

First Monday Instructions Including Walking Instructions

Online Hybrid Insight Retreat Sept 8 - Sept 28

Insight Retreat Center

Gil Fronsdal

There's a common idea that when you practice, you should practice without expectation; you should practice without judgments and ideas of what should happen, or could happen, or what you want to have happen. Something like that. I'm not completely 100% behind this idea. But maybe 90% of the time it has probably saved a lot of headaches, a lot of problems around these things that we have.

But I want to offer you another reference point for what we can bring along with us. There are times when I'm driving up the local freeway, 101, for those of you from Redwood City to San Francisco. It's an urban freeway. People are going fast, lots of things. And I'm a little bit agitated from the traffic, and going, and busyness, and stop-and-go, and all the things that a freeway can be. Then you go up over a little rise on the freeway and come down, and there's this amazing view of the bay around where the old candlestick [factory?] used to be, and the water comes up really close to the freeway. I'm very much touched by water. Water is a very powerful reference point for me maybe because of the way I grew up. So when I see that, especially when San Francisco Bay is calm, and I'm looking out at this vast expanse, something inside of me settles and gets calmer. What has happened is that there's a new reference point for what's happening and that reference point actually makes a difference, impacts me.

So when we sit and meditate, we can have reference points for what we're doing. The Buddha's teaching is filled with these reference points. It's possible to interpret them in such a way as to think we're supposed to make ourselves this way. But there's also an art to letting these reference points be somehow nearby so they remind something deep in your body, deep inside: "Ah. I can

return to this. This too.” Maybe something can settle so you feel more at ease, maybe feel safer, maybe feel more at home here. Exactly what is supportive for you is up to you and your story, your life.

So one of the things I wanted to teach during this retreat – i’ll introduce it here – is there’s a place where the Buddha has a refrain. And part of the refrain is: *One puts aside memories and thoughts of lay life* (the ordinary, everyday life in the world).

And so that’s one reference point: putting aside memories and thoughts about the world out there, where I came from, what was going on, what has to happen, the kind of things that frequently appears in the news. It might be difficult to put aside what you brought with you here to the retreat – recent events, things that happened, concerns you have.

But in fact, there’s this reference point. We’re actually, for now, putting all that aside. And that’s an ordinary thing to do. We do that all kinds of times in life, where we say, “Okay, this is not the time for certain things.” If you invite friends over for dinner, that’s not the time for certain preoccupations. Put those aside for now so you can be with your friends and making dinner. If you take a shower, I hope you don’t bring your device with you to make sure to catch the latest email. You put that aside. So it’s an ordinary thing in life that we do here and there – put things aside for the purpose of what we’re doing.

So here, maybe in a loving way, in a caring way, we have this reference point that maybe can help you to settle. Maybe it doesn’t stop you from thinking about other things. But maybe you understand, “Oh, that’s not what it’s about. I don’t have to invest so much into it. I don’t have to pick it up and keep reinforcing it.”

And then the Buddha goes on to say that one internally – *internally*: there’s a movement not outwards to what happened before, elsewhere, at other times and places, but a turning inward to this inner life that we have. That’s really the terrain, the homeland for the exploration of this practice. So turning the mind inward. And it’s not so far-fetched to see that the metaphor for this mind is a body of water, like me looking at the bay. Over and over again, the Buddha uses water as a metaphor for the practice, and for the mind, for awareness.

Inwardly, the mind becomes stilled, quiet, unified and collected.

So just hearing that doesn't make it happen that way. But that is a reference point. 'Oh, right next to you.' Is there some way you can just look over the rise and have some kind of intuitive sense of, 'Oh. A place of stillness.' Maybe next to the agitation. Maybe even in the middle of your agitation, there's stillness. Or maybe if the mind is wide and broad, the way awareness holds your agitation is what is still. Quiet.

There is the noise of the mind, the chatter of the mind. Not to make it a problem and wrong to have it that way. But maybe there's a way in which there's a reference point. Oh yeah, there's also quiet of the mind. Maybe it's not so far away. Maybe just beyond the edges of the noise, there's quiet.

The mind unified and collected. The movement towards being whole. Everything has a place here. Everything is included.

And what is that whole that includes everything, that frees us from any preoccupation with any part of the whole?

So, with this reference point – putting aside memories and thoughts of the lay life, inwardly letting the mind be still and quiet, unified, and collected – becoming aware of your body as you sit here. And in a way that works for you, to be aware of the global body, whatever way that's easy, a broad awareness of your body.

Every sensation you feel in your body exists because you have nerve endings in that part of your body. And if what the mind is, is a sum total of your whole nervous system, and the mind is not just in the head – the mind is as wide as the global experience of your body, as expansive – to know your mind is also to know your body. To know your body is to know your mind.

And then, within the body, as part of the body, to become aware of the body's experience of breathing.

Maybe trusting that if you're present for the body's experience of breathing, that is also the mind's experience of breathing. The two are not separate.

And with the body's experience of breathing, how broadly through your body does breathing touch your body?

How wide and broad are the movements of the body as you breathe?

