



# Insight Retreat Center

## NEWSLETTER

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### Work Days

Workdays are an integral part of taking care of IRC, and thus supporting retreats. There is a sense of community when we sit and work together and take care of our center. Whether working in the gardens or sweeping the floors, it's inspiring to know that days later retreatants will be doing sitting and walking meditation in those areas.

Saturdays, 9am to 4pm, with lunch included:

February 13, March 19, April 16, May 14,  
June 4, July 2, August 6

Other work days will be announced on our website's Workdays link. Questions? Eileen: [messina.eileen@gmail.com](mailto:messina.eileen@gmail.com), 650.269.5801

### Garden Days

To help with gardening and landscaping please contact the Landscape Manager at: [gardening@insightretreatcenter.org](mailto:gardening@insightretreatcenter.org).

### Volunteer: Help Care for IRC

IRC is run entirely by volunteers. The continuing support allows us to take care of the center and offer retreats. Join us at a Work Day or fill out a Volunteer Form online or email:

[insightretreatcenter@gmail.com](mailto:insightretreatcenter@gmail.com).

**Resident Volunteers:** Several Resident Volunteers live at IRC for extended periods, participating in dharma programs and assisting with the various tasks needed to support center activities. If you're interested in becoming a resident volunteer email [insightretreatcenter@gmail.com](mailto:insightretreatcenter@gmail.com).

### IRC Email List

For future e-mail newsletters & updates, please subscribe to our email list at [www.insightretreatcenter.org](http://www.insightretreatcenter.org)

## Practicing with Pain on Retreats

by Gil Fronsdal

If mindfulness is to be relevant and liberating in all areas of our life it needs to include discomfort. To be free only when we are comfortable is not the freedom that Buddhism advocates: real freedom is found when we have inner peace and equanimity in times of both comfort and discomfort.

One area of discomfort experienced on retreat is physical pain; sooner or later everyone who has a retreat practice will encounter pain in their body. While in daily life it may seem natural to make efforts to avoid it, experiencing pain during retreats can be an opportunity for practice on the path of liberation. Rather than viewing pain as a problem, the first strategy is to see it as deserving careful attention, as an opportunity for investigation and personal growth. Through the application of mindfulness, pain can lead to insight, peace, and inner freedom.

No retreat rule requires participants to endure pain. If changing one's posture can alleviate pain, one is welcome to do so. However, when pain is seen as a practice opportunity it then becomes interesting to allow it to remain so it can become the focus of mindfulness. How long we remain with the pain depends on how long we see this as a worthwhile opportunity, which will be different for everyone. (People who have a condition that brings unremitting pain should discuss this issue with a retreat teacher at the beginning of a retreat).

One practical reason to investigate pain is to learn if there is a physical issue that needs addressing. In taking the time to feel and explore discomfort, we might learn what's causing it. For example, we may discover that the pain comes from tension in a part of our body. Relaxing the tension may lessen the pain. Pain may also arise when our posture is out of alignment. Investigating the pain may reveal that a small adjustment in position not only alleviates the pain but also leads to a more balanced posture. In contrast, big changes to one's posture at the first signs of discomfort may ease the pain by shifting to yet another imbalanced posture.

Taking the time to give careful attention to

pain may help us recognize when it might signal the possibility of injury. Any time we suspect that injury might occur we should adjust what we're doing. One warning sign is pain experienced in seated meditation that persists for five minutes or more after getting up and moving. To avoid injury in this case, we should find a different meditation posture that does not elicit the same pain.

When pain does not carry the risk of injury it can be useful to let the pain continue and to explore it. Particularly useful to investigate is pain coming from relaxing chronically tense muscles to which we have become insensitive or "numb." With meditation these areas begin to soften and wake up, and sometimes the first sensations that return are the pains of chronic tension. Patiently allowing the pain to continue may allow the muscles to continue to relax. Tense muscles in the shoulders and shoulder blade area are the most common ones that may hurt as they relax, and occasionally those in the chest or belly.

