't know if that is using my mind to focus on the breathing. It sort of happens where I just visualize this person who's doing this motion.

Gil: That's great. To be able to answer your question I have to ask you a question. When you visualize that person doing this thing with the breathing, what happens to you?

Participant 5: Well, I relax and I can do the counting. So I can do the counting.

Gil: It helps you be present, helps you relax, helps you to be there?

Participant 5: Yeah.

Gil: Then it's useful.

Participant 5: Okay.

Gil: But, at some point, you want to stop the visualizing. So use it when it's useful to get you going or get you centered, and then once you're kind of more there, stop doing it. Does that make sense?

Participant 5: Yeah.

Gil: You look a teeny bit perplexed.

Participant 5: Well, I just don't know that I can do that. I don't know if I can. Then what am I actually thinking about? Am I thinking "breath in, breath out"?

Gil: Oh, when there's no visualization?

Participant 5: Yeah.

Gil: Oh, okay. Yes, this gets to another instruction that we give in this tradition about mindfulness that's optional, but some people find it very helpful. Whatever you're being aware of, you make a very quiet, gentle, tender, relaxed note, naming it. If you're with your breathing, you would gently say "in" as you're breathing in, "out" as you're breathing out, and that might be enough for your mind to be involved.

The way I was taught originally, it was “rising” because we were told to follow the breath in the belly. So when you breathe in, the rising of the belly, you say “rising.” And then as you breathe out, “falling” as the belly fell. There are these different words you can use. If you find yourself thinking about peanut butter, you say “thinking.” You don't even have to say “peanut butter.” You can just say “thinking.” Or if you're finding yourself feeling kind of agitated, “agitated.” We'll talk more about this, but maybe for you, you're looking for something that you can do so you're not too idle. And the visualization of this person doing the breathing gets you involved, right? The other thing you might try is this very simple mental noting, “in,” “out,” and see if that keeps you on track.

Participant 6: I'm very new to meditation. One thing that I noticed today as I was meditating was when I was concentrating on the breath, I felt that I had forgotten how to breathe, and every action of breathe in, breathe out, did not feel natural, like I was breathing in too hard. It was more like what they tell you in yoga, like when you are breathing in, breathe in very deeply, and then breathe out very deeply. So I was trying to do that because I was concentrating too much on the breath. I think that's unnatural, but I also wanted to hear your thoughts about it.

Gil: Yeah, for people who have come from a tradition where you do a lot of controlling your breath, where you breathe in particular ways, it takes a while to switch gears and do this practice where we don't try to do anything special with our breath. We just leave our breath alone and let the breath breathe itself. We call it a natural breath. Don't try to make it special; don't try to change it.

For some people, it goes on automatic, that they start trying to control their breath and do something with their breath. There are two things you can do with that. The first is to go along with what I said already today: now you get to be mindful, aware, of what it's like to have a controlled breath. It might be uncomfortable. It might feel like you shouldn't be doing it. But if you're doing it, just relax and keep doing it. And be aware that you're doing it: “Oh, look at that. This is a controlled breath.” You can use the mental note “control” – this is what control is like.

The magic of this is that if you clearly see that this is what you're doing, at some point, your inner system will begin to relax. But if you feel like you're controlling the breath, and then you try to control it by controlling it more, you can spin out and end up in trouble. So just relax. Controlled breath, not controlled breath, just know you're breathing the way it is. And let it be really simple. So that's the first thing I would suggest.

The other thing you can do sometimes when you're caught up in controlling the breath is just stop breathing for a little while. A little while means four seconds, just very short, until you feel a natural pull to breathe in. And then just allow it to breathe in. Maybe at the top of the in-breath pause until you feel the natural pull to breathe out. And sometimes that little pause breaks the controlling. Okay?

Participant 7: Do you have suggestions for creating the habit of a meditation practice?

Gil: I think one of the ways of developing a habit of meditation practice is to do it every day, so that's kind of like a catch-22, right? First, what you should do is consider what's realistic. If you decide I'm going to sit and meditate 45 minutes every day in the morning, but your life is so busy and it's impossible to do, then you're just disappointed because you can never do it. You have to figure out how long and when in the day is realistic for you. And that's some of the reason why some people find it really good to do it first thing in the morning before we get caught by everything. But it's possible that's not what your life is about. It may be possible if you do it 10 minutes a day. That you can realistically do. Anything more than that is not realistic.

