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FIVE-WEEK INTRODUCTORY COURSE IN MINDFULNESS MEDITATION

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Insight meditation, or *Vipassana*, is one of the central teachings of the Buddha. It has continued as a living practice for 2500 years. At the heart of insight meditation is the practice of mindfulness, the cultivation of clear, stable and non-judgmental awareness. While mindfulness practice can be highly effective in helping bring calm and clarity to the pressures of daily life, it is also a spiritual path that gradually dissolves the barriers to the full development of our wisdom and compassion.

During the five-week introductory course, the basic instructions in insight meditation are given sequentially, each week building on the previous one. The first week focuses on the basics of meditation and on mindfulness of breathing. The second week discusses mindfulness of the body and expands the area of attention to include all our physical experiences. The third week introduces mindfulness of emotions. The fourth week addresses mindfulness of the mind and thinking. The fifth week focuses on the role of mindfulness in daily life and in deepening one's spiritual life.

Insight meditation is nothing more mysterious than developing our ability to pay attention to our immediate experience. We are often pre-occupied with thoughts about the past or the future or with fantasies. While sometimes such pre-occupations may be innocent and harmless, more often they contribute to stress, fear and suffering. Mindfulness practice is learning how to overcome pre-occupation so that we can see clearly what is happening in our lived experience of the present. In doing so, we find greater clarity, trust, and integrity. Mindfulness relies on an important characteristic of awareness: awareness by itself does not judge, resist, or cling to anything. By focusing on simply being aware, we learn to disentangle ourselves from our habitual reactions and begin to have a friendlier and more compassionate relationship with our experience, with ourselves and with others.

Mindfulness is the practice of being attentively present. It is called a practice in the same way that we say that people practice the piano. Being attentive is a skill that grows with practice. It develops best if we set aside any self-conscious judgements or expectations of how our meditation is developing. The practice is simply to relax and bring forth an awareness of what is happening in the present.

In order both to develop the skill and experience the joys of non-reactive presence, a daily meditation practice is helpful.

MINDFULNESS OF BREATHING

Insight Meditation usually begins with awareness of breathing. This is an awareness practice, not an exercise in breathing; there is no need to adjust the breathing in any way. We simply attend to the breath, getting to know it as it is: shallow or deep, long or short, slow or fast, smooth or rough, coarse or refined, constricted or loose. When we get distracted by thoughts or emotions, we simply return to the physical sensations of the breath.

Because of the mind's tendency to be scattered and easily distracted, we use the breath as a kind of anchor to the present. When we rest in the breath, we are countering the strong forces of distraction. We train the mind, heart, and body to become settled and unified on one thing, at one place, at one time. If you are sitting in meditation and your mind is on what you did at work today, then your mind and body are not in the same place at the same time. Fragmented this way, we all too easily lose touch with a holistic sense of ourselves.

Mindfulness of breathing is a powerful ally in our lives. With steady awareness of our inhalations and exhalations, the breath can become an equanimous constant through the ups and downs of our daily life. Resting with, even enjoying, the cycles of breathing, we are less likely to be caught up in the emotional and mental events that pass through us. Repeatedly returning to the breath can be a highly effective training in letting go of the identification and holding which freeze the mind and heart. It also develops concentration.

You will get the most benefit from this course if you engage yourself with the practice during the week between our class meetings. During the first week please try the following three practices:

1) Sit one twenty-minute session of meditation each day. For this first week, focus on staying aware of your breath as described in the next section of the handout. Begin and end each sitting with, a minute of conscious reflection: At the start, clearly remind yourself that you are about to devote yourself to being mindful and present. Consciously let go of any concerns, remembering that you will have plenty of time to take them up again later. At the end, reflect on what happened during your meditation session. There is no need to judge what happened; you just want to strengthen your mindfulness through a brief exercise in recollection.

2) Choose one routine physical activity that you perform most days and experiment with doing it mindfully. This means doing just this one activity while you are doing the exercise - not listening to the radio at the same time, for example. It is also best to let go of any concern about the results or in finishing quickly. Remain in the present as best you can. When the mind wanders, simply come back to the activity. Activities you might choose include brushing your teeth, washing the dishes, or some routine act of driving or walking.

3) For one half-hour period during the week, maintain some regular attention of your posture as you go about with some normal activity. Without straining, assume a posture that is alert and upright. Notice what happens to your mood, thoughts, feelings, presence, and degree of mindfulness as you do this exercise.

MEDITATION INSTRUCTION: MINDFULNESS OF BREATHING

Sit in a comfortable but alert posture. Gently close your eyes. Take a couple of deep breaths, and, as you exhale, settle into your body, relaxing any obvious tension or holding. Then, breathing normally, bring your awareness to your body, sensing for a short while how the body presents itself to you. There is no particular way to be; just notice how you are at this moment.

Then, from within the body, as part of the body, become aware of your breathing, however it happens to appear. There is no right or wrong way to breathe while doing mindfulness practice; the key is to simply notice how it actually is right now. Let the breath breathe itself, allowing it to be received in awareness. Notice where in your body you feel the breath most clearly. This may be the abdomen rising and falling, the chest expanding and contracting, or the tactile sensations of the air passing through the nostrils or over the upper lip. Wherever the breath tends to appear most clearly, allow that area to be the home, the center of your attention.

Keep your attention connected with the inhalations and exhalations, sensing the physical sensations that characterize them. Let go of the surface concerns of the mind. Whenever the mind wanders away, gently come back to the breath. There is no need to judge the wandering mind; when you notice that the mind has wandered, simply return to the breath without evaluation.

To help maintain contact between awareness and the breath, you may use a label or mental note. Softly, like a whisper in the mind, label the in-breath and out-breath, encouraging the awareness to stay present with the breath. You can label the inhalations and exhalations as "in" and "out," or perhaps use "rising" and "falling" for the movement of the abdomen or the chest. Don't worry about finding the right word, just use something that will help you stay connected.

There is no need to force the attention on the breath; to strengthen your ability to become mindful and present, use the gentle power of repeatedly, non judgmentally returning and resting with the breath.