Pain may also arise when the meditation posture fatigues weak muscles that are engaged for longer periods than they're used to. For example, if we commonly sit hunched over, the back muscles required to sit straight may quickly tire out. When chronically tense muscles relax we may need to engage previously under-used muscles to hold our posture. While overusing fatigued muscles is not useful, it is also not useful to completely avoid the discomfort that comes with using weak muscles. It's important to use them enough—perhaps intermittently—so they can gradually become stronger.

Our reactions and beliefs about pain are useful to explore through mindfulness. Rather than focusing on the pain, we can focus on our relationship to the discomfort. Are we impatient, averse, angry, or afraid? Do we tense physically around the pain or contract mentally as we think about it? What beliefs do we have about the pain? Are there unnecessary beliefs that magnify the pain or our impatience? Is pain seen as a personal failure or shortcoming?

*Continued inside*

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## Practicing with Pain, cont'd

Is it viewed as an obstacle? Sometimes these secondary reactions are more painful than the bare, physical pain itself. They can also trigger tensing of muscles around the pain, thereby increasing it. By distinguishing the reactions from the primary physical sensations, we may find it much easier to be patient with pain and to decrease tension around it.

Over time we can learn to have a simpler and more easeful relationship with pain. We learn to experience it without creating stories about it, without self-pity or fear, and without resistance or contraction. Not only can we learn to be equanimous about pain, we can also experience profound peace—even while pain is present. We can allow pain to be just pain, nothing more and nothing less, simply present without being a problem..

### **Pain & the Four Foundations of Mindfulness**

To find a simple and easeful way of attending to pain we can use the lens of the four foundations of mindfulness (body, feelings, mental states, and mental activities) to guide our investigation and practice.

#### **1. Mindfulness of the Body**

The Buddha's instruction for the first foundation is to observe the body solely in terms of the body. Thus we focus on the pain simply as physical sensations independent of our emotional reactions or thoughts about those sensations. As if seeing the pain through a magnifying lens we can direct attention to the specific area in the body where the pain occurs. As we bring mindfulness closer and closer to the primary experience of pain it will sometimes transform into a kaleidoscopic dance of very particular sensations that arise and pass quickly. Occasionally the sense of pain will disappear, as all we are aware of are these rapidly changing sensations.

Because the word pain is an abstract concept, viewing it only through the lens of this word actually removes us somewhat from the actual pain. It can quickly get us entangled with thoughts, memories, and expectations associated with pain. Dropping the concept pain can make it easier to identify the physical sensations that make up the pain. Possible sensations include pulling, stabbing, tightening, burning, or aching. Some sensations, such as vibration and tingling, may be more neutral than unpleasant. The basic sensations may be easier to experience than some of the mental associations toward the pain.

#### **2. Mindfulness of Feeling Tones**

The second foundation of mindfulness is a

step deeper into our subjective experience than simple physical experience. Here we become aware of the feeling tone of the pain—i.e., the simple evaluation of its being either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. While pain is usually unpleasant to experience, it is not always so. When the shoulders are mildly painful from being tense, this pain can be pleasant and welcome if it is a sign that the shoulders are beginning to relax. Another similarly mild ache may be felt as very unpleasant if we believe it is the harbinger of a serious illness. This may change to a neutral response if the ache proves to have a benign and temporary cause.

Becoming aware of the feeling tone of the pain, it may be possible to distinguish the feeling tone from any reactions and stories that might arise. It may be easier to maintain a relaxed awareness of the simple experience of unpleasantness without further complications such as negative interpretations or states of mind that strengthen the overall sense of unpleasantness. The mind has the ability to remain peaceful in the face of mild pain, and with mindfulness practice this peace may be possible with even stronger pain.

#### **3. Mindfulness of Mind States**

The third foundation of mindfulness takes us deeper into our subjective experience by focusing attention on our general state of mind or mood, often a more intimate and personal aspect of life than either our physical experience or the feeling tone of experience. Perhaps the simplest approach to the third foundation is to be aware of whether our state of mind is tense or relaxed, contracted or expansive. This can include recognizing if the overall state of our mind is happy or sad, hostile or kind, dissatisfied or content. Mind states often last longer than physical pain; therefore, when the pain has disappeared, the associated mood may persist.

