Guided Meditaiton: What Is It?

Gil Fronsdal

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Hello everyone. We've had a variety of technical problems here at IMC, or I don't know if problems with events. Some of you might have tried to go onto the Monday evening talk yesterday online with Diana Clark.

The neighborhood, about eight blocks around us, had a power outage during just that time. So there was no ability, and then here at IMC, the electricity went out. Also, for the last twenty-four hours or so, the heating system hasn't worked. So that's been exciting to try to figure out.

One of the understated possibilities of mindfulness meditation is to help us break the habits of thinking and to enter into a new way of being present, even a new way of thinking. Not that we're being brainwashed into thinking anything in particular, but we're already brainwashed by thinking the habitual things over and over again. Probably one of the most common activities that humans, most humans, are involved in is thinking.

When that thinking is repetitive, when that thinking has a particular theme of fear or aversion or anger or hurt, or something is wrong, or someone better do something for me, or the problem is with other people, not with me, or the problem is with me, and we constantly think these thoughts, it becomes the atmosphere in which we circle. It becomes a very powerful habit that, in some ways, produces its own problems. If our habitual thinking is painful, then it reinforces pain. It reinforces, almost like the message is reinforced sometimes by how we feel having the message.

So if we feel the repeated thing is, “Something's wrong with me. I'm the one who's a problem,” that's painful to have. The very discomfort of it kind of reinforces, “Yes, there's something wrong here,” and so it's self-fulfilling in a way. So, to break the habit, so we can think fresh, new, not be caught.

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One of the ways to do that is to ask questions: good questions, simple questions, questions that orient us to a new way. Yesterday, I offered the question, “Where?” In meditation, where are you experiencing something? Not how you're experiencing it, but where. Then bring a loving, caring attention to that where, and hold it there, breaking the habit of attacking it, or believing it, or pulling away from it, or something that's not healthy. Just be with it. Accompany it in that place.

Today, the question is very simple. It's also one word, and that is, “What?” To make it longer: What is this? So whatever we're aware of, whatever we're attending to or aware of in our direct experience—remember, it always has to be in our direct experience that mindfulness works. If you're thinking about the future, the direct experience is the fact that we're thinking about the future. Where does that thinking occur? And then, what is this?

This is a kind of question that you ask, but you don't try to answer. Some people's habit is to have answers, to figure things out, and to put a lot of hope in finding something, seeing something deep, understanding something that's transformative. But in mindfulness meditation, the question, “What is this?” is supposed to have a different effect. It's almost like we're stepping towards something, and, what is it? We're there to receive it, to sense it, to feel it.

It's kind of like—you wouldn't do this literally, but maybe in your mind you could—if you meet a new person, a stranger, and you step one or two steps towards them with a sense of, kind of like, with open heart or open mind, “Who is this?” You're not solving the question with thinking. You're here to take in the person, to feel the person, to hear the person, to see the person. You're available.

So the same thing: if you're with your breathing, what is an inhale? Don't look for an answer in your head. Don't check it off by, “Oh, it's an expansion; it's a movement of the chest or the belly.” What's more deep is, “What is this?” Just allow, almost silently, to sense it, to let it register, to feel it more fully. Accompany it with the where, and really let it kind of be taken in.

This is what it is. This takes a little bit of time, and to give time, patient time, breaks habits of instant solutions. Just, what is this? Then leisurely feel for a second, a few moments. Feel what's there. What is this?

That's the *vipassanā* question: a question not to be answered with a thinking mind, but to be felt, to be sensed with the sensing body, in the place where the event is occurring. So, assume a meditation posture and close your eyes. Then very simply ask the question, “What

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is this experience of being human right now?" No thinking needed. What is this? To sense. To feel, from the body's point of view.

What is this vitality? Aliveness. What is this tension? This bracing of myself. No need to think the answer, no need to be for or against anything with this question. What is this experience of breathing?

When you find yourself back in the old tracks of thinking, the old modes, the habitual modes, respond with a question that takes you back into your direct experience. What is this? Don't try to answer it with thoughts. The answer is in sensing it and feeling it, opening yourself to be with it for a few moments.

Yeah. If you find yourself thinking, especially in the habitual way, maybe you can switch to a different way of thinking. Break the habit by asking the question, "What?" What is this here and now in direct experience? Whether it's the breathing, the body, emotions, or the lived experience of thinking, what is this? Letting the question open you to feel and sense more fully, as if you're discovering something new.

Hmm. Even if you're feeling uncomfortable in any kind of way, or if you're feeling comfortable in any kind of way, simply ask what, in a way that opens you to experience it more fully, to make more space, to be more open, to be wider than the experience, so it's received and felt. What is it to say the word "what" so that it's a friendly attitude, a caring attitude towards whatever you're experiencing? So it's not the habitual attitude that maybe doesn't serve you.

As we come to the end of this sitting, there's a way that this question of what—what is this person that I'm with?—can be an expression of kindness, generosity, care, respect. Who is this person? What is it to be with this person? Where the "what" is an attitude of friendliness, of delight to know this person, to experience this person, to have the sense of what.

Even if you know the person really well, certainly there are new dimensions of this person every moment. Maybe, with breaking the old habits of thinking and attitudes, how we are with people by saying the word "what" in a friendly way, we can more fully live with goodwill.

May all beings be happy. May all beings be safe. May all beings be peaceful. May all beings be free.

And may our question, "Who is this? What is this person? What is this to be with this person?" help us to contribute to the welfare and happiness of this world. Thank you.

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