

Introduction to Meditation

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Class One Notes

Buddhism & Vipassanā

Buddhism is not a belief system or dogma; it is a map and practice for exploring your life, enabling you to tap into your innate happiness, love, wisdom, and balance. In this course you don't blindly take our word for it; you test Buddhism by practicing meditation to see if you can verify the map in your own direct experience. That is what this series is all about.

Buddhism happens to be an extremely well-articulated path that, for the past 2600 years, has helped millions of people attain freedom from suffering. The Vipassanā tradition within Buddhism focuses on the direct teachings of the historical Buddha. Here, at Mountain Stream, we practice a lineage within Vipassanā that was transmitted by profound masters from the forests of Thailand. Our form of meditation involves turning our attention inwards to explore, or rather “see,” or even better yet “feel,” our human experience with a mindful awareness. The word “Vipassanā” literally means “seeing clearly,” but, throughout our course, we will have an emphasis on embodiment and “feeling clearly.”

Meditation Introduction

What is meditation? Guess what—it is not about stopping your thoughts. If I had only one word to define meditation, it would be “choice.” Upon examination, we find that we are habitually lost in thought. We are also often blindly acting out our conditioning and reacting where we “re” “act” that which we've done a million times. With meditation, we show up for the fullness of our lives by sustaining a mindful awareness¹ of what's happening in our direct experience in the present moment. Doing so engages the innate capacity of choice that is available only when we aren't distracted or reactive. It allows the space for a wise response to emerge. During formal meditation, we can be laying down, sitting, standing, or walking—all typically in silence.

So, why would someone meditate? What do you think it offers besides choice? Maybe you have heard of the health benefits and the cognitive bonuses. There is a mindfulness craze in our country with courses being offered at corporations and even the military for many thousands of dollars per person. You actually will get all of that here and something more—liberation. The Buddhist form of meditation provides a framework of understanding, ethics, and practices that lead to the end of suffering. To freedom.

Mindlessness, Mindfulness, and Mindful Awareness

When we start on a journey, it is helpful to have a sense of how we will travel our path. Therefore, we will take a moment now to define some terms and flesh out elements of a conceptual framework as a vehicle for our exploration. The intention right now is for you to have an initial understanding that can then deepen from the idea level to the experienced, and ultimately, embodied levels as practice unfolds

¹ Our definition & use of the term mindful awareness is how mindfulness is often defined.

over the course of years. Don't worry if it does not all stick right away. We will revisit this material continually, and a concrete understanding is not necessary to learn to meditate. Imagine that you are planting seeds now that will continue to bear fruit for the rest of your life.

When we're mindless, it's as if we are actors in a movie up on the screen in a plot that's written by our conditioning and a train of associations. We lack choice. We are reactive to what's happening and "re" "acting" what we've done so many times before. We are contracted onto the screen by *identifying* with the never ending stream of thoughts and impulses that are hopping from place to place—the associative train chugging along. Thus, we are imprisoned by whatever is happening, which is often stressful. Sure, there are lovely moments, but one minute we are up, the next down—being carried along in a life without true choice.

With mindfulness, we pull ourselves off of the movie screen and take a seat in the theater. When we watch a movie, we *know* that we are watching a movie. We are in the context (or orientation) of being in our seat. Thus, mindfulness is a matter of *orientation* to our experience. It is taking the seat in the theater.

Awareness is the capacity to know, or be conscious of, our experience. We are aware all the time when we are awake. By awake I simply mean not being asleep in our beds or physically unconscious. We know we are awake because we are *aware* of what is happening.

We are aware of what is happening through our five senses—sights, sounds, bodily sensations, tastes, and smells. We are also aware of the thoughts that arise in our minds. All of what is happening falls into those six categories. I'm often asked, "How about emotions or intuitions?". When we look closely, we see that our emotions, intuitions, or "feelings" are actually a combination of thoughts and sensations. There is a whole class where we will explore this one topic. As Joseph Goldstein says, the categories of experience are like a six piece orchestra, and the music is your life. You are aware of these elements, and, together, they make up your lived experience. Put another way, there's what's happening and the awareness that *knows* the "whats" that are happening. This is a framework for understanding that we will continue to unpack throughout our course.

Awareness is how our waking lives unfold. Whether we are up on the screen mindlessly or mindfully in the seat in the theater, we are, in both cases, aware. The question is, do we have a mindless awareness that leaves us imprisoned on the screen, or have we taken the seat of a mindful awareness that allows us choice and freedom? When we are aware, we know what's happening. When we are *mindfully* aware we know that we are knowing. We know we are in our seat.

One of the default things that happens when we have a mindful awareness is that we are seeing what's happening *here and now*. Instead of being lost in planning, which pulls us out into the future, we might watch the process of planning happening in our minds and understand, "Oh, planning is happening right now." Given that understanding, we might make the choice, "Not now. I'm meditating, and planning can wait." Then, we can return to our intended focus for that meditation period.

The “whats” that are happening can be likened to clouds that pass through the open space (or sky) of our awareness. We notice that the sky does not *judge* the clouds. It simply is the space through which they move. It doesn’t make up stories about them. It doesn’t get upset about them. It allows them. When we attend to our experience from the seat of mindful awareness, the awareness does not become contracted onto the screen by identifying with the “whats” that are happening. It remains off the screen—open and spacious like the sky.

Some clouds stay for a longer while. Sometimes they are stormy. The sky just lets them all pass through. No matter how big, or dark, or persistent, or thunderous the clouds might be, the sky is not damaged or stained by them. It is free. Which means *we* can be free. If we truly, deeply, learn to stabilize our orientation to life from the seat of mindful awareness, we can be completely free—not with a cold, disinterested, passive, dead, clinical observation but with an attentive engagement that offers us choice, wisdom, and an aliveness unboxed in by crippling mountains of stories. We can be fresh, and open, and helpful, and caring. We can hold our humanness tenderly. We can learn, as the title of a meditation book by Phillip Moffett suggests, to “Dance with Life.” All this simply because we took the seat of mindful awareness and stayed in it.

