

Wednesday Guided Meditation

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Usually at this point in a week-long retreat, the instructions will be on mindfulness of thinking with some detail for that instruction. And it's still kind of the, maybe the main orientation for the instructions are given, but it won't be with the same approach. Being mindful of thinking is a great practice. You develop a lot of mindfulness by being attentive and aware of thinking, how you're thinking, the ecology of thinking, meaning the different parts of thinking, how thinking relates to the physical aspect of thinking, the sensations that come with thinking, the emotional part of thinking, the emotions that come with thinking, the cognitive part of it, what the inner voice is like, or what the images are, people think in images. It's also possible to be mindful of the content of thoughts. One of the great discoveries on retreat that can really help sometimes is to discover how occasionally, once in a while, how repetitive their thoughts are.

Reviews, it's kind of thinking the same thing over and over again. Anybody else did that to you. Talked that way. You'd wonder about their mental sanity. But when we do it for ourselves, it's almost as fascinating. The hundredth time is the first time.

But on retreat, we start seeing, oh, here I am again. There I am again. And just that seeing can release some of the interest, preoccupation with those thoughts. So there's all this stuff to notice around thinking. But I want to offer another approach today, and that is that sometimes what's really helpful is to not center your life on thinking, but as an alternative, be supported in the mindfulness by pleasure so that the mind has a enjoyable place to return to or to center itself on. And you're allowed to enjoy the pleasure of practice.

In fact, the pleasure of practice is one of the supports for going more deeply into a settled, quiet, peaceful, collected way of being here with the whole, the all of who we are. And there's a variety of things that can be pleasant. Letting go of thoughts is certainly an option. What's

nice to do, if you're able to let go of thoughts even briefly, is to feel the pleasure of the releasing. That something maybe feels opening, something feels relaxing, something feels a relief, a pleasure of relief. Sometimes it's just the release of the tension or pressure around thinking, that those moments of release feel enjoyable, feel good.

And so that letting go is not a chore, it's not something you do as a duty or something, but you do it to enjoy the letting go. And as practice goes along, it becomes less letting go, less relaxing, and more a gentle movement of calming. A calming of our system, calming of the nervous system that spreads throughout the body. So, in this regard, I also want to offer a one-breath journey. One way of practicing mindfulness is to somehow practice in the rhythm of breathing in and breathing out. And that whatever you're going to be mindful of, whatever you're going to know and feel, that it's not a checklist approach to mindfulness.

This is how I practice when I was first introduced to this noting practice, where I would... It was kind of like if I noted what was happening, I had done what I was supposed to do. It was like the conclusion. And so if I noted an exhale, the beginning of the exhale, then I just checked out for the rest of the exhale because I'd done my duty. And then beginning of the inhale, in, rising or something. But what I learned is the noting, the knowing, any deliberate movement of knowing, feeling, noticing.

That's the beginning of a journey. That's what opens us to feel and sense. That's the gentle tapping of the ground with the foot when you're on the scooter. And then there's the nexus enjoying the ride. So in noting inhale, whatever way you... Maybe it's very simple, just breathing. Maybe it's non-verbal, kind of like here I am with the inhale. That's the beginning of being open to experiencing the full inhale. To feel it. To know the exhale.

Okay. Is the beginning of a journey to be open, to feel the exhale. And the Buddha offered the mindfulness practice in that sequence first to know, first to know, and then to feel, sense the experience, sense the whole body. So one way of practicing is whatever you know that's happening in the present moment, the simple act of recognizing what's happening now. On the inhale, feel it more fully. On the exhale, let there be a softening with it.

It might be a softening of your relationship to it. It might be a relaxing of the muscles around it. It might be a releasing. So if you find yourself thinking a lot, there's no need to struggle with that or feel like you're doing something wrong. The thinking is just simply one more thing to know that's happening. And so this moment of knowing, moment of naming it, noting it, simply and clearly.