If we react to pain with negative mind states we may further react to the unpleasantness of the mind state itself, so that it becomes the strongest and most debilitating part of our experience of pain.

When physical sensations of pain, feeling tones, and mind states are all undifferentiated it may be quite difficult to recognize the details of the experience. The whole experience may seem dense and impenetrable. Distinguishing these three component parts can make it easier to be mindful of the mental activities that are considered part of the fourth foundation.

#### **4. Mindfulness of Mental Processes**

The fourth foundation is the most intimate aspect of our experience. It focuses on the

mental activities that bring us toward either more suffering or happiness, to either entanglement or freedom. This foundation is the heart of Dharma practice.

The simplest way of practicing this foundation is to recognize whether or not we are clinging to or resisting anything. When there is pain, do we meet it with craving or hostility, with resistance or worry or confusion? The fourth foundation includes discovering how mental suffering around pain comes from compulsively wanting things to be other than they are. It is also recognizing the corollary, which is that mental freedom and peace come from letting go of this wanting.

Ideally, practicing with pain on retreat is done with compassionate concern for ourselves. Being mindful of pain does not require stoicism, resignation, or duty. Rather it is meant to be a way to care for ourselves through the growth of wisdom and the reduction of the inner roots of our suffering.

Because persistent pain on retreat can be tiring, it is important to avoid spending too much time practicing with it. If possible, spend some periods of meditation in a posture that is pain-free to refresh your mind and body. Pace yourself with pain so you don't become grim or feel overwhelmed by it.

Retreats can be seen as microcosms of how we react or respond in daily life. By studying our reactions to pain on retreat we can become more knowledgeable and wiser about how we respond to challenges when we're not on retreat. We can learn how not to get hooked into our reactions to pain and use these lessons in the rest of our life.

Pain is a normal part of life. Becoming wise about it is one of the benefits of retreat practice.

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## Introducing Pamela Weiss

On August 10–16, Pamela Weiss, one of the guiding teachers at San Francisco Insight, will be teaching a retreat with Andrea Fella. Pam began her study of Buddhism in 1987, and spent several years training in a Zen monastery. She was trained to teach in the Insight tradition by Jack Kornfield, and is also an executive coach, helping business executives incorporate Buddhist practices and principles into leadership development. Pam is dedicated to bringing the dharma into work and relationships, as well as articulating a feminine expression of the dharma. Visit her website: [www.appropriateresponse.com](http://www.appropriateresponse.com).

## Landscaping & Financial Updates

**Landscape and Grounds.** In the last year we've done significant tree removal for both fire safety and removal of unhealthy trees. We are now considering an overall landscape design that includes adding drought tolerant, low maintenance California native plants, more walking paths and meditative nooks, and moving fences to include the grounds of our recently acquired property next door.

**IRC Mortgage.** In paying off the mortgage for the property next door, we may have given the mistaken impression that IRC is now debt free. In fact, IRC still has an \$800K mortgage on the primary property. As this mortgage has very generous terms, it made financial sense to first pay off the property next door, whose loan term was much shorter. We are grateful for the continuing support of our community towards realizing our goal of being debt free.

## Other Ways to Donate

**Amazon Smile** is a simple and automatic way to support IRC every time you shop through Amazon, at no cost to you. Go to [insightretreatcenter.org/smile](http://insightretreatcenter.org/smile).

**Donate Your Car** — Make a tax-deductible donation of any vehicle, working or not. Center for Car Donations handles pick-up and all paperwork; IRC receives 75% of sale price. Tell them you want to donate to Insight Retreat Center. Call 877/411-3662 to schedule a pick-up and be guided through the process.

**Ebay Giving Works** — A simple and easy way to recycle your unwanted possessions and support IRC at the same time. Go to: [insightretreatcenter.org/e-giving](http://insightretreatcenter.org/e-giving)

## Help IRC While Buying or Selling a Home

IMC sangha member Carol Collins is a retired longtime local real estate broker with Realtor connections throughout the state. If you are thinking of buying or selling a home she can refer you to a conscientious, highly qualified Realtor who will, in turn, make a donation in your name to IRC. Carol can serve as your consultant at no charge throughout the buying or selling process. She has performed this service for sangha members in the Bay Area and Santa Cruz. Contact Carol at 408/348-1385, or [carolcollins888@gmail.com](mailto:carolcollins888@gmail.com).