This introductory series of classes is all about developing our connection with the seat of mindful awareness and then, *staying in it*.

We focus today on the most noticeable process in our direct embodied experience—the breath. In the next class we’ll explore the immediate, unfiltered experience of our bodies. Very cool. Next will be emotions, and then thoughts, until we open (in our fifth class) to what is considered *true* mindfulness, with that open (or *choiceless*) attention, which accepts all six categories of “whats” together. This gets us prepared to bring our meditation off the cushion and into our daily lives. In our last class, we will explore the mystery of awareness itself.

One note before we dive in—*the point of meditation is not meditation*—it is to lead a fulfilling, clear, authentic, present life in which you embrace your innate wholeness. You are not here to become the greatest meditator of modern times. Relax. Ease into this. Your system is not used to taking this orientation, this seat of mindful awareness. Be kind and gentle with yourself the way you would be in training a puppy. The biggest obstacle you will initially face is your *expectation* of how things should be and how you should be. Be patient with any expectation as it arises and let it flow through—just one more passing cloud.

Posture

Suzuki Roshi, of the Zen tradition of Buddhism, equated having the proper posture to enlightenment itself. That is because when we fully open into our bodies in a relaxed, attentive manner, with no compensatory contractions of our muscles, we open to a naturalness of physical being that is effortless and free. Vipassanā is ultimately a somatic practice. We drop out of the penthouse of our head-centric, thinking minds and inhabit *all* of ourselves. We touch our experience so thoroughly and intimately that we touch through its ephemeral and empty nature to the very *awareness* that holds it.

The core idea with sitting posture is to be upright and yet completely, muscularly relaxed with the skeleton bearing the weight through the bones. This requires a balance of the spine above the hips such that no pelvic, belly, or chest muscles need to be engaged. If you are in a chair, see if you can sit upright without leaning on the back rest. Make sure your legs and feet aren't pressing into the ground. The knees should ideally collapse in towards each other with the lower legs at a right angle to the thighs.

If you are on a cushion, the elevation of the cushion tilts your hips forward, enabling the pelvis to hold the spine directly above your sacrum. If you tilt too far though, you will have to push back to keep your balance so work with as little height as possible. People from cultures that do not use chairs typically sit in meditation on the floor without any cushion at all and can be perfectly comfortable for hours. Check the legs and feet for any tightness, which can be invited to release by imagining the breath moving into it. Typically, one calf is in front of the other, and you can switch for the next sitting. Or you can try half lotus with one on top of the other. I don't know of anyone that can hold a full lotus position for long periods and don't recommend that you try it. It is hard on the knees, and you will just end up striving and possibly injuring yourself. Play with your posture and find what works for your unique body.

Try gently, slowly, swaying the spine from side to side and (separately) forward and back over the pelvis then let all muscle effort go. Allow the swaying to settle effortlessly into the balance point of each of these directions. Explore your pelvis, belly, and chest with your attention and invite any tightness to release, again by breathing into it. Alternatively, you can purposefully clench a contracted spot and then release it. Similarly, explore the shoulders and neck. Allow the hands to rest in your lap or on your knees such that the shoulders are not pulled forward. Make sure you are not pressing through the arms. The shoulders should relax towards the back, allowing your chest and heart to open. Relax the jaw and tongue, and tuck the chin slightly, which straightens the spine and adds a sense of lift through it. The skull should float on the axis joint of the top vertebrae.

All of these suggestions represent the ideals of proper posture. Primarily because of our use of chairs and staring into screens, or because of injury, physical limitations, or inactivity, there may be significant, habitual holdings that may not work themselves out without patience or physical therapy of some kind. Give yourself plenty of time to get used to sitting still. Your body is not used to this. In some ways, it is a bit of setup. Discomfort is often part of the initial practice until our bodies acclimate. Be patient and curious. Explore discomfort. It is a profound teacher, which we will explore more fully in our next class. Qigong and Tai Chi are especially helpful, as is Feldenkrais awareness through movement practices. Yoga can be effective, especially the forms that stress conscious embodiment without any pushing. Some yoga practices, however, emphasize attaining postures and stretching out muscles and tendons. That orientation most commonly induces striving and can be counterproductive to settling naturally into an easeful posture.

Imagine softening the crown of the skull itself and then the forehead. Relax the area behind the eyes and imagine that they are melting into your brain. Soften the cheeks and allow the lips to spread backwards towards the ears. Adding just a hint of a smile sends a neurological signal of ease

throughout your whole being. This is why so many Buddha statues show that faint enigmatic smile, which can meet any experience as a friend.

Mindful Awareness of Breathing

Once we attain a posture that allows our bodies to be relatively still, the most noticeable process we discover is that of breathing. Unless there is respiratory difficulty, the breath is a wonderful object to explore for establishing a settled, continuous, mindful awareness. My wife, however, struggled with the suggestion to follow her breath because the sensations of energy moving through her body were more natural to her interest as an object of attention. In our next class we will expand our exploration to the whole body, but, for the purpose of training, I'm going to ask you to be with your breath for this class and for at-home practice until next week.

We choose an individual object for initial practice because having a focus allows the mind to collect and stabilize in being present over time. It is a training. The breath and the body are always *here and now*—the mind is so often *there and then*. It is rehashing the past or trying to plan the future. Anywhere but right where our lives actually unfold—this present moment. Because it so deeply habituated to jump around, we need to be kind and truly patient, relishing the moments when we *do* show up. Expectations just get in the way. Our practice is really just having the sincerity to start over—again, and again, and again—with a relaxed heart.

