

Monday sit with instructions

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For those of you who are new, each morning at 8:30 we offer instructions for the day.

And the idea is that in some kind of way the instructions are built on each other through the days.

And what I'd like to do this morning is to first teach a little introduction to the instructions, then offer you a four-word summary of the instructions.

Okay.

And then we'll do a kind of guided meditation for kind of offering you the instructions in a particular way for today.

So as an introduction, when I was first... I had three stages of learning about these instructions.

When I was first taught this instruction in Thailand, what I understood was in about five minutes from the teacher... was pay attention to everything.

And I was sent off to a little hut at the edge of the monastery, but to meditate alone.

And that kind of didn't work for me very well, that instruction, because it made me really busy to try to be aware of everything.

And so I went back to the abbot and explained my problem.

And he said, oh no, no, yes, we pay attention to everything, but only one thing at a time.

So that helped.

And then I went to Burma, and there they gave the instructions, took longer to give the instructions.

There was, I think, maybe a 30 or 45-minute cassette tape I was given. And all the instructions were right there. It wasn't like given slowly and progressively over the days. It's all right there. And what I learned from that was that the way to be aware, that they were taught the way to be mindful in Burma, was very much sensation-based, to sense the experience. And the emphasis was on the sensations related to breathing, particularly around the belly. And that was the central focus, I call it the home base, for being in the present. A place where awareness was going to be at home and cozy. Some people call the experience of breathing as an anchor to the present moment, so we don't drift off a lot. Sometimes I think of it as a refuge for awareness. But the home base. And the idea was to stay at the home base until something else became more compelling or more predominant, and then to leave the home base, wander off, to attend to the sensations connected to whatever it was was predominant. So what I learned was that if there was body sensations, I would sometimes leave the breathing and just be sensing those sensations in my body with great care and a certain kind of tenderness. If there was thinking, I would not think about my thoughts. I wouldn't analyze them. But rather, I would sense the experience of thinking. And if there was emotions, I would also be body-based, sensing and feeling the experience of the emotion. And so I would leave the home base of breathing and then attend to what was more compelling, if anything was that way. And then I returned to this home base as a place to settle, and to kind of hone or attune, or maybe attune is a good way of talking about it, attention to the present moment, to help support me to stay in the present moment.

And somehow the rhythm of breathing in and breathing out was kind of a, kind of can be a kind of relaxing place to be because of that rhythm, like the rhythm of waves washing up and down on the beach.

And you can, some people can do that for hours, just watching those waves on the, you know, coming and going on the beach.

So for me I've sometimes imagined that the experience of breathing, somewhat like a wave like comes and going.

And there also, in Burma, there was idea that everything was subject to a mindfulness.

There was no thing that was not the subject, but ideally the knowing of it, the feeling of it, the sensing of it was the predominant thing we did.

When I came to the United States and was introduced to how it is taught here in this country, on retreat, the teachers had a way of not doing all the instructions in five minutes or 45 minutes, but to spread it out over time.

And some of that we came under the influence of the Goenka way of practicing *vipassanā*, where the beginning is with breathing, and with the idea that breathing for some people is stabilizing, is settling, is calming, helps to produce a little bit of concentration at the beginning of a retreat.

But the American teachers also then would do, the first day would be breathing, the second day would be body, the third would be emotions, and the fourth would be thinking, with the idea that for some people, that with this... grounding and how to be with breathing, it's easier to know how to be with the body.

With the grounding and breathing and body, it's easier to know how to be with the sensing and feeling of emotions rather than being caught in the stories.

And as we know how to be with emotions, it's easier to be with thinking, a place where people often get tripped up and lost in.

But if we can feel the sense, the thinking in the body, and sense and feel the emotions connected to thinking, it's a lot more easier to be with thinking, mindfulness of thinking.

And in this way, it took four days to kind of, say, pay attention to everything, one thing at a time.

But to do it so everything's included.

There's no outside.

And so when we do this practice here, here at the IRC, we're also going to offer the practices in those four stages.

But of course you're going to be thinking and emoting and the body is here.

And so it's all included.

It's all something that supports us to be here and now in the present moment.

So the little four-word saying that maybe summarizes this whole teaching and in a way, or at least offers a kind of guideline for the teaching.

You might want to remember this.

Set yourself at ease.

Set yourself at ease.

To whatever degree that's easy.

And you can't really do it completely.

It's probably impossible to set yourself at ease 100%.

So then set yourself at ease with imperfection.

Set yourself at ease with the middle of how you might feel uneasy.

Set be at ease with how things are.

And with that as a guideline, the instructions in the guided meditation begins.

With some attention to your body, may be aware of your whole body for a few moments, and they can be supportive to have your body in an intentional posture for meditation.

So whether it's sitting up a little bit straighter than you would normally, whether it's placing your hands and arms in a way that's a little bit more gathered together intentionally for the purposes of being here in a full way, or if it's laying down and somehow adjusting how your shoulder blades are, your spine, so that maybe there's a little more openness in the chest or the positioning of the neck is a little more intentional and evocative for attention.

And take a few moments to feel your whole body in some simple global way, not so much thinking about it, but sensing the body's experience of itself.

And then within the body is part of the bodily experience.

