

Monday Morning Guided Meditation

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So good morning, everyone, and for those of you online who are not—it's not your morning—hello. And so here we are, morning of 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.

And one of the common challenges that some people have on a first day of retreat is to have high expectations of how concentrated, quiet, blissful you're going to be, you know, by the middle of the morning or after five minutes. And two things happen with those expectations. One is they might not happen, and so then there's disappointment and frustration and worse that happens. 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.

And so one way, one approach to how to be with a first day of retreat is to think of it as not about what you can experience, how concentrated you get, how still you're going to get. Rather, it's a whole-day check-in to yourself. You're just doing a deep check-in about how you are, what's happening with you. Not in the bigger pictures of your life, though that might inevitably insist that you see or know, 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: unresolved feelings and all kinds of things.

But it's really the deep check-in to how you are now, how you are in your body, how you are with breathing, how you are with your heart, how you are with your emotions, how you are with your mind and your thinking and your stories. Where does your mind go? What's it concerned with? And what do those concerns really mean for you? This is not meant to

be evaluation, tell more stories, or figure things out exactly. It is just to really see—kind of like you're sitting on the deck that you're in IRC having tea, and you're just quietly, without judging anything, checking out the plants, the trees, the birds that are going, the different socks that people are wearing as they walk by you.

Whatever's going, just very simple: “Oh, this is how it is. This is how it is.” And this relaxed mode: “Okay, I'm just noticing what's here and now around this.” So 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, fight, fight, and struggle with what's happening.

First day of retreats, a fair number of people will be very tired, more than you expected. And 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, probably a good reason why you're tired. Maybe fighting it just makes it worse. Okay, this is—remember that Gil said I can take a nap. I think that's—I think it's a good thing.

And so, just, “Oh, what is it like to be tired?” And 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, hurts, and so it's also fairly common the first day. The body is more kind of not quite aligned or 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? Is it—you know—what is it that is happening here with the body? Check in, really get to know. And if you need to change your posture, please, please do.

And if there's a lot of thinking, which can happen the first day, some people get quieter—seemingly, they 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. And it might be an illusion that you're not getting quieter, but still, to think of this: “Okay, this is a check-in. Oh, this is what it's like to be thinking.” What's the ecology? Because that's the ecosystem of all these thoughts, not like with the reasons why or trying to solve the stories or tell better stories, but just like in the present moment.

If I'm checking in, 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 how they feel, how they are, their tone of voice, the energy in which they're using, and what else is there to feel and sense with the story mind. So in this way, a deep check-in. That is a form of care, maybe love. 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 the emotions are. And the breathing is kind of like the stability, the grounding, the place, the thread that runs through everything, that maybe keeps you from wandering off too much in the story-making mind, judging mind, thinking mind.

And so 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. So may that protect you from expectations or disappointments about how it's going, or efforts to strain to try to override how you are. It's the aikido of going into how you are and finding your presence, your joy, 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 for you, in your way, 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. And if we're asserting part of ourselves in the meditation, then we might also end up being partial, not including all of ourselves. And I like to say, gently close the eyes, so that 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 unhurried, the soft beginning of a meditation session. And 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 it a welcoming place to be, your body? Is it an unwelcoming place, a difficult place? And to let your attention roam around your body, maybe with a quiet mind, as quiet as you can, to feel and sense the body and its different ways and different parts.

Sometimes, a broad discovery of the body can be seen as like tilling the soil, getting ready for planting a seed or plant that's going to grow. Simply getting to know the body is the tilling, is the softening, is the learning about the body, preparing for how the body will be the seed bed for something to grow. And in this body, as part of the body, checking in to discover how you are emotionally, in terms of a mood or an attitude. Are there moods, attitudes, emotions that seem to take you away from the present moment, from being connected to your body?

Or do the moods, emotions, attitudes you have somehow support being present?

Whatever it is, it is. It's okay. Just check in 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, know clearly, what a thinking mind is like. What it feels like—the tensions and pressures, activation of the thinking mind. Is a thinking mind more agitated or more calm?

What would it be like in the 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, to check in about your breathing. Where in the body do you feel the experience of breathing the clearest? What part of the breathing is clearest to your awareness? What is least clear—the inhale or the exhale?

Is your breathing easeful? Or is your breathing, in some way, uneasy or restricted, forced? It's all okay. Whatever way your breathing is, fine. This is a time to just check in and know it how it is for you. And 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? And again, to have no higher goal than staying present for three breaths. And then checking in with yourself in a broad, relaxed way. How are you—body, heart, or mind? A simple check-in. And then, in the middle of that, middle of what you're experiencing, return to your breathing for three breaths.

Giving yourself over as fully as you can give yourself to those three breaths. And if you notice there's tightness in your muscles, tension in your mind, you might, on the exhale, let there be a softening of the tension, the tightness. And relaxing on the exhale, that settles you more into here, into the middle of how you are. If you get carried away in thoughts, 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 than how you are. But check in, and how is this how you are? A check-in that's not judging anything, evaluating anything. Maybe letting your breathing be the center of all things, so when you check in with yourself, it's in relationship to that center. Breathing with your emotions. Breathing with the thinking mind. Breathing 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 breathing body, that does the allowing? And then, in a few moments, I'll ring the bell to end the sitting. And one approach is to not quickly end the meditation with a bell, but take the time to feel and sense the ringing. Maybe letting 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 who people said had grown in this practice, grown through this practice of *vipassanā*. Some of his plant had attained fruition, some deep way. And so I didn't know much of anything about *Theravāda* Buddhism or *vipassanā*, but I was introduced to this man. He had a presence that I'd never seen before, 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?" And 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 worked for you, this idea of a deep check-in, to really be present, as if you're important, your experience is important, nothing to fight with. With a goal, if there's a goal, to be fully here in your experience, to inhabit your experience. And noticing how you leave that home, leave that habitation, by a lot of thinking or a lot of preoccupation in something or other. Come back here, here, non-contention with this, this moment here.

So 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. So you're welcome to, you know, 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 the other, 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.

So one of the great things about Buddhist practice and *vipassanā* is the attention to detail. It's almost like you can get a tattoo on your arm, or maybe the palm of your hand, when you look down and you meditate, to remind you: attention to detail. And details are not

incidental. Details are the place where the practice grows. Details are where awakening can happen. And we never know which detail is going to be the one that is a catalyst for insight and awakening and depth and joy, but you don't want to miss it. So you have to kind of be there for the details.

And one of the great details is the details of how you relate to doors here at IRC. We were required by the fire marshal to have very heavy doors. And when they close, if you let them kind of close behind you by themselves, they can bang quite loudly, and the sounds can reverberate down the hallways into people's rooms. And 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—the click is enough to wake them up.

So sometimes attention to detail is a great opportunity for compassion and mutual care of our community. So, as 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 just summed it all up by saying that what it had taught him was how to open and close doors.

So the way we do it here at IRC, this attention to detail, is you really want to be present for the door, like the door counts. It's a detail that's important. It's you and the doors. Develop a relationship with doors, and you hold the handle, and you, you know, pull it down so the tongue of the door lock kind of opens. And gently pull the door out, and never let go of the door. Because then you lose your intimacy and your direct contact.

And then, when you're closing the door, close it gently while you're still holding it. And keep the handle down until you gently have it gently get snug in gentle intimacy with the door frame, and then let the handle go up. That way there'll be no clicking sound, and that way there's no banging, and 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 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.