We connect with breath as a process. We are curious, like a newborn. How do we know we are breathing? Are *we* even breathing, or is the *breath* breathing us? We allow the breath to be just as it is, not forcing any particular yogic principle or other agenda. We are simply open. We receive the breath almost in the same open way we receive a sound while listening.

Having established an intention to let the breath be natural, it does help to start with a few deeper breaths that make it all the way to the belly, registering the astonishing range of sensations floating in our mindful awareness. After a few cycles, see if there is a certain location (such as at the tip of the nostrils, the sinuses, the chest, or the belly) that commands your attention. Perhaps there is a quality of the breath that you find interesting. Is it long or short? Ragged or smooth? Easeful or labored? Whether you choose a location or quality, allow that refinement to become your anchor or home base, where you return after your mind inevitably wanders.

If the mind is particularly active or restless, we can use a gentle background noting and counting practice to give the thinking mind a job. It also helps to connect our attention to the object. As you breathe, count "In one, out one, in two, out two..." up to ten. When you lose your place, simply start back at one and continue. Do this as long as it feels supportive. Then let it go and see if you can stay naturally with the process of breathing. Such notes should be only 5% of the experience. If it feels oppressive, don't bother—just give your mind time to settle. Some days we sit and scarcely have a present moment. Other days the practice flows easefully. Neither is better or worse. This is a process—a training. Our job is to keep showing up with sincerity. As the practice unfolds, the breath reveals its subtleties—its mysteries. Something we have taken for granted turns into a joy, anchoring us here and now. What is it like in that moment when we return from being lost?

Home Practice

A key point of meditation is to make it your own—for it to be *authentic* to you. One way to enjoy meditation and make it your own is to have it be a friend. Literally. Could you invite this practice into your life's flow the way you would welcome a dear friend? How would you greet it? Maybe you would offer your friend a cup of tea or light a candle to create a comfy mood. Maybe you'd dress in casual comfortable clothes. Maybe you would have a cozy, quiet, private place set up. Play around with what feels right. Be truly curious about what makes meditation a friend of yours? What makes it your own?

Like any endeavor in life: the more you give, the more you receive. I'm going to offer you suggestions for homework, and I urge you to take them to heart and do them to the best of your ability. This is for your benefit. Meditation is a practice. Practice *takes* practice—not jaw-grinding enslavement but a balanced effort. You are touching into something that can profoundly bless your life, not to mention the lives of those around you. That being said, we are so quick to judge ourselves, and we all have such busy lives, I don't want to trigger self-criticism or stress. The reality is that *just by being here* something good is happening for you. But, it is so much greater if you engage and practice over these weeks. I honestly hope you will. It supports you and the whole group. But if you haven't done anything between classes, please don't let that stop you from coming. No judgements here. You are welcome *as you are*.

Try to meditate as much as 20 minutes a day, following your breath as we did in class this week. When is the most conducive time in the day? I find that in the morning, before I get pulled into too much activity, and at night, to chill out before bed, are conducive times. I often start with a silent dedication that has evolved over the years. It signifies to my nervous system that "mediation is beginning," and helps me drop in. You might try "I dedicate this practice to the benefit of...." Having a simple cue is key to starting a new habit. Then, you have the practice and, lastly, see if you can think of a reward. A treat. Maybe a cookie or a cup of tea. Choose something that is basically a pleasure for you. This completes the habit-forming triad of Cue, Practice, and Reward—a scientifically-proven sequence to get your new habit rolling.

Recognize that, in any moment, you can drop into the seat of mindful awareness; you don't have to be on the cushion. Notice if mindful awareness happens organically in a moment; this might happen simply because you are taking part in this class. Notice what it feels like when it happens. You might be driving or standing in line or washing dishes and—whoa—you're following your breath! What's the difference between the two orientations of mindlessness and mindfulness? On the screen or in the seat? What does it feel like?

If you've reached the end of your day and haven't had one mindful moment, don't despair. That is actually a great noticing, an insight. Take a couple of minutes as you lie down in bed and *practice*. The more you put in, the more you will receive (and, in turn, support the community). I also ask that you listen to the first talk in the [Introduction to Meditation](http://www.audiodharma.org/talks/audio_player/1176.html) series by Gil Fronsdal at http://www.audiodharma.org/talks/audio_player/1176.html and bring a brief (one to two sentence) reflection from that talk for your check-in. Again, if you can't get to it, there will be no shame but please do try.

Class Two Notes

Direct Experience of Our Bodily Sensations

In our first class, we focused on the breath, which is often our most-noticeable, bodily process. Our intention in Class 2 is to drop out of a conceptual relationship with our bodies and experience them directly as a constellation of sensations floating like clouds in the sky of our mindful awareness. I call this “feeling clearly,” and it is a key element in developing meditation practice and insight into the nature of our lives. That being said, because we are not used to opening to our physicality in this direct manner, it can take time for this way of feeling to develop. Class 2 is an introduction. Don’t get discouraged if it is not clear initially. All the practices presented in this series mature, just like anything else, over time and repetition.

To support connecting directly with our felt experience, we bypass terms like there is a “pain” in my “right shoulder.” We instead describe the sensations themselves—the actual clouds that are floating in the open sky of our mindful awareness. We are not concerned with their location, and “right shoulder” is simply a name—a concept. “Pain” is not clear enough and does not describe the sensation itself. Instead we dive right into the alive happening of the sensation with words like, pressure, pulsing, and stabbing. In fact, we can think of our bodies as a combination of four essential elements of sensation—earth, air, fire, and water. The earth element indicates our mass as a physical being, and words like pressure, heaviness, hardness, and softness work in that realm. Air is movement, so we use words like flowing, pulsing, vibrating, tingling, stabbing, expanding, and contracting. Fire relates to temperature, so words like cold, cool, warm, or hot are used. Water is cohesion and wetness, so we use terms like sticky, slippery, or gummy. These words can be used as notes that help us connect with the sensations and their qualities, but it should be stressed that even the use of these more appropriate words are not the goal. They should be a gentle background whisper. We are really interested in being mindfully aware of the sensations themselves, and these are ultimately indescribable.

