Tuesday Morning Guided Meditation

Gil Fronsdal

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I am fond of the idea that when we do mindfulness practice, meditation, there's a rhythm to it, and we bring rhythm to it. And then, when things have kind of a rhythm of coming and going, appearing and disappearing, a rhythm of attending to something and not attending to something, there's something that can be relaxing about that or freeing in that because we're not locked in.

And so, one of those rhythms is the rhythm of breathing—breathing in and breathing out. And it's a little bit hard—not impossible—but it's a little bit hard to cling to the in-breath when it's passed and we're exhaling. The in-breath only exists when we're breathing in, and then it vanishes as we exhale. The exhale kind of exists while we're breathing out, and then it vanishes and stops. And then the inhale begins, and this coming and going, appearing and disappearing, this rhythm of arising and passing. In the *sutta*, sometimes they call it the surge and the receding, like a wave.

There's also a rhythm of being with breathing. Maybe often I encourage people to have breathing as the home for the meditation, the home base. If everything else is equal, just stay with the breath. Cultivate stability, steadiness, calmness with that rhythm of breathing in and breathing out. And then, if something else is more compelling, is louder, and there starts to be a tension between trying to stay with the breath and the other thing that's happening, then it's fine to let go of the breathing and make this other experience the object, the subject of mindfulness.

And today the topic is the body, body sensations, and here there's a nice rhythm that can be established, that you offer. That is, you might stay with breathing for a while, and then there's a compelling body sensation, and you bring your awareness to it fully, completely, maybe. But you don't get fixated on it. You stay in the body sensation to get to know it, to

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acknowledge it, and then come back to the breathing. And then, if the body sensation is still predominant, then return to it and be with it again. And there might be a rhythm of going back and forth, and that rhythm is a little bit of a protection from getting locked in.

When there's uncomfortable body sensations, if we spend too much time focusing on it, trying to understand it or be present for it, or inevitably maybe trying to get rid of it, try to work it, try to find out how to be equanimous with it, if it's too long, it's all too easy for almost kind of unconsciously attitudes and reactions and emotions to begin arising that make it more complicated than it needs to be. But if you just stay for a while with the body sensations and come back to breathing for a while, and then go back to the body sensations, you might see if it's true for you that this idea might keep you from making it more complicated than it needs to be. Just a simple, simple awareness: Oh, this is how it is now.

So one way that's nice is to spend maybe long enough for clear moments of mindfulness, these raindrops of mindfulness. Maybe spend three, four, five breaths with the body sensation that's compelling. And then come back and do three, four, five breaths with breaths in the awareness. And then, if the body sensation still is compelling, go back and do three, four, five breaths' time with that. And somehow, if you can manage that rhythm in a relaxed, easy way, it helps from getting locked in, getting caught in reactions, getting caught in meaning-making and stories around it.

And you're less likely also to kind of become complacent, kind of be staying with one thing. Sometimes the mind begins to drift off and gets distracted, and the quality of the attention is not so high if you try to stay with a body sensation for a long time. But if you kind of touch into it, acknowledge it, see it, know it, feel it, and then come back to the breathing, then some kind of rhythm that's nice for you. And then, how we experience the body sensation is really key to how we do all this.

And for this purpose, I'd like to do an exercise I'm fond of offering. And each time I offer this mindfulness kind of exercise, the lesson is a little bit different. So if you've done it with me before, listen anyway, because it'll be different.

So as you're sitting here, bring your attention to one of your hands and feel the sensations of your hand. Feel the palm of the hand, the sensations on the back of the hand, in the fingers. Parts of the hand might be warm; other parts might be cool. Part of the hand is touching something. There's contact and pressure. Other parts of the hand are just touching the air, very different sensations.

There might be a subtle pulse, vibration in the hand, a tingling, a weight. There might be

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subtle sensations that are unpleasant or not so subtle. There might be subtle sensations of pleasure, and the sensations in the hand are being sensed in the hand. You might know it from the mind, the head, but the sensing is right there in the hand. We can say it's the hand's experience of itself, and the hand's experience of itself, in and of itself, does not include ideas and stories and labels, words. The hand itself does not have an image of itself as a hand.

And then, as you sense the sensations of the hand, also notice how you're aware of it. Are you straining to know the sensations? Are you reluctant, annoyed that you're doing an exercise? Are you trying to feel the hand by using the eyes to look at it? Even with the eyes closed, the eyes get activated. And what extra baggage comes along with sensing the hand?

Allowing the hand to have its own experience, how simple can the experience be, with nothing extra added? And in the same way that you are feeling your hand in the hand, allow your attention to go to that part of your body where you usually experience your breathing. Allow that part of your body to have its own experience, sensing not just the experience of breathing but sensing the sensations that are there in that area. And rather than straining or narrowing attention to focus, maybe it can be more like turning on the light. And with the light on, the light of awareness, there's a fuller sensing of sensations associated with breathing.

And a rhythm of sensations associated with breathing in, those with breathing out. They come and they go. Maybe the sensations of breathing have no sharp edges. Maybe they're diffuse. As they appear and then disappear, and wherever the inhale disappears to, let your thoughts disappear there too. Each thought also appears and disappears.

