

## Introduction to IMC's Meditation Instruction

**Gil Fronsdal**

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So for the talk today, I want to start with a story I'm fond of as an introduction to what I'll be talking about. There was a person who was well learned in Buddhism. Many years studying with the great teachers of the era, studied all the great books and suttas and commentaries. And so, at some point, he went to his end master, and now with a piece of beautiful calligraphy paper, and asked the master to do a calligraphy, to write down the most important teaching of Buddhism. In calligraphy, there's a tradition, especially in Japan, that the Zen masters will do calligraphy, and sometimes the scrolls are hung in a respectful place in a home. And so, in that custom, the person went to the Zen master and made that request.

The Zen master thought about it for a while, and then with great focus and presence, wrote something on the scroll. The person was very excited that this great Zen master was going to write the essential nugget, what Buddhism is about. The Zen master wrote the character in Japanese for attention, just that one word—attention, a single character. The person said, "Oh, no, you seem to not quite understand. I want the most important, the essential, the key teaching." So the Zen master took another piece of paper and, with great focus and presence, wrote another two characters now.

The person was very excited to see it now, thinking it would be something profound. The Zen master had written attention again. The person explained, feeling that they were well studied, that they had read all the great philosophies of Buddhism, surveyed the whole terrain, and studied with lots of teachers. They felt sophisticated and knowledgeable. So, they asked, "Can you really capture the essence of the philosophy, of the teachings?" The Zen master said, "Oh, now I understand, okay?"

He took another piece of paper, and with great focus and presence, looked at the paper, composed attention in the moment, grounded here, and then wrote attention. This idea of attention is so important for this tradition, for Buddhism, and everything you need to know and

need to occur in Buddhist practice happens through the vehicle of paying attention, being attentive to what's going on. A beginning class in meditation would tell you to start being mindful, start engaging your attention in the present moment. In some ways, it can be seen as a beginner's practice, but it's the same practice for someone who has been practising for years, someone who has matured in the practice, reached full maturity for it. It's still attention. The core practice is the same.

The practice of a beginner and the practice of someone who has practised for a long time is in some ways the same. People who practise for a long time, it's always good to go back to the beginning, to really start over again, in a sense. But if we've done practice for a long time, we don't quite start over. The practice is the same—attention. The basic instructions might be the same as for a beginner, but we bring something along. Something accompanies us from the maturity of our practice that creates a little different context for doing the basic practice.

What I'd like this talk to be about is an introduction to meditation practice. It's meant for people who are maybe pretty new to all this, maybe your first time coming to a talk. Also, some of you have practised for a long time, and I hope it's going to work for you, too, that you don't say you're ready to turn off the YouTube channel because, "Oh, it's just going to be an introduction to meditation. I know all too well what meditation is about." I hope that you'll appreciate, as in the minutes that I talk, that it offers something a little different.

The reason for this topic is that my current plan—which is subject to change by tomorrow morning—is, for the next few weeks, on the seven a teaching that I do, to go through the basic instructions in meditation practice that I teach here at MC. I teach a five-week intro meditation class periodically, and that follows a pattern. The pattern is: the first day, first evening, we talk about breathing. The second evening, we talk about mindfulness of the body. The third day is mindfulness of emotions. The fourth one is mindfulness of thinking. The fifth time is everything else, kind of an "A."

I thought we would go through that one week at a time: a week on breathing, a week on body, a week on emotions, a week on thinking, and then maybe a week or two on some other things. I feel it's really, really useful to come back to the beginning, to basics, for everyone. As I said, I think that basics are not just basics for people who have a lot of experience. It's still the basic practice, but hopefully something accompanies that. There's an understanding and insight, an approach to starting over again that is both just starting over again, sharing the practice of a beginner, but somehow there's something else happening there along with it. So that's the plan.

This talk today is a little bit like an introduction to the series that I'm planning to do. I wanted to take the opportunity to contextualize, to step back a little bit more objectively, and contextualize the instructions in meditation that I've been doing here during this pandemic time, and also at MC, and how it fits into the larger scene. All instructions are probably at best a choice of words, but are contrived, are artificial. They're something that are constructed, made, and presented. As such, they have history. The way that I teach this five-week intro class at MC—I had it, I'll tell you the origins of it.

When I went to practise *vipassanā*, insight meditation, in Thailand and Burma, the instructions were very simple. In fact, in Burma, I showed up at kind of the ground headquarters—that's ground zero for the whole, in some ways, *vipassanā* movement that spread into the West. They gave me a cassette and a Q and A player with fifteen minutes of instructions in the meditation. That was the extent of the instructions that I was given. I used them for the eight months that I was on retreat there. All the instructions were given in fifteen minutes.