The body is always here and now. When we bring our minds into the same time and space as our bodies by employing a mindful awareness, we connect the two. There is a default grounding and coordination that leads to more relaxation and ease. This has actually been measured in neurological studies. Our *bodies* also provide a more reliable source for understanding how we feel about our present moment experience than our *thoughts*, which can be flying all over the place. We explore this more fully in Class Three, which covers emotions. Given a very strong cultural orientation to being in our heads and relying primarily on logic and reasoning, exploring our bodies opens a new universe of intelligence, intuition, and wisdom.

Universal Challenges of Life—the Five Hindrances

As we practice meditation, we begin to meet our lives more fully and clearly. With this mindful awareness of the “clouds” that are happening, we notice different “weather patterns.” Our patterns. Our habits and coping mechanisms. Some are quite helpful, enjoyable, and skillful leading to our well-being and that of others. Then, there are those that get us tied up and lead to stress. In Buddhism, the major universal patterns that are challenges in life are also known as the Five Hindrances. These

challenges, though, become the vehicle by which we understand peace and wellness. They are to be embraced and explored. Freedom is their fruit.

The Hindrances start with *Greed* for enjoyable sense pleasures whether of sight, sound, taste, smell, or touch. Lusting for these things keeps us running around. This is a recipe for stress.

Conversely, with *Aversion*, we feel that we have to keep things we don't like away. Unfortunately, that's not possible. We all know that we will fall sick from time to time. If we are lucky, we will get old, but our faculties will diminish in the process, and we will, for sure, die. All of these experiences involve unpleasant sensations. Ouch. What really helps with greed is simply imagining how great it would feel if we didn't have that particular need. Bringing a sense of *kindness* to what we are aversive about, or the feeling of aversion in our bodies, helps to bear its weight and allow it to soften.

Next up are *Sloth and Torpor*. They are that heavy feeling we have when we are supposed to do something we aren't excited about or that is new and uncomfortable. Interest helps here. Embrace it and explore it. It will change as will your relationship to it.

Restlessness and Worry (about the future) or *Regret* (about the past) are agitated states that come from not being able to feel fully safe and needing to have everything be perfect. Gratitude for the many things that *are* going right in any given moment is the antidote here.

Lastly, there is *Doubt*. This can be about the teacher or teachings and that can be a positive quality that leads to further investigation. Don't take my word, look for yourself. Doubt about your capacity to practice and become wise or doubt about your worthiness are the most difficult of all these challenges. This is where the clear map of Buddhism really helps. Hang in there. Be patient. Get to know the fogginess of this pattern. It will lead to great confidence and a very full, enjoyable life.

Homework

Try to meditate as much as 20 minutes a day, connecting with your bodily sensations as we did in class this week. Recognize that in *any* moment you can drop into the seat of mindful awareness; you don't have to be on the cushion. Notice if mindful awareness happens organically in a moment—this might happen simply because you are taking part in this class. Notice what it feels like when it happens. You might be driving or standing in line or washing dishes, and—whoa! You're connecting with your sensations or your breath. What's the difference between the two orientations of mindlessness and mindfulness? On the screen or in the seat? What does it feel like?

If you've reached the end of your day and haven't had one mindful moment, don't despair. That is actually a great noticing, an insight. Take a couple of minutes as you lie down in bed and *practice*. The more you put in, the more you will receive and the better able you'll be to offer heartfelt support to your community. Listen to the second talk in the [Introduction to Meditation](http://www.audiodharma.org/talks/audio_player/1180.html) series by Gil Fronsdal at http://www.audiodharma.org/talks/audio_player/1180.html, and bring one brief (one to two sentence) reflection from that talk for your check-in. Again, if you can't get to it, there will be no shame, but please do try.

Class Three Notes

Feeling our Feelings—Exploring Emotions

Eckhart Tolle states that emotions are where the mind meets the body. Last week we explored the direct experience of our bodies as a collection of sensations. We developed a vocabulary that correlated with the elements of:

1. Earth—pressure, heaviness, hardness, and softness
2. Air—flowing, pulsing, vibrating, tingling, stabbing, expanding, and contracting
3. Fire—cold, cool, warm, or hot
4. Water—sticky, slippery, or gummy

Having established this investigation of our physicality, we are now ready to take yet another step into subtlety and open to the evanescent realm of our emotions. Wow.

Emotions are called “feelings” precisely because we *feel* them. This class is about feeling them *clearly*—being able to distinguish what emotion we are feeling and the sensations associated with it. Emotions are often triggered by a thought. We’re just sitting there minding our business and a thought arises in our awareness. A strong sensation that we recognize as an emotion then may arise in our bodies in reaction to that thought. If we are paying attention with a mindful awareness, we can see the process unfold and catch the train before it fully leaves the station. Keeping our mindful awareness on the sensation is much easier than tracking the thoughts, which can be firing off like popcorn. It keeps us grounded, and we can weather the process more ease-fully.

Conversely, we might notice that we’ve had a few thoughts in a row that relate to a particular emotion. “I’m annoyed with my wife” pops up. A few moments later, “This place is just disgusting!” emerges. And, some moments later, up comes “I’m sick of the food at that restaurant.” If we check into our bodies with a mindful awareness, we might notice “Oh, I’m familiar with this clenching in my chest and jaw. This is anger. There’s anger in my system now.” We most skillfully attend to anger simply by bringing a mindful awareness to it. This is one of the magical aspects of a mindful awareness—in its light, negative energies tend to diminish as we loosen up around them and stop feeding them. Instead, we feel them clearly and allow them to heal and/or pass through. Now, here’s a really great piece of news—possibly my favorite in all of meditation. When we bring a mindful attention to a positive emotion like happiness, gratitude, or love, it tends to *increase* because, once again, we feel it clearly and its ventilating, awakening, freeing qualities are given the space to expand. Super cool.