How wide and broad in your torso is the expansion of the torso as you breathe in?

How does the body collect itself on the exhale, returning from an expansive torso to a gathered-in experience of the torso?

What physical sensations come into existence as you breathe in?

And how are the sensations of exhaling different than inhaling? How are the sensations of exhaling different than inhaling?

These bodies of ours were designed to breathe.

Is there any part of the cycle of breathing in and out that you're not involved in doing? Where it just feels as if the body does it itself? Breathing breathes itself.

And maybe it's easier to let the breathing breathe itself if there's a sense of the wider body within which breathing occurs – the wider field of the body that receives and allows breathing in, breathing out.

Feeling the body as you breathe. Allowing the body to soften as you exhale.

Allowing the body to relax. Not so much doing the relaxing, but maybe a sensitivity to the body shows how the body wants to relax, and you allowing it.

Maybe around the eyes and the forehead... in the face... maybe more broadly in the head... in the shoulders... in the belly...

Sensitive to the breathing, breathing itself, sensing the sensations that appear, come and go, as you breathe.

And I'll offer you, before I'm quiet now, these four reference points, and see if anything inside resonates with them, maybe in a way that makes it simpler to breathe and breathing becomes quieter, softer:

The reference point of a healthy stillness. A nourishing stillness of being.

The reference of an inner quiet.

The reference of an inner unification or wholeness.

The reference of an inner collectivity or gathering together, so all things are allowed to be there without a need to be involved in them.

... ..

One of the things that I believe is useful to take into account in being on retreat is the momentum of our life – the momentum of our thoughts, our concerns, our preoccupations; the momentum of our emotional life that has been triggered. Some of that momentum has to just dissipate. Sometimes you can't just flip a switch and turn these things off. But if things like thinking continue to be fed, they keep going. It's kind of like having a little push scooter you're pushing with one foot. If you stop pushing, it will come to a stop. But if you keep pushing – if you don't stop kicking, it'll keep going, maybe forever.

So there are conscious and unconscious ways in which we're participating in or fueling some of our emotional life and some of our mental life – our thinking. We can't necessarily even see how we're doing it, but with something as simple as coming back to the breathing, staying with the breathing, the fuel of attention is no longer going into the momentum of preoccupation, fantasy, planning, and thinking.

Attention is kind of like a fuel. The way we use awareness and engage it is a fuel that feeds whatever it is directed towards. So if it goes toward thinking, you're kind of feeding that. You can let thinking be on the side. But if attention goes to breathing, then you're supporting the momentum of awareness with the breathing and you're decreasing the feeding of the thinking, the preoccupations.

There's also a fine art: when awareness is done consciously – when we're aware of being aware, when we're intentionally aware – then even while being aware of thinking, the food is going into awareness, not into the thinking.

So when we keep staying with the breath, staying with the breath, staying with the breath, slowly, the momentum of everything else has a chance to settle because it's not being fed as much. But you have to give it time to allow things to settle.

It's the same way with walking meditation. It helps to have an alternative to do at the beginning of a retreat so that you're not inadvertently reinforcing the mind that wants to think about things and spin out.

And so when you do formal walking meditation, the steps are equivalent to the breathing, as an anchor or home base to keep showing up for. You all have some sense of walking meditation, and hopefully you do do it. It works even if you don't want to do it. It's invaluable to do walking meditation. One reason it's invaluable is that it is a way of ensuring that there's a continuity of practice throughout the day.

The art of this is not to strain to have continuity or work too hard at it, but also not to swing to the other extreme and not have any continuity – to just kind of forget about everything when you're not sitting (have tea, and go for a walk, and smell the flowers, and plan your vacations).

And at the beginning of a retreat, one of the ways that works for some of us to have that continuity in walking where we're feeding the practice more than we're feeding thinking or preoccupation, is maybe today or tomorrow, to count your steps. One way is to count up to ten. Another way is to count up to five. Another way is to count up to two, then start over again. Sometimes with a short count you won't get distracted. Sometimes the habit of a long count – ten is so long – gets you into the automatic quality of it, and off your mind runs.

What I learned in Burma was a practice of counting where you count five steps, then you start over again at one and count to six steps. Then you start at one and count to seven, and so on, up to ten. Then the next time you count to nine, then to eight. Maybe that's more complicated than you want to be, but it engages the mind so that you're not feeding the thinking mind. It might feel sometimes like it's too much, but if you really pay attention, it's better than the alternative, which is to just let the mind do whatever it wants and continue to feed the momentum of something you probably don't want to keep feeding.

As with all forms of practice, it helps if you do it lovingly, kindly, without expectation, and maybe with the reference point of a certain inner stillness, an inner quiet, an inner unification, an inner collectedness. Allowing yourself to become collected; allowing yourself to gather together; allowing everything you are to kind of settle together here. All of you is included. All of you is welcomed here in this unification process, this stilling process, this quieting process that allows all of us to be at ease.

May you be at ease on this first day of practice. And may you navigate the first day of retreat with the wisdom that you've gained from having done this many times before. I hope you enjoy the day. Thank you.