Instructions: Deep Check In and Breathing

Gil Fronsdal

October 19, 2026

Keywords: *vipassanā*, *Theravāda*, non-contention, mindfulness, deep check-in, breathing, awakening, compassion, *aikidō*, Thomas Merton

---

So good morning, everyone, and for those of you online for whom it is not morning, hello. Here we are, on the first morning of the retreat, and I'm delighted to be here with you. I hope that your sleep went well, or at least wasn't too difficult. Sometimes the first night in a new place can be hard. You can always nap today. I know people who nap multiple times on the first day, so napping is allowed.

I guess you can overdo it, but please don't underdo it. One of the common challenges that some people have on a first day of retreat is to have high expectations of how concentrated, quiet, or blissful they're going to be. You know, by the middle of the morning, or after five minutes. Two things can happen with those expectations. One is that they might not happen, and then there's disappointment, frustration, and worse. The other is that we overlook what's actually happening.

We don't pay attention to what's really going on for us because we're looking for something else to happen. One approach to how to be with a first day of retreat is to think of it as not being about what you can experience, how concentrated you get, or how still you're going to get. Rather, it's a whole-day check-in with yourself. You're just doing a deep check-in about how you are and what's happening with you. Not in the bigger picture of your life, though that might inevitably insist that you see or know it, because the mind will bring with it the concerns from life.

Or, if you get a little bit quiet, it allows the kind of unresolved things to finally have a chance to bubble up. You're not distracted from unresolved feelings and all kinds of things. But it's really a deep check-in with how you are now: how you are in your body, how you are with breathing, how you are with your heart, and how you are with your emotions. How are you with your mind, your thinking, and your stories? Where does your mind go?

Creative Commons License: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International

What is it concerned with? What do those concerns really mean for you? This is not meant to be evaluation or to tell more stories. It's not meant to figure things out exactly, but just to really see. It's kind of like you're sitting on the deck at IRC having tea, and you're quietly, without judging anything, checking out the plants, the trees, the birds going by, and the different socks that people are wearing as they walk by you. Whatever's going on, just very simply: "Oh, this is how it is. This is how it is."

It's this relaxed mode: "Okay, I'm just noticing what's here and now around this." This idea that the first day is a huge, deep check-in might protect you from being disappointed by what's happening, trying to override what's happening, or fighting and struggling with what's happening. On the first day of retreats, a fair number of people will be more tired than they expected. Rather than struggling with that, the deep check-in is, "Oh, wow. Look at that. This is what it's like to be tired. Wow, I'm really tired." And to see that with care, maybe even love.

I mean, there's probably a good reason why you're tired. Maybe fighting it just makes it worse. "Okay, remember that Gil said I can take a nap. I think it's a good thing." Just, "Oh, what is it like to be tired?" "I've never really stopped and paid attention to tiredness." Is there some deep check-in that can happen with what it feels like to be tired?

What's going on? It might be that your body aches or hurts, and that's also fairly common on the first day. The body is more kind of not quite aligned, or not quite here in a cooperative way. So check in with that. What's happening here with the body?

Is it just a legacy of how I've been hunched over my desk and my computer for the last ten years? Or is it, you know, the stress that I carry in my shoulders? What is it that is happening here with the body? Check in. Really get to know.

If you need to change your posture, please do. And if there's a lot of thinking, which can happen on the first day, some people seemingly get quieter in their daily meditation than they do halfway through the first day of a retreat. They thought it should be the opposite direction. It might be an illusion that you're not getting quieter, but still, think, "Okay, this is a check-in." "Oh, this is what it's like to be thinking."

What's the ecology? What's the ecosystem of all these thoughts? Not the reasons why, or trying to solve the stories or tell better stories, but just in the present moment. If I'm checking in, it's like I'm sitting with a friend who's telling a story, and I'm paying attention not so much to the story, but rather to how they feel, how they are, their tone of voice, and the energy with which they're speaking. What else is there to feel and sense with the story mind?