Each thought has no edges. The individual thoughts come and go. And then, returning to the body's experience of breathing, and then with starting a short rhythm of practice, feel the hand again. The buzzing, the movements of sensations, the coming and going, the way awareness naturally roams around the hand to feel the different parts. And then gently come back to your breathing, to discover the body's experience of breathing now.

And then find some sensations in your body which are uncomfortable. Maybe not the most uncomfortable, but find something that's uncomfortable. And in the rhythm of coming to breathing and going to something else, now go and attend to that. In this simple way, you felt the hand. Feel the area of the discomfort. Sensing the sensations, where each sensation sensed is a raindrop being absorbed into the dry soil.

Or maybe it's a small little trickle across the surface of the soil that flows a little bit before it absorbs. Maybe there's a continuity of awareness. And then returning to breathing, and remembering that the body's experience of breathing is not thinking. Sensing is silent in

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relationship to thinking. No need to have a lot of thinking involved in sensing and being aware.

And then continuing with the breathing until there's some sensation in your body that's more compelling, and calmly bring your attention to that sensation. Maybe beginning a rhythm of feeling it and then back to the breath, feeling it and back to the breath, staying as simple as you can. The world of the body sensations, in and of itself, is a world without thinking. And if you see thinking as distinct, maybe you can relax the thinking muscle, relax the pressure or the hook or the glue that keeps you to the thinking. And as the tension around thinking relaxes, settling into the sensations of the body, the sensations of breathing, the rhythm by which sensations appear and disappear.

Even something that seems solid and unchanging, if you allow yourself to be intimate with it, you might see that it shifts and moves and comes and goes. And sometimes it's nice to expand the field of awareness, to have a global experience of sensations throughout your body in whatever easy way they appear, like how you might feel the warmth of a warm day. Feel an atmosphere that's in a room, maybe a big cathedral, the peaceful, large, peaceful room. Same way, feel and sense the sensations of your body as if the body is a large room or a peaceful grove of trees in the forest.

And sometimes, in the context of feeling the whole body, we notice that there's less preoccupation with particular sensations. What was a concern before becomes part of a big, wide field where there's lots of room for the dance of sensations coming and going, buzzing and vibrating. And within that wide body, the biggest movements have to do with breathing, the rhythmic waves of breathing in and breathing out, in the midst of this wide field, wide lake of the body. And as I ring the bell in this sitting, you might hear the sound with your whole body. Maybe without quickly going into picking up thinking and doing, just.

I had the good fortune of spending time with a really wonderful Thai teacher, meditation teacher, one of the great meditation teachers of the 20th century named *Ajahn* Buddhadāsa. And he spoke some English, and he would give some *dharma* talks, and very impressive man to be with. But I don't remember any of the *dharma* talks. But what I remember was at the end of one of the *Dharma* talks, he gave them always outdoors, and it kind of ended, and people started to leave. But he was still kind of there, at the front, and then he kind of looked up, like he'd forgotten to say something, and so then he said it.

And I was sitting close enough that I could hear what he had to say. So what he had forgotten to say was, “Don't do anything that takes you away from your body.” Don't do anything that takes you away from your body. And I was young and naive and ignorant, and thought that

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was a strange thing to say. Why would he say that? And so I made it my kind of spirit, my contemplative question for that retreat that was with him.

And I discovered, by just having that question, I discovered how often I left my body. I mean, I went into my thoughts and ideas, and I saw that if I was walking through the forest jungle to go to lunch, which was a big deal in monasteries, when I was young and hungry, I wouldn't be in my body. I'd be like two feet ahead of my body, you know. My desires, my wish, my thoughts were all about that lunch up ahead. And then I would bring my mind back into my body, kind of my sense of gravity being back here.

And over and over, I saw so often how I left myself behind my body. That was really a great lesson. So one of the ways to be at IRC is to use this opportunity here, where things are quieter, less complicated than many places. There's no real need to rush to get tea. Is to stay connected to your body, stay aware of your body.

And so I recommend that you go about your day at the speed of mindfulness of your body. So do a speed here, each person's their own way, but go about at the speed where you'll notice when your mind begins to drift away into thoughts and you're no longer connected to your embodied experience. Oh, there it is! If you kind of go down the steps and across the community hall, to the tea, in the ordinary way in which you'd go, you know, through the streets to catch a bus, by the time you get to the tea, you've probably had fifteen different thoughts, all kinds of, you know, wonderful things you're thinking, and you don't even know that you're thinking.

But if you go at the speed of mindfulness of the body, maybe you'll see when you start leaving yourself behind. Come back, stay in your body, stay connected to the embodied presence, embodied attention, the awareness that resides in your body, which is the world of sensations. And this is, you know, part of the specialty of walking meditation—to walk at the speed of mindfulness of the body—to really be able to enter into the whole world, to enter into like the sea of sensations that come alive as you walk, that come and go, the rhythm of sensations.

Stay close, stay close, because that's how all those little raindrops begin forming little teeny little streams. They might still get absorbed. Maybe they're not there very long, but they get longer and longer, and it takes longer before they get absorbed into the soil of your body. But at some point, your body is saturated enough that you start feeling there's more continuity, more there's a feeling of real big presence here in the body. And at some point, that presence is something you seem to carry with you. You don't have to do it anymore.

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It's like something has come alive—a vitality associated with embodiment, presence in the body. So I hope you can enjoy your body today.

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