So I would start with something short and then build on that. In fact, that's what I recommend for this intro to meditation class. For those of you who are starting meditation with this class, start with 10 minutes each day for this next week. And maybe not even every day, but six of the next seven days, so maybe Sundays off or something. Then next week add five minutes. That's one way to develop a habit, doing something that's brief enough that you can actually do it. Then after the week, you might enjoy it enough, you might be in the groove a little bit more, and so then adding five minutes is manageable. Then the following week I'll suggest another five minutes, another five minutes. And once you get up to 30 minutes, maybe that's enough.

Participant 8: Gil, you have your morning sessions at 7 o'clock. Are those also available, recorded? I mean, people could do that even earlier if that 7 o'clock time doesn't work, right?

Gil: Yeah. What's being referred to is that every weekday morning at 7 a.m. I'm on YouTube. I do a 30-minute guided meditation and then I give a 15-minute talk. Those are recorded on our YouTube channel, and you can listen to them later. We also have an audio recording. We have a website called Audio Dharma that you can get to. There's a link to it at the top of IMC's website. There is where you can listen to all the talks that are given here. If you ever want to listen to this talk again, it'll be on the website. If you miss next week's class but you want to hear it, you can listen to the audio recording or you can go on the YouTube channel because the video is recorded as well.

Some of you might know that I've been doing these 30-minute guided meditations since the beginning of the pandemic. Some people are kind of becoming dependent on guided meditations. You asked about a habit for starting. That's another way people get into the habit is by using guided meditations. That keeps them engaged. But, sooner or later, it's really good to learn to meditate without any guidance – just be quiet and not have any extra input – because the idea is you're supposed to meet yourself. When you have a guided meditation, you're not quite alone with your own mind and your own heart. That's where the real benefit comes when you're alone with yourself and meet yourself in some deep way.

People who use guided meditations sometimes get a little bit attached to how the guided meditation helps them get relaxed and then they get attached to that. But that's not the point of this meditation. The point of it is to see clearly. The ancient Buddhist word for insight – we're

called the Insight Meditation Center – is *vipassanā*, which literally means clear seeing. This is the practice of clear seeing.

It's just about time to end. Let's end with a five to six-minute meditation.

Beginning with care for your posture, and gently closing your eyes. Again, preparing for the meditation period, taking some long, slow, deep breaths. Relaxing on the exhale.

Then letting your breathing return to normal.

Relaxing the belly.

At the end of the exhale, pause for just a moment, just long enough to feel the impulse to want to breathe in. And as soon as you feel that natural impulse in the chest, in the belly, allow – let there be a feeling of allowing – allow the inhale to begin. Almost like you're making room for it, welcoming it, "Ah, come."

Then, at the top of the inhale, just before you exhale, pause there as well, just for a moment, just long enough to feel the body wanting to exhale. And then relax, so the body does exhale. Release the breath.

Allowing the inhale, releasing with the exhale.

Allowing the inhale. And as you release the exhale, release any concerns you have. Let go of your thoughts. And ride the exhale all the way to the end of the exhale.

Then, to end this meditation, taking some deeper breaths to feel your body more fully. Feel your chair, the floor, the cushion. Remember that you're in a room with a group of other people. And then when you're ready, you can open your eyes.

[meditation bell rings]

Thank you for being here, for coming to this. I hope this was not too many words. There's a tradition that I didn't follow, which is when you want to teach meditation, you do it with as few words as possible so there's not so much to think about. But, as a way of saying that, I want to just say "keep it simple." Try to keep it as simple as you can. And if you don't remember everything that I taught today, it's probably better – just enough to keep you doing it in a relaxed way.

A lot of the learning comes from doing it, so if you're able over this week to just meditate 10 minutes a day, then you'll be more prepared to come back and hear the next set of instructions. If you don't meditate in the next week, don't worry about it. Just come anyway if you want. That's okay. The way I teach this course, as we go along, I'm trying to also teach some life skills

with mindfulness and awareness that's applicable in your life, independent of meditating. So you're not a failure because you don't meditate. You might benefit from this anyway.

Some of the people who showed up today to help set up and prepare are long-time meditators. When we finish here, you can walk up to them and ask them questions about either meditation or IMC if you want to learn more about IMC. Tom, who has a name tag, has been around for a long time. He's taught this course before, so he knows a lot of this. Nancy, who greeted people at the table, you can check in with her. The other Nancy has also been around and done a lot of meditation at our retreat center. She can talk a little bit about our retreat center as can Sveta. She's been at our retreat center a lot for retreats. Is there someone else? Anna, of course. She has a name tag. She's also been around here for a very long time. She'd be delighted to answer questions. If any of you speak Spanish, then you can do it in Spanish. It's sometimes easier for some people.

Thank you for being here. I hope this serves you well. I'm here too if you want to ask me a question.