Creative Commons License: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International

In this way, a deep check-in is a form of care, maybe love. It's a way of seeing that you're a valuable person, and this is the time to really spend the first day finding out what's here, preparing yourself for what's coming. As I said last night, in the middle of that, there's a way of checking in with your breathing and falling in love with your breathing, or trusting your breathing, or entering into the world of your breathing. Or letting the breathing enter into the world of how you're checking in with yourself. Breathe with how the body is.

Breathe with how the tiredness is. Breathe with how the mind is, or how the emotions are. The breathing is kind of like the stability, the grounding, the place, the thread that runs through everything. Maybe it keeps you from wandering off too much into the story-making mind, judging mind, or thinking mind. Then you can stay here, as if it's really valuable to stay here.

Stay here. Stay with your present-moment experience, because this is where the deep check-in happens. May that protect you from expectations or disappointments about how it's going, or efforts to strain and try to override how you are. It's the *aikidō* of going into how you are and finding your presence, your joy, and your freedom with being at A, not thinking you should be at B. It's really here with yourself.

So we can begin this by assuming a meditation posture that somehow or other appeals to you in your way, so that you can bring all of yourself into the meditation. Sometimes, if we collapse somehow or are too relaxed in meditation, we leave parts of ourselves out. If we're asserting part of ourselves in the meditation, then we might also end up being partial and not include all of ourselves. I like to say, "Gently close the eyes." So right there, at the beginning of a sitting, when you do close your eyes, it's part of the meditation: the gentleness, the quiet, the unhurriedness, the soft beginning of a meditation session.

The check-in can begin then, without the idea that you're here to change anything or fix anything. For now, just discover: how is it? How is it to be in your body right now? Is your body a welcoming place to be? Is it an unwelcoming or difficult place?

Let your attention roam around your body, maybe with as quiet a mind as you can, to feel and sense the body in its different ways and different parts. Sometimes, this broad discovery of the body can be seen as tilling the soil, getting ready for planting a seed or a plant that's going to grow. Simply getting to know the body is the tilling, the softening, and the learning about the body. It prepares for how the body will be the seedbed for something to grow.

In this body, as part of the body, check in to discover how you are emotionally, in terms of a mood or an attitude. Are there moods, attitudes, or emotions that seem to take you

Creative Commons License: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International

away from the present moment and from being connected to your body? Or do the moods, emotions, and attitudes you have somehow support being present? Whatever it is, it is. It's okay.

Just check in with how it is for you emotionally. And how is it in your mind, your thinking mind? As if you're allowed to think. It's okay. But see clearly and know clearly what a thinking mind is like. What does it feel like?

What are the tensions and pressures, the activation of the thinking mind? Is a thinking mind more agitated or more calm? What would it be like, in checking in with your mind, to allow it to be the way it is, as if there's no problem there, just something to know and check in about? And then, in the middle of it all, check in about your breathing. Where in the body do you feel the experience of breathing most clearly?

What part of the breathing is clearest to your awareness? What is least clear: the inhale or the exhale? Is your breathing useful? Or is your breathing in some way uneasy, restricted, or forced? It's all okay. Whatever way your breathing is, it's fine.

This is a time to just check in and know it how it is for you. What is it like in this check-in to stay close and intimate with three breaths? What happens with what's all around the breathing—body, mind, and heart—if you give yourself over to three breaths, just those three? Again, have no higher goal than staying present for three breaths. Then check in with yourself in a broad, relaxed way.

How are you: body, heart, or mind? A simple check-in. Then, in the middle of what you're experiencing, return to your breathing for three breaths. Give yourself over as fully as you can to those three breaths. If you notice there's tightness in your muscles or tension in your mind, you might, on the exhale, let there be a softening of the tension and tightness. Relaxing on the exhale settles you more into here, into the middle of how you are.

If you get carried away in thoughts, there's no need to be troubled by that. But use it as an occasion to check in with yourself again. What is here for you now? You don't have to be any different from how you are. But check in: how is this, how you are?

It's a check-in that's not judging anything or evaluating anything. Maybe let your breathing be the center of all things, so when you check in with yourself, it's in relationship to that center. Breathe with your emotions. Breathe with the thinking mind. Breathe with this body.