But in that simplicity and clarity, then on the, with an inhale, feel what you're knowing, look

up fully, sense it in the body. And on the exhale, release, let go, soften. And if it's easy and as you exhale and have a softening and opening in relationship to what you're knowing and feeling, you're allowed if it's available to enjoy it. You could even have a sense of... And so one breath journey is with one breath. Feel what's happening, sense what's happening. Let there be a relaxing or a calming on the exhale.

And it might not be a calming or relaxing that you do, but over time it might be one that you allow to happen. Some calming, releasing on the exhale. Some of that is with the exhaling itself. Maybe sometimes as you exhale, there is a releasing, softening of the chest and the belly that maybe supports a wider calming. And if there's a sensation in your body that's strong enough to become a subject for mindfulness, the one breath journey, to know it, and let that be the beginning of this one-breath journey. Feel it as you inhale. Feel it as you exhale and relax.

So the calming, relaxing prepares you for the next moment of a gentle, clear knowing. So it's not a quick checklist approach to mindfulness. It's slower. It's almost as if every act of mindfulness it takes a time, it takes to breathe in and breathe out. And from time to time, it might be nice to expand your awareness, broaden your awareness for a global feeling, since they're sensing of the body. Sometimes you might be able to sense the humming, vibrating throughout the body.

And sometimes that might feel pleasant. And so the global humming pleasure of the body can be the container or the feel within which other experiences occur. There is a wholesome pleasure that supports the practice of being present, so that you're more centered in your body, in your thinking. And sometimes a journey, one breath journey, is all about the breathing itself. Knowing, feeling, calming, the experience, with the whole experience of breathing in and breathing out. Allowing yourself to feel whatever pleasure might be very simple pleasure with breathing.

In any part of the cycle, maybe it's this simple background humming in which the breathing occurs. As part of the calming, releasing, perhaps you can switch from being the person who knows and feels, switch from being the self that is experiencing things to let it be the body's sensing. Let it be the body that experiences with the calming, softening, being a releasing into the body, a settling into the body more fully. If you're more involved with thinking than with mindfulness, you might try the one-breath journey. As you breathe in, know your thinking and feel it. Be open to feeling and sensing and experience.

Maybe there's tension and pressure. Maybe there's a gathering of energy in the head. And as you exhale, relax the thinking mind. Relax, settle back into your body. And then do it again.

You might have to do it repeatedly, gently, contentedly. And as you exhale, if it's available, allow yourself to feel the pleasure, enjoy the pleasure of relaxing, releasing, or perhaps a gentle humming pleasure, maybe radiating from breathing.

For most of us, the movement towards wholeness, the wholeness of suchness, grows in the body, a growing flow, vibration, or sensing through the body where all things are allowed to, all things are allowed to be there as they come and they go. Where thinking is not the center. Storymaking recedes to the background. It becomes quieter, softer, less and less compelling. And as we end the sitting with a bell ringing... Maybe being careful to not use the ringing in the so-called end of the sitting. Be an occasion to pop back up in the head with your thoughts, but rather an occasion to feel and sense the ringing of the bell with your whole body, because much of your body is somehow takes in sound.

If you have some sense of being wholly here, more completely here, with all your senses, with being embodied and a certain kind of hum or radiance of sensing with your body, you might notice how you lose that sense of wholeness when you get preoccupied in thoughts, doing things, getting somewhere here, figuring something out, to know that, to feel what that's like, to have that switch and relax and see if you can return just in the direction of being whole, being complete with all your senses. Thinking doesn't have to stop, but it's clearly a small part of the whole. Maybe it's very light, soft, gentle. In a way that thinking is not. If we're gripped into the thoughts, glued to the thoughts, and as you go about the retreat center, moving through the sun and the shades of the trees and the sky and the water, the ground. See what it's like if you're participating in the natural world here with all your senses open.

Breathing, knowing, sensing and feeling the kind of wholeness where maybe you're not your thinking self or your contracted self or your usual limited self. It's not the center of your experience. But maybe it's your body's experience of being here, sensing, participating, nature knowing itself. Today we start the second round of practice discussions.