I like to think of our difficult emotions as children who live inside us. We can care for them in the same way we would care for an upset child. What do you do with a child in distress? You bring them in close and ask them how they are and comfort them. If you tell them it is not ok for them to feel the way they do, or to go their room and never bother you again with their hurt, you end up with a very neurotic child. Yet, this is what we do every time we push away an unpleasant emotion. These

emotions are our guides and our opportunities for freedom. Remember the five hindrances we spoke about last week. Our difficult emotions offer the same opportunity.

Rumi conveys this so beautifully in his poem, *Guesthouse*.

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
Some momentary awareness comes
As an unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,
Who violently sweep your house
Empty of its furniture,
Still treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out for some new delight.
The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
Meet them at the door laughing,
And invite them in.
Be grateful for whoever comes, because each has been sent
As a guide from beyond.

We use the acronym RAIN, which provides a framework for holding these upset children when they grace us with their presence.

- The *"R"* stands for *Recognize*. See that the child is there and upset.
- The *"A"* stands for *Allow or Accept*. Let the child be just as it is. It is trying to tell you something. It wants to heal and, in so doing, offer you more freedom.
- The *"I"* stands for *Investigate* by feeling it in your body.
- The *"N"* stands for *Non-Identify*. We understand that this is an energy passing through. We are not defined by it. This isn't how we've always been and how we always might be as we are so apt to think in the moment. Loosen the grip of identification and let go.
I recently heard a very wonderful teacher change "N" to Nourish. I love this. We take care of ourselves in the moment by offering ourselves compassion and kindness. We recognize that this is a tough emotion and we soften to hold it and all of ourselves warmly. Beautiful.

The Tibetans call compassion the quivering or trembling of the heart and I, personally, use the acronym, RAFT.

- The *"R"* and *"A"* are the same as in RAIN (*Recognize and Allow or Accept*).
- The *"I"* becomes *"F"* for *Feel*. We feel clearly what's happening in our bodies, and that is the investigation. Not a head driven examination but a body-centric feeling into the aliveness of what is present.
- The *"T"* is for *Tremble*. We bring the trembling of a compassionate heart to ourselves.

RAIN and RAFT also work for positive emotions. Yum!

Balance as Freedom

As we saw in our exercise in class, when we lean towards what we want, we are actually off balance. This is greed for the pleasant. The exact same is true when we try and stay away from what we don't like—aversion or hatred for the unpleasant. We felt directly in our bodies how stressful it is to be in either of those off balance positions. We, lastly, felt how easeful and open and freeing it was to be in balance—when we met our experience without moving towards or away, but just felt it.

This is the basis for the first three of the Four Noble Truths.

1. There is inescapable, unpleasant stuff we will come into contact with in a human life. That's simply a fact.
2. Trying to get away from it causes stress. If we then get attached and need to have things a certain way, we are really caught and we will, for sure, suffer. That's because we aren't fully in control. We will have "owies" and ultimately die. Every moment is different than the last. It is a flowing river of change. If we hold on and try and stop the flow, it is like trying to hold on to a rapidly moving rope—we get burned.
3. Meeting life just as it is—accepting it fully—with an interested (even wondrous) mindful awareness, liberates us from the struggle to control that which we cannot. This does not mean that we stop enjoying the beautiful. We are free to enjoy it more because we don't waste our time trying to desperately hang onto it. William Blake put this beautifully in four short lines:

He who binds to himself a joy
Does the winged life destroy;
But he who kisses the joy as it flies
Lives in eternity's sunrise.

Leaning towards and away and getting stuck in attachment are very deeply conditioned approaches to life that are inflamed and reinforced by our consumerist techno/scientific, "We're going to figure it all out, and if you don't, you are flawed.," culture. So, we need a way of living that helps us calm that seesaw tendency, and we'll talk about that in the next class. It's called the eightfold path, but I call it simply a sane way to live.

Homework:

Really try to establish that 20 minutes of sitting a day. I just read an article in the New York Times about forming habits. Habits are most easily reinforced by practicing a three-step ritual:

1. You train your nervous system by providing an easy CUE. That might look like lighting a candle, having a cup of tea, or even putting on a certain sweater.
2. Then you do your ROUTINE for 20 minutes.
3. Then you have a juicy REWARD like a piece of chocolate or warm shower.

Soon you won't need the reward.

Finally, listen to the third [Introduction to Meditation](http://www.audiodharma.org/talks/audio_player/1194.html) talk by Gil Fronsdal at http://www.audiodharma.org/talks/audio_player/1194.html. Think of a reflection to share with the group and yourself. What is your prime takeaway?

Class Four Notes

Thoughts—the Outer Ring

As I said in our first class, we can look at our process through this series as if we were exploring our direct experience in different concentric rings of awareness. At the very center of our physicality is the breath. Around that is the body. In our last class we explored the ring where the mind and body meet at the level of emotions. And here we are at the outer ring—thoughts and the process of thinking itself. Notice how we've also expanded to successive levels of subtlety as well.

We spend so much of our time in this outer ring of thinking—the furthest place we can be from our center. And it gets wobbly out here. Our thoughts are often firing off like popcorn strung together by mindless trains of association. First we notice our shoes are tight. Then we think about buying a new pair. Then we remember the shoes we saw when we were in that thrift store in Oregon. Yeah Oregon. That's a cool state. I'd love to go back there. To the coast. Sometimes you see whales there. I know someone who thinks whales are aliens. How ridiculous. Like Area 51 in the TV show Roswell. The guy who starred in that had a cool haircut. I should trim my nails come to think of it... Do you find this at all familiar?