The simplest way of repeating those fifteen minutes is to focus on the sensations of your breathing. If something becomes more predominant, more compelling than your breathing, let go of the breathing and bring your attention to really see what it is that's pulling you away, or what's more compelling. When that's settled enough—it doesn't have to stop, but settled enough, no longer so compelling—go back to your breathing. It was a lovely practice for me to discover, because in doing Zen practice before that, the focus was so much on breathing and on posture, that there were no instructions for emotions, for thinking, for all the wider range of our experience. In *vipassanā*, I learned that these simple instructions included this wider—all of our humanity. Everything was included.

I remember, after practising in Burma for a while, I got so happy when I realized at some point that this practice taught me to be mindful, to be present for everything in my experience. The reason I became so happy was that I knew that if I was mindful, there was a way of being free, liberated from experience. This idea that no matter what the human experience is, because I knew now how to be mindful of it, I could find some kind of freedom, some kind of peace, some kind of independence, some kind of autonomy, disentanglement with it all. I still couldn't do it so well, but now I knew the theory: I can be free anywhere I go if I keep practising mindfulness. So that was it—the instructions were very simple, and then there's certainly more that happened in those fifteen minutes of instructions, but it was all done like that.

I came to practice a little bit here in the West, and then at some point I was invited to become a teacher in this spiritual tradition. Only then did I really start attending Western insight med-

itation retreats. I hadn't done a lot of things here in the West. Here, I discovered they taught the instructions in a different way. On retreats, they would start on the first day teaching about breathing meditation, to get grounded and get settled. The second day, they would talk about mindfulness of the body, partly because by the second day people's bodies were aching and challenging. The third day, they would talk about instructions in mindfulness of emotion.

By the third day, that was often kind of challenging for people, so that was useful. The fourth day, they would talk about mindfulness of thinking. Then there would be some other things the next days of the retreat. That was a pattern. I was introduced to that pattern, and I thought this was a nice pattern. As a part of my teacher training, starting in 1990, I was asked to take over a group, a small meditation group in Palo Alto, and I taught them every week for about a year, a year and a half or so, until it became clear it would be useful to do instructions in meditation for people.

So then I offered the first time, but I had never received any kind of basic meditation class or instructions and meditation class, which I was about to teach. I didn't have any reference points for how you do it, and I certainly wasn't going to do the fifteen minutes instructions that I got in Burma. So I said, "Well, the way that are taught on retreat, that's a very nice sequence, and it leads up to the way we were taught in Burma, because after you get the full set of instructions, then you know how to be present for everything." That was what we were building to on the retreats. By the fifth, sixth day, then the instructions were similar to what they are in Burma. So I thought, "Why don't I teach a five-week course following the instructions on the retreat?"

One of the reasons I was motivated was that the class was an hour and a half. Actually, initially, I think they were maybe forty-five minutes, but it's longer than the ten, fifteen minutes instructions on a retreat. So I thought, you know, those instructions are so brief. There's so much more to say about the instructions for each of these things. I wanted more time. So I initially had forty-five minutes, and then eventually it became an hour and a half in order to go into some real explanations, real care around how to teach mindfulness of each of these areas. So I made up this course that way, and that's what I've been doing, and other people that I see have been doing now for almost thirty years, and I think it works very well.

But it's only one way of practising, one way of giving the instructions. In the pandemic last, earlier this year, I gave sixty or so talks that were basically instructions on mindfulness of breathing according to the *ānāpānasati* technique. That's a whole other way of practising, which I find tremendously valuable, but it is different. I've been asked now repeatedly to do

a similar series on the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, which if you take that as your primary instructions, is a little bit different again, a different technique. So these are all kinds of realizations, all these different ways of doing it.

My hope in offering the classic, now for thirty years, way it's done here at MC, sequentially, is that even if you don't take that as the core technique, in a sense, it's laying a very good foundation for how to include breathing, body, emotions, thinking, and whatever technique you do, you become wiser, you are more understanding. I've also hoped, in teaching this at MC this way, that it is also relevant for people who never meditate, that people in their ordinary life will also find it useful to understand some of the principles, ideas that I teach around breathing, body, emotions, and thinking, and the rest of it. So in the intro class, I'm trying to make it relevant in such a broad way. So that's kind of like the background. Some of you, I would probably prevent a little bit of confusion if some of you come to the seven steps teaching and say, "Wait a minute, just earlier in the year we had all sixty talks about *ānāpānasati*. Now, how does this fit in?" So I hope this helps a little bit.