## Schedule of Retreats 2016

**Insight Retreats** are opportunities to engage in full-time mindfulness training. A daily schedule involves periods of sitting and walking meditation, instructions, dharma talks, work meditation, and practice discussion with teachers. Silence is maintained throughout most of the retreat.

- **Apr 23–30** Insight Retreat with Andrea Fella and Greg Scharf
- **May 17–21** Insight Retreat with Gil Fronsdal and John Travis
- **May 27–30** Insight Retreat with Ines Freedman and Shelley Gault (registration opens 2/27)
- **Jun 5–12** Insight Retreat with Gil Fronsdal and Paul Haller (registration opens 2/5)
- **Jun 21–26** Insight Retreat in Spanish with Rebecca Bradshaw and Andrea Castillo (registration opens 2/21)
- **Jul 16–30** Mindfulness of Mind Retreat with Andrea Fella (registration opens 2/16)
- **Aug 10–14** Insight Retreat with Andrea Fella and Pamela Weiss (registration opens 4/10)
- **Aug 19–24** Insight Retreat with Nikki Mirghafori and Richard Shankman (registration opens 4/19)
- **Sep 11–25** 14 Day Insight Retreat with Gil Fronsdal (registration opens 4/11)
- **Oct 7–10** Insight Retreat for People in their 20's and 30's with Max Erdstein and TBD (registration opens 7/8)
- **Oct 16–29** Experienced Students Retreat with Gil Fronsdal, assisted by Ines Freedman (registration opens 5/16)
- **Nov 3–6** Insight Retreat with Ines Freedman and TBD (registration opens 8/3)
- **Nov 13–20** Insight Retreat with Gil Fronsdal and Bob Stahl (registration opens 7/13)
- **Nov 29–Dec 4** Insight Santa Cruz Retreat with Bob Stahl and others TBD (registration opens 7/29)
- **Dec 11–18** Insight Retreat with Gil Fronsdal and Andrea Fella (registration opens 8/11)

To register, for schedule changes, additions and more, visit:  
[insightretreatcenter.org/retreats/](http://insightretreatcenter.org/retreats/)  
or email [info@insightretreatcenter.org](mailto:info@insightretreatcenter.org)



## Help Our Volunteers in Just 5 Minutes!

IMC and IRC are now converting to a new, more efficient database for mailing lists, donations, tax letters & event registration. If you haven't already done so, please create a profile on the website so our volunteers won't have to manually transfer your contact information.

- On the IRC website click "Create an Account" on the lower left, then fill out the form. Make sure to click "Create Account" at the end to submit.
- You will receive an email with a link to set up your password—please remember to save it!

## Planned Giving to IRC

A charitable bequest is a simple way to leave a gift to support the future of IRC for generations to come. It's easy to make a bequest by including Insight Meditation Center of the Midpeninsula as a beneficiary:

- in your will or living trust
- in your retirement plan or bank account
- in your life insurance policy

The Legacy Circle recognizes those who include IMC/IRC in their estate and financial plans. Members are invited to an annual luncheon with the IMC/IRC Teachers.

For information, visit the DONATE page on the website. For questions or a consultation with a volunteer attorney, email [legacy@insightmeditationcenter.org](mailto:legacy@insightmeditationcenter.org)





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# Love and Wisdom

by Andrea Fella

Our mindfulness practice asks us to open to all aspects of our experience: both our joys and our struggles. It can be challenging to open to suffering: to the frustration of wanting things we cannot have; to the fear that the things we have will go away; to anxiety about the health and happiness of ourselves and our loved ones; to confusion. Yet every time we experience a flavor of suffering, it is an opportunity to grow in both wisdom and love—when we meet it with mindfulness.

Much of our suffering happens when we struggle against the very nature of life: its changing uncertain nature, so often out of our control. At the same time, our suffering also seems to be connected to a deep inner wish to be happy, to be healthy, to be safe. We wish that for ourselves, for our loved ones, for the