We become lost on a ludicrous ride on the train. And this is how we spend so much of our lives. Lost in thought. Mindless. What a waste. Especially as we open to the rich panorama of the present moment that is expressing itself in a kaleidoscope of sensations and aliveness.

This is not to say that thinking is not a powerful tool. When guided towards a task, it can produce miraculous results. I'm pretty happy about this computer I'm using. A lot of thinking went into its production. Wow. Our job is to get curious about thoughts and the thinking process itself, so that we can feel it for what it is and develop a skillful relationship to it.

If we wait with a mindful awareness (rather like a cat at a mouse's door) for the next thought, we discover something miraculous. With intimate scrutiny and honesty, we ascertain that we can't fully predict the next thought. They arise on their own. They are impersonal. Not in our control. Whoa. Do we think our thoughts, or do they simply arise based on our predispositions, habits, and conditioning?

Like a sound arising and being heard by the ear, thoughts arise and are sensed by the mind. They come and they go. Where do they come from? What is their substance? How long do they stay? Where do they go? They are like the most diaphanous of blips. Yet, they trigger so much, and we take them so seriously. We believe that we are our thoughts and that we are the thinkers of them. Does this bear up under investigation?

With our thoughts firing off like popcorn—way away from our centers—we become unbalanced, stressed, and distracted if we follow them too closely. We believe we will be able to think our way into getting more of what we like and keeping away what we don't want. Most of our thoughts relate to our being the star of our own movie. How was I? How am I? How will I be? And, most of them are reruns. As Chogyam Trungpa said, "looking into the mind is just one insult after another." Ouch.

Tonight and throughout this next week, we look at thoughts with a sense of freshness and exploration. What is a thought for us? Do we think in words or images or both? What is the process of our thinking? As we attend to thoughts with a mindful awareness, what patterns do we notice? Can we see the conditionality? The train of association? Thoughts can be a challenging meditation object. They are so fast and wispy, they can sneak right under our mindful awareness and whisk us away. Take thoughts as an object of focus for shorter periods of time and reground the mindful awareness in the breath as needed. Be playful and easy with yourself. These little blips have been running your life almost unseen. It takes time and interest and often humor to befriend the world of thinking.

Living a Sane Life—the Noble Eightfold Path

Last week we performed an exercise that showed us how stressful and unsatisfying it is to lean greedily *towards* what we want and aversively *away* from what we don't like. Our peace, we found, was in meeting life just as it meets us. That's where our balance and freedom lies. Even though the leaning towards and away is so deeply conditioned, the good news is that we can be free if we lead a life that brings us into harmony with how things actually operate. That is articulated in the Noble Eightfold Path.

If we have a skillful orientation to life, informed by the wise understanding that our actions have consequences for our happiness in a vast web that we cannot fathom, we naturally lean towards non-harming and skillfulness. When we show up with a mindful awareness and see that everything is changing moment by moment and that it isn't in our control or even "personal," we recognize that if we attempt to hold on, we will suffer. We are vigilant about the stress of leaning towards and away, which is the first step towards holding on. We feel that clearly. These elements comprise a wise view that gives us a good direction in which to be pointed.

Next, we need an engine to take us on our journey to freedom, and that is wise intention or resolve. Intention is the mother of actions. It is like a drain in a sink. The surface is inclined so that everything is drawn down to the drain. When we have a strong intention, it literally draws to itself the energies needed for the manifestation of its aim. Wise intention is to be very clear about wise view and to firmly resolve to live by its wisdom and allow freedom to emerge.

If wise *view* provides our direction, and wise *intention* is the engine, wise *action* is the running of that engine. We resolve not to cause harm in speech, action, or livelihood. In so doing, our minds become calm, restful, and at ease because we have nothing to regret. With an undisturbed mind, we are well set to meditate with a balanced, consistent, sustainable effort. When we cultivate the mind this way it naturally settles and unifies into concentration, and, at some point, our minds stay in a state of mindful awareness, freed from holding on. At peace. Liberated. It's possible. In fact, now that you are here, it is inevitable. You're doomed to awaken. Wow.

Class Five Notes

Mindful Awareness—AKA Choiceless Attention or Choiceless Awareness

In our previous classes we have focused on specific, direct aspects of our experience to follow with a mindful awareness while meditating. We started with the breath, then moved to bodily sensations, with emotions next, and, most recently, thoughts. This creates a useful framework of concentric rings of experience that are more subtle as we move from the breath at the center to the outer circle of thoughts.

Once we have familiarity with these elements of our lives, it is well within our capacity to include the other basic categories of our experience, which are sounds, sights, tastes, and smells. Remember that emotions are a composite of bodily sensations and thoughts, and the breath is composed of sensations alone. In our first class we determined that all human experience can be broken down into the objects of the five senses plus thoughts—a six piece orchestra and the music is your life.

So, up until now we've had an individual category of experience to attend to with a mindful awareness in each class. This helps to collect our attention and familiarizes us with direct and non-conceptual exploration of objects unfolding moment by moment. It is as if we have had an anchor each week. Today we unhook and set sail with a mindful awareness of the full flow of our lives.

As always, our job is to stay mindfully off of the mindless movie screen so that our awareness can be like the sky, and the six types of phenomena can be like the clouds passing through. We are interested in the *process* of what's happening (not the content). This keeps us from getting wrapped up in the stories of our thoughts and from judging our experience. It simply is as it is, moving and morphing in every moment.

Everything is in a state of perpetual perceptual flux. We may think a rock is stable, solid, and unchanging, but our perception of it is constantly changing. We change our physical view, even ever so slightly—or we blink—and it has changed in our minds. We touch it and the sensation of that is alive with temperature, hardness, heaviness, and the subtle vibrations we find in every tactile experience. The rock itself is a very slowly moving verb. It will ultimately wear down into dust. At its atomic level, it is a swirl of rapidly vibrating energy blips. Everything, everything, everything is constantly changing. Wow.