In terms of the *ānāpānasati*, *satipaṭṭhāna* sutta, I'm planning next year to do a series on it, and probably do a little gap before I do it, after doing this current series on the basic instructions here. I hope the basic instructions here will be tremendously supportive for understanding *satipaṭṭhāna*. So there are these basic instructions, and as a beginner, the instructions are more prescriptive, meaning these are the things that we do. For someone as we mature, there starts to be a shift in the practice where it becomes less and less something we do, and more and more something we allow. The so-called instructions are no longer prescriptive; they become descriptive. It's more and more that we are discovering a capacity for being aware here.

We're just receptive in a certain way, and then we're aware of breathing, and so it isn't much worth following instructions to be with the breathing. Breathing has found us, and that's where the practice is at some point. Sometimes the body speaks up, and so then we're aware of the body—it's the loudest thing happening. So that's what fills this autonomous, independent kind of capacity just to be aware. Sometimes emotions, sometimes a thought, sometimes other aspects of all this. Awareness becomes more something we allow, develops a certain independence. It's not being directed necessarily, but it might be very specific if one thing is the loudest thing. But it's not like we're doing it; it's more like we're allowing it.

Over time, as practice matures, under some degree, some experience, some taste of what freedom is like, then the awareness shares with some of the qualities of that freedom—that it's still the basic practice, but it's accompanied by a sense of what freedom is, or a feel

for freedom, and disenchantment. These qualities come from a sense of freedom and independence, that I call it autonomy, that there's a sense that awareness becomes more autonomous—not that you become autonomous, because that's dangerous in terms of conceit: "Look at me, I'm autonomous and capable of independent." The idea that you are independent, that you are anything, is not really needed in the freedom and the ease and the peace of autonomous awareness. The autonomous awareness, the awareness that can just be, has lent itself in the West to the language of non-judgmental awareness, to have an awareness so accepting of everything, to have an open awareness. There was a time that was popular with something called choiceless awareness. Over time, there are different trends about how to talk about this.

The current trend, as of today here with me, is to talk about it in terms of being autonomous awareness. As practice deepens, as I said, rather than mindfulness of something we do, it's mindfulness of something we allow. We allow that autonomy of awareness that is not entangled or caught up or for and against any experience. Then it becomes more and more a kind of marvel, kind of a wondrous thing, that there is this free-feeling awareness that's free and independent, and not pushed around, not attached to anything, not for anything or against anything. Then everything else becomes nature. Even things which are unfortunate—say that you are angry with someone, hostile with someone in a very unfortunate way—the autonomy means that you are not going to give in to it. You cannot participate in it. The forces of hostility and anger exist within you, but this precious core of whom we kind of sense are, the awareness allows us just to leave it alone, and maybe seeing it, it's not identifying with it.

This is one of the characteristics of a mature practitioner: there's less and less identification with whatever the experience is. Identification here means that we define ourselves by it. We limit ourselves, and this is who I am. We hold on to it, we grab on to it, and now I know who I am. That immediately limits the range and the wholeness, the fullness of the experience. It's not a denial of certain appropriate entities that people have; it's the movement of identified movements of the identification that we have that is the issue. As practice matures, it's still the same practice, but what we're doing is we are no longer identifying with these things. Everything we see then becomes nature, just part of the process.

That kind of independence, being able to hold in awareness whatever the experience is—breath, body, emotions, thoughts, challenges, pain, suffering, whatever it might be—is a remarkable process, because then the natural functioning of who we are begins to operate better and better. This idea of being able to feel the freedom and allowance of a natural func-

tioning that comes when we don't restrict nature, we don't limit it, we don't bottle it up, we don't become attached to it. The understanding of Buddhism is that all the unhealthy ways that we live our lives, all the ways that we cause harm to ourselves and others, comes from not leaving things alone, not letting things equally liberate, come to harmony. It comes from entanglement, wanting, contracting around something, resisting something, judging something, identifying with something in a heavy, burdensome way.

The instructions are very simple, basic, and the longer one has practised them, the more basic instructions become even more relevant than they were when you were a beginner because of what accompanies it, because now there is a sense and a feeling. There is a possibility of having to be simpler, and simpler, and simpler is not simplistic. Simpler is where our freedom is found. So that's the introduction. Hopefully, for those of you who are not going to come to seven, it was nice for you, and for those of you who do, I certainly look forward to seeing you tomorrow morning or seeing you, being with you now. We will all, hopefully, go through it in a way that all of us, including me, find valuable and meaningful. So thank you.

Now, those of you who want to meet with me, go to the meeting that Jan and Berry are hosting. You can join the YouTube and enter the room, and I post it here again, and then I think I can do it right now. Let's see. Yes, there it is. So hopefully that gives you—there's a password. The password is Sangha, S and G with a capital S. But the link there actually has the password embedded in it. So you might have to copy and paste, because there's so much more. Oh, I didn't quite do it. Let me see if I can—yes, there it is. There it is. So it's underlined. It probably means you can click on it. So thank you all, and I wish you all a good week.