And it's maybe in a gentle way, a gentle approach.

Becoming aware of the body breathing.

Aware of how the body experiences breathing in and breathing out.

The movements of the body as you breathe.

The sensations that come into play with that movement.

And at the beginning of a meditation, sometimes it's useful to take a little bit fuller breaths, not too full, but full enough that you feel a little bit stronger connection to your body, a stronger connection that is a reminder that the meditation unfolds here and now in this present moment experience.

And as you exhale, it'll maybe a little longer than usual, to relax the body.

Maybe relaxing the muscles of the face as you exhale, softening the shoulders.

Maybe softening in the middle of your chest, the heart area.

Softening in your belly, and then letting your breathing return to normal.

And maybe with a little bit of a global awareness of the body, see if there's some place where the breathing is comfortable for you.

Inviting for you to attend.

Not so much that you're focusing on the breath, but you're attending, sensing the body's experience of breath, of breathing.

It could be the sensations of the air going in and out through the nostrils.

If that's nice for you, it could be the movements of the chest or the ribcage, diaphragm.

It might be the movements around the belly, the belly.

So it's not a mental effort from the control tower.

Relax into how the body senses breathing.

The changing rhythm of sensations, breathing in and breathing out.

If you find yourself thinking a lot, it's okay.

But acknowledge that in a quiet way.

It may be for three or four breaths.

Breathe with the experience of thinking, the sensations of thinking.

And as you exhale, relax the thinking muscle.

If there's strong emotions, that's okay.

But you might also, just for three or four breaths, breathe with the emotions, where the breathing helps you from not getting caught up in the stories or judgments.

So the emotions are gently acknowledged.

And if there are strong body sensations, maybe the same thing.

Maybe it's enough to acknowledge it with three or four breaths.

And then returning to sensing, feeling quietly the body's experience of breathing.

And sometimes it's not the strongest sensations of breathing that are a refuge.

But maybe there's some subtle ones.

Or it might be the... a broad, whole-body way of experiencing breathing, with breathing as your companion for being here in the present moment.

Sometimes we find ourselves thinking a lot.

It's okay, and it might also be useful to engage the thinking mind more intentionally to help you stay with the practice.

You might find a gentle, meditative voice to give yourself a little bit of instructions, especially when doing so is better than the alternative.

Or you might gently use mental noting, a particular simple thought, one-word thought, that acknowledges the experience you're having as you breathe, maybe in for in-breath, out for out-breath.

Or rising of the chest belly and falling.

Maybe it's almost a non-verbal note, very quiet and peaceful, that gives a thinking mind something to do when that is better than the alternative.

And after these minutes of meditation, is there some way now, a different way, that you can set yourself at ease or recognize where there might be some sense of ease that supports an easy attention with breathing, with the body, some degree of ease with things which are not easy, maybe gently breathing with what is not easy, relaxing with the exhale.

If you find yourself quite sleepy, it might be nice to gently emphasize the inhale, a little bit fuller inhale, just enough to awaken something.

And as the instructions were to take a few fuller breaths at the beginning of a sitting, as you hear the bell to end the sitting, don't rush to end the sitting.

Don't just stop immediately.

But maybe again, take a few fuller breaths.

Maybe now there can be a deeper, fuller connection.

And maybe even a further settling, relaxing on the exhale as you get ready to open your eyes.

So maybe it's useful to keep in mind that you set yourself at ease on this first day of the retreat, when often that's not what people feel.

Often the first day can be challenging.

And even people who have practiced for a long time, many retreats can forget that the first day is often a sleepier day.

Or a day when the mind seems just, you know, more busy than usual, thinking a lot, concerned, or unexpected emotions, or all kinds of challenges that can be the first day.

And some of the task of the first day is to learn to be gracious with how that is.

Not to take it as...

But take it to be something to find your ease with, your grace with, or learn how to practice with it rather than against it.

It's also a good day, though, to take an extra nap or two if you're really tired.

And it might be a good day to do more walking and meditation if you're tired.

Right.

Which in a few minutes Andrea will give instructions for.

And so if it works for you to have the breathing at the center for the first day, for sometimes it just kind of keeps things really simple.

So you don't end up navigating, negotiating, struggling, fighting, trying to fix things so that they become what you think they're supposed to be like when you meditate.

Right?

But rather it's just a simple rhythm of breathing in and breathing out.

You come back to it.

And the analogy I like for that is, if you go for a really long hike, you know, the mountains or someplace, you might go through all kinds of changes.

There might be times in the beginning where you feel like doubt you should have even started.

You're still feeling lazy or something.

Or then you end up with a steep hill and all kinds of interesting terrain along the way.

And the primary thing you need to do is just keep taking one step after the other.

One step, one step.

And that keeps you on the trail.

It keeps you on the path.

And so the first day of meditation, sometimes it's enough just to one inhale, one exhale.

Just gently to keep you on the path.

And the path is just the present moment, your lived experience for now.

And if you find it useful...

You might use a gentle, quiet thought that's better than just thinking a lot about other things.

Quiet thought, the mental note here.

Now, that's probably one of the most common notes I use these days is the note here, reminding myself just to be present for this experience now.

Or something more specific, like in for the in-breath, out-for-the-out-breath.