When we unhook from any particular object and open to the full flow of life, we start to see the constructed or compositional aspect of our experience. First, we are mindfully aware of a thought, then a sensation, next an image arises in our minds, another thought, another thought, another thought and, ooh, now an emotion.... There is a predominant object in the forefront in each moment being replaced in the next. Sometimes the object of one moment looks very much like the object of the last, but, if we are really precise, we will notice some degree of change.

Our intention is to stay mindfully in our seat. This keeps the awareness from getting contracted onto the mindless movie screen by identifying with what's happening and then getting lost in stories and

judgements. Instead our mindful awareness stays open allowing the parade of experience to pass through and be known. There is a choicelessness to this openness. There is no agency selecting what to pay attention to and no one creating the “whats” that are occurring. It is simply experience happening and being known.

To help us stay connected with this flow of experience, moment by moment, we can use gentle background notes—just as we’ve done before with the breath. In this case, we pick an easeful, consistent rhythm and softly name what happens. “Breath, image, thought, thought, sound, sound, sensation, emotion, emotion, sensation...” Like a metronome, we simply name the basic category of what we notice arising in the sky of our mindful awareness. We name the clouds passing by. This can take some practice. If you feel tightness or strain in the mind, let it go and hang out with the breath until you are settled again. Then try it again. If it feels ok just to be present to the flow and not use noting, that is fine too, but noting helps most folks initially to connect and hang in there with the unfolding process.

When we practice with a mindful awareness with a choiceless attentiveness, we feel life as it truly is. We feel the change. We feel the open, free, sky-like nature of the mindful awareness that lets the clouds pass through. The clouds are always changing, but does the sky change?

Since the clouds are always changing, we recognize that if we hold on and try to stop them, we will suffer. We’ll get burned just like we would if we were trying to hold onto a moving rope. We also start to notice that there isn’t a “me” somewhere creating the clouds. They just arise. Whoa. Amazingly, we can see that whatever we’ve been spending time and energy on tends to set the stage for many of the clouds that come. We are habitual creatures with all types of patterns and ways of relating to life through our coping mechanisms, views and, opinions. It’s the way we organize experience so we can make sense of it. Very necessary and useful. Thus, this is not a problem if we are mindfully aware of how this is operating and not mindlessly being led around by it. When we feel change, suffering, and impersonality really clearly, our systems naturally let go, and we come into the balance of freedom. Yay!

Cultivating an Open Heart—Metta Practice

Now that we’ve seen that what we spend time and energy on creates the conditions for more of the same to arise, the good news is that we can choose skillfully. And perhaps the most skillful choice of all is to cultivate an open heart. When the heart is open, it automatically allows everything to be just as it is. Flowing and alive. It connects and accepts and allows. It is not struggling, controlling, and suffering. It is in balance. It sees everything as an interconnected whole—not as separate pieces and parts. It is innately aligned with change, non-suffering, and impersonality. Very cool. We can cultivate an open heart, or friendliness, or loving-kindness with Metta practice. Repeat softly and silently three to four phrases you create such as “May I/you be happy” May I/you be at ease.” Try this for a few minutes each day and see what happens. You can do this while driving or in the checkout line or... Be creative. And enjoy. Don’t worry if the opposite arises sometimes. Metta can act like a magnet. Hang in!

Class Six Notes

Awareness—Review and Exploration

Awareness is the capacity to know or be conscious of our experience. We are aware all the time when we are awake. By awake I simply mean not being asleep in our beds or physically unconscious. We know we are awake because we are aware of what is happening. If we are having surgery performed, we are given drugs so that we will not be aware of the physical pain and trauma that would otherwise be known during the procedure.

We are aware of what is happening through our five senses—sights, sounds, bodily sensations, tastes, and smells. We are also aware of the thoughts that arise in our minds. All of what is happening falls into these six categories. Again, as Joseph Goldstein says, these categories of experience are like a six piece orchestra and the music is your life. You are aware of these elements, and together they make up your lived experience. Put another way, there's what's happening and the awareness that *knows* the "whats" that are happening.

Awareness is how our waking lives unfold. Whether we are up on the screen mindlessly or mindfully in the seat in the theater, we are, in both cases, aware. The question is—do we have a mindless awareness that leaves us imprisoned on the screen, or have we taken the seat of a mindful awareness that allows us choice and freedom? When we are aware, we know the "what's" that are happening. When we are mindfully aware we actually know that we are knowing those "whats." Or rather, we know that we are in our seat knowing (watching, hearing, and understanding) the movie that is happening.

The "whats" that are happening can be likened to clouds that pass through the open space, or sky, of our awareness. We notice that the sky does not judge the clouds. It simply is the space through which they move. It doesn't make up stories about them. It doesn't get upset about them. It allows them. When we attend to our experience from the seat of mindful awareness, the awareness does not become contracted onto the screen by identifying with the "whats" that are happening. It remains off the screen, open and spacious like the sky.

Some clouds stay for a longer while. Sometimes they are stormy. The sky just lets them all pass through. No matter how big, or dark, or persistent, or thunderous the clouds might be, the sky is not damaged or stained by them. It is free. Which means *we* can be free. If we truly, deeply learn to stabilize our orientation to life from the seat of mindful awareness, we can be completely free. Not with a cold, disinterested, passive, dead, clinical observation, but with an attentive engagement that offers us choice, wisdom, and an aliveness unconstricted by crippling mountains of stories. We can be fresh, and open, and helpful, and caring. We can hold our humanness tenderly. We can learn, as the title of a meditation book by Phillip Moffett suggests, to "Dance with Life." All this simply because we took the seat of mindful awareness and stayed in it.

