

Wednesday sit with instructions

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One, maybe a relatively simple way of guiding this practice of mindfulness, is to ask yourself the question, how am I experiencing this right now? In the present moment, whatever is the main thing happening, the main thing grabbing your attention, what's the direct experience of this like in the present? So if you're thinking about the past, what's the actual experience like? Not of the content, but what's the experience like of thinking about the past? What's the sensations? How is it sensed and felt in the body?

Is there tension, pressure, some part of your body activated more than usual? Are there any emotions in the present moment? And no need to think about the emotions, but that too can be sensed and felt as direct experience. If you're thinking about the future or having a lot of fantasies, making stories, ruminating, what's the direct experience of that? How is that experienced? Where that question points you into being connected to what's actually happening experientially.

And you might in that process learn how spending a lot of time thinking can be a kind of loss of personal connection. It's all too easy to end up being disembodied by spending a lot of time in the abstract thoughts and stories. It's possible, it's so easy to lose the connection to our lived experience here and now. And it's okay to do so, provided in this practice you get curious what is a direct experience? What's the experience like of being disconnected, of not being centered in the whole lived experience of now?

And what you might start learning is that we have different types of thinking. And there are types of thinking which really disconnect us, keeps us lost in stories and involved in abstract worlds and commentary and analysis, judgments, that are in some kind of way a bit shallow because they're not connected to the depths within us. And there's also ways of thinking that helps support us to be here and now, ways of thinking that are calm, peaceful. And it could

be that you give yourself instructions in the meditation, gently, calmly, kind of like you're your own teacher, almost as if, but not really, like you're saying them out loud, because it's a different part of the brain that's involved in speaking than in the usual kind of habitual thinking. And you might be able to tap into some part of you that's wiser.

If you give yourself instructions, you can ask yourself the question, what is this experience like? What am I experiencing here? What's the direct experience? What would it be like to give a room for this experience? Breathing room.

Or it could be a little bit more simple. It could be, oh, I think it'd be a good time to discover the direct experience of breathing. How's the experience of breathing in and breathing out? How can I sense and feel or receive the sensations of breathing in a calm way, in a clear way? And of course it might seem that that kind of verbal instruction to yourself is being active and feeding your thinking. But it might be better than the alternative, if the alternative is to be in these abstract thoughts that disconnect you.

It could be that the thinking that you do is very, very simple. Maybe a thought, one word thought, that allows you to acknowledge, recognize what it is that you're sensing and feeling, so that mostly you're in the sense receptors, sense bases, sensing what the experience is. The simple thought, in for breathing in, out for breathing out. Hearing, for hearing a sound. Pleasure, for feelings of pleasure. Pain, for sensations of pain.

Where you might notice the tone of voice with which you say the note. Is it harsh or forceful? Is it calm, relaxed? Or there might be non-verbal ways of knowing, non-verbal ways of understanding that might seem very deep, that connect you to the practice here and now, that guide you into the present, into a calm, soft, receptive state. But of course, sometimes it's not that way. Sometimes the thinking mind is quite strong, and it's completely fine to let that be the subject of awareness, subject of mindfulness.

Rather than being dismayed that you're thinking so strongly, you might try being amazed that that's possible, and to allow yourself to sense, to recognize, calmly recognize that your mind is out of control or that there's strong thinking. And the art being the calm recognition, the calm knowing, the calm sensing, receiving the sensations of pressure, agitation, constriction, allowing those sensations to be there, to see what they do, remembering we're not solving anything here. If anything, we're allowing, making room for things to dissolve, to relax, to soften on their own. And sometimes with strong emotions, the thing that most needs attention, most needs to be seen and known and maybe even loved, is the emotion that is the fuel or the source of the thinking. Planning can often be associated with apprehension or fear.

Some forms of thinking are associated with aversion and anger, hostility. Some with strong desire or doubt, regrets, remorse. Some associated with joy and delight. And if we don't recognize the emotion and calmly, clearly feel it in our body, it's all too easy to be somehow or other participating in the emotion or letting it have more power over you than maybe is useful. So if thinking is strong, that too can be part of the mindfulness, as opposed to being a problem or opposed to being a distraction. Thinking becomes the attraction of what we sense and feel.

So with those instructions in the background, you might want to set yourself at ease. There might be a way you can do that physically with your body. Set your body at ease. And if there's something uneasy in your body, it's okay. Be easy with that. Maybe easing up a bit.

Maybe with every exhale for a few breaths, relax the body, softening into whatever ease you can find. Setting your mind at ease or being easy. In any ways the mind is uneasy, easing up if the mind is uneasy for two or three breaths. Feel the sensations of ease, and after feeling it, two or three breaths you might soften, relax the thinking mind. Relax the ways the mind is not at ease in being easy with any unease that's left. Let it be.

Center yourself on the breathing again. Centering yourself on the breathing is to sense the sensations of breathing. Maybe with an intimacy, with those locations where sensing and sensations arise together. And maybe there's a way to set your heart at ease or easing up on whatever is difficult in the heart area. It's okay. That too is allowed to be there and experienced at the sensation level.

Maybe taking two or three breaths to relax in the heart area. Soften. And then once again, centering yourself on the body's experience of breathing. Maybe even trusting the simple experience the body has of breathing in and breathing out, resting attention on the breathing. And then before we end the sitting, take a few couple of minutes to notice if your mind is thinking, and if it is, is there any way that this thinking is sticky, or there might be some attachment or some identification with it, like the thinking is you.

And if there's any stickiness, attachment, identification, maybe for two or three breaths, soften on the exhale, relax the attachment. And if it doesn't relax or soften, it's okay. Ask yourself the question, how is this being experienced? What's the experience like of sticky thoughts, attached thoughts, knowing it calmly, feeling it clearly? This is how it is. And then as you hear the bell ending the sitting, set yourself at ease to settle back and watch what happens to the thinking mind.

One reason to wait to give instructions on mindfulness of thinking until the fourth day of the

retreat is so that you might be able to attend to it, to accompany your thinking with a clear mindfulness, with less thinking about thinking, and more sensing and feeling being with the actual experience of thinking. A word that I don't use very often, maybe, is the word sacred. But one of the things that I think is sacred is an awareness that includes everything. There's nothing which is unacceptable to be aware of. Our wisdom might say no to some things, want to change some things, like if I once more drop a plate on the dining room floor.

But to be, to not exclude anything from awareness, or in the art, maybe a sacred art, of being open to experience it as it is, without for and against automatically in the awareness, without getting entangled or having a knot, knotted up with the experience. And if you are knotted up and for and against, to stay in that sacred realm, that too would be known. That too would be included in awareness. So as you go about the day-to-day here at IRC or at home, those of you practicing elsewhere, if it is nice for you, you might consider going about doing whatever you have to do, whatever you're doing, at the speed of mindfulness, meaning that the speed by which you can stay present for your experience, and you'll notice if your mind starts drifting off in thought, if you start leaving the present moment experience to go into your thinking.

And maybe there's a nice, comfortable speed to do things, that keeps you in your sense experience, keeps you in your embodied experience of the present, enough to notice if you start wandering away. And the interesting exercise I've done is to notice when at the end of a sitting my mind has been involved now with thinking more than being present. Do I manage to get to the bottom of the steps or across the community hall floor? Maybe you can extend how long you stay aware. And when you're not aware in cotton thoughts, and you know it, great. That too is to be experienced.