Maybe only three breaths at a time, so the quality of that attention can be a good quality for three breaths. Part of this practice is to allow yourself to be fully at A, fully how you are. But rather than it being you who does the allowing, what might it be like if it's your breathing, the

Creative Commons License: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International

breathing body, that does the allowing? In a few moments, I'll ring the bell to end the sitting. One approach is not to quickly end the meditation with a bell, but to take the time to feel and sense the ringing.

Maybe let go of the meditation as the sound of the bell disappears. When I was introduced to this practice in Thailand, in the monastery where I was, there was a young man whom people said had grown through this practice of *vipassanā*, so that some of his plant had attained fruition in some deep way. I didn't know much about anything, about *Theravāda* Buddhism or *vipassanā*, but I was introduced to this man. He had a presence that I'd never seen before or experienced before. It really made an impact just being in his presence.

So I asked him a question. I asked him, "What have you attained through all this practice you've done?" He looked at me very kindly, and he answered very directly what he attained. He said, "Non-contention." It wasn't what I expected, but wow. I thought, "Wow, that's the result of this practice. What a cool thing."

That's what he chose to say: non-contention. So, to sit in non-contention with your experience—not fighting it, not struggling with it—but maybe this idea, if it works for you, of a deep check-in. Really be present, as if you're important, your experience is important, and there's nothing to fight with. With a goal, if there's a goal, to be fully here in your experience, to inhabit your experience. Notice how you leave that home, leave that habitation, through a lot of thinking or a lot of preoccupation with something or other.

Come back here, here. Non-contention with this, this moment here. It's a little unusual how I started the first meditation, the way I did, with the check-in. So those of you—many of you—have practiced before. You're welcome to continue practicing the way you know how to practice. But if what I offer is useful for you, then please consider it.

Kodo yesterday talked about the liturgy of IRC being the manager's announcements. One of the great rituals of IRC that seems to happen every retreat that I teach is that, one way or another, we get a message from someone: "Can you talk about doors?" Doors? Why would you know? But we have this whole thing about doors and the ritual of talking about doors. So I've been asked to talk about it.

That's doing my part of the ritual. One of the great things about Buddhist practice and *vipassanā* is attention to detail. It's almost like you can get a tattoo on your arm, or maybe the palm of your hand, so that when you look down and meditate, it reminds you: attention to detail. Details are not incidental. Details are the place where the practice grows.

Details are where awakening can happen. We never know which detail is going to be the one

Creative Commons License: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International

that is a catalyst for insight, awakening, depth, or joy, and you don't want to miss it. So you have to kind of be there for the details. One of the great details is how you relate to doors here at IRC. We were required by the fire marshal to have very heavy doors.

When they close, if you let them close behind you by themselves, they can bang quite loudly. The sounds can reverberate down the hallways into people's rooms. We've had people who grew up in war zones, and it's quite difficult to hear that bang. Some people are very, very light sleepers, and even the click of the doors—even if the doors are closed carefully—is enough to wake them up. So sometimes attention to detail is a great opportunity for compassion and mutual care in our community.

Thomas Merton, the great Catholic monk in America, probably one of the most famous Catholic monks in America, had a big interest in Buddhism. He said that his years of monastic practice could all be summed up by saying that what it had taught him was how to open and close doors. The way we do it here at IRC, this attention to detail, is that you really want to be present for the door. The door counts. It's a detail that's important.

It's you and the door. Develop a relationship with doors. You hold the handle, and you pull it down so the tongue of the door lock kind of opens. Gently pull the door out, and never let go of the door, because then you lose your intimacy and direct contact. When you're closing the door, close it gently while you're still holding it.

Keep the handle down until you gently have it snug, in gentle intimacy with the doorframe, and then let the handle go up. That way, there'll be no clicking sound. That way, there's no banging. That way, you've practiced very good mindfulness. You're here to practice mindfulness, so don't lose that opportunity.

Who knows? Maybe it's at the door that you'll get enlightened. Maybe it's at the door that you'll get compassioned and filled with care and love for the community, because it's so important. May the doors be the heart of the practice, going in and out of your room. So thank you. Thank you very much for being here.

Transcript is machine generated and may contain errors.
Creative Commons License: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International