At this point in the course, we have now developed and explored this useful conceptual framework of the sky and clouds as a vehicle for our exploration. The intention has been for you to have an initial

intellectual understanding that can then deepen from the idea level to the experienced, and ultimately, embodied levels as practice unfolds over the course of years. You don't have to have directly experienced awareness by this point (as if you could). We hold the framework and allow a process to unfold. We plant seeds that will continue to bear fruit in wondrous ways throughout our lives. We allow heartfelt insight into mystery to emerge—not factual, intellectual definition to be exhaustively compiled (as if it could be).

Tonight, we ask further questions about the sky-like nature of our awareness. We are not here to answer these, but to explore them.

We can feel and see the clouds, but can we see the sky itself? Can we see open space? We know it is there, but can we actually find it? Pick it up? Hold it? Define it? Can we even call awareness "space" or "sky?" Perhaps we could say it has a certain groundless quality. An "unfindableness." The looking for awareness and not finding it, is actually the finding of it. It sounds crazy, and yet, there it is. We can't find the most basic aspect that makes our lives lived, yet we know it is there. We are so immersed in an unfindable awareness that Einstein offered the analogy "Fish will be the last to discover water."

We've noticed that the clouds are always changing, but does the sky? We look in the mirror and see a face and body that have changed over time, but what is *aware* of the seeing—has *that* changed? If the clouds are changing in time, but the space of the sky is unchanging, is awareness outside of time? Is it timeless? There is a saying that the greatest matter is not the future of humanity, but the presence of eternity. Wow.

Perhaps the most readily explored aspect of a sky-like awareness is the question of whether it is inside of us or outside. If we close our eyes and a bell is rung, the sound of it arises in our awareness. We may have a perceptual understanding that this sound did not arise from within our bodies, but, in terms of the sky of awareness, it is just another cloud. Sensations that occur within our bodies are still clouds in the sky of awareness. Thoughts, tastes, smells, sights, emotions—all clouds. Knit them all together and, like virtual reality on steroids, we have a sense of ourselves and our world. And when we focus directly on these clouds, as we did with, for instance, sensations, they start to soften, change, and ultimately disappear.

Our culture takes for granted that awareness is generated by the interaction of billions of nerve cells in our brains with their trillions of connections and array of neurotransmitters. Because of our sky/cloud framework, we can now ask this question—if everything is arising in the open sky of our awareness, is my sense of me and everything else *also* arising in that same sky. Am I generating my awareness or is awareness generating a very real sense of me and the universe within itself. A multiplicity within a unity. No separation between the subject and observer because it is all just awareness dancing with itself. Wow! This orientation aligns perfectly with the many spiritual traditions, such as Taoism, Vedanta, Christian Mysticism, Jewish Kabbalah, Sufism, Buddhism, etc. These all point to non-duality.

Non-duality has been illuminated by the study of quantum physics and the double slit experiment that shows that simply observing the state of a subatomic particle causes its behavior to collapse from a wave of possibilities into the behavior of a particle. (Check out this short Dr. Quantum video at

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fwXQjRBLwsQ>). What begins to emerge is a picture of reality as a self-interactive, unified field of possibility.

Let's just recognize that these are all just words and that we ultimately can't describe reality using them. These are concepts that are being introduced to stimulate interest and exploration. Their value is in helping us orient and open to our life as a mystery. Like a newborn, we then have a fascinated, open-minded, friendly, wonder-infused connection with our beingness. The term beingness is really helpful because it points to this sense of being a being, but can we really say that we are anything? Softening up our sense of self is so valuable because when we stop trying to control things for "Me, Wonderful Me," we have so much more energy, and we are freed from fear. Cool!

In classical Theravada Buddhism, in each moment of experience (of which the Buddha said there are seven trillion in the blink of an eye!) the object arises with its consciousness as an aspect of it. In a moment of hearing, there is a sound as an object, sound consciousness, and the sound sensing capacity of the ear all wrapped together. You cannot separate the three aspects; they are part of a whole. Each enables and "makes" the other. This opens the possibility that the object and the sense capacity are actually made of consciousness themselves, which points to non-duality and a self-interactive field of awareness yet again. Awareness could be said to be the experience of all of these many moments of consciousness knit together—like the spinning blades of a fan becoming a solid looking circle or the moving picture frames that become a movie.

From another perspective, the Thai Forest tradition points to the same relative or instantiated object consciousness just described as part of a broader uninstantiated consciousness. The objects with their consciousness arise and pass endlessly, but the uninstantiated consciousness always remains acting as awareness. Whatever the case, we don't now try to identify with awareness as ourselves—as the new "Me." We let go into the mystery of our being-ness and enjoy freedom from having to struggle or figure it all out. We drop out of our intellects into our hearts and bodies and feel clearly the wondrousness of—what?

Selected Resources

- Mtstream.org
 - Monday Evenings, 7:00 pm – 8:30 pm, meditation and Dhamma talk
 - Wednesday Evenings, 6:30 pm – 8:30 pm, Kalyana Mitta (Spiritual Friends) Group, meditation and Dhamma talk
 - Open Temple Fridays, 10:00 am – 2:00 pm, meditation and library access
 - [Daylong Retreats](#)
 - [Residential Retreats](#)
- Spiritrock.org
 - [Residential Retreats](#)
 - [Drop-in programs](#)
 - [Live Webcasts](#)
 - [Online Classes](#)
 - [Non-Residential Programs](#)
 - [Extended Study Programs](#)
- Dharmaseed.org—Western Buddhist Vipassanā teachings
Among others, check out:
 - [John Travis](#),
 - [Jack Kornfield](#)
 - [Joseph Goldstein](#)
 - [Sharon Salzberg](#)
 - [Sylvia Boorstein](#)
 - [Donald Rothberg](#)
- Audiodharma.org—numerous talks given at the [Insight Meditation Center](#), Redwood City, California. In addition to guest speakers, there are many Dhamma talks by its teachers
 - [Gil Fronsdal](#)
 - [Andrea Fella](#)
- AskLove.org—an online support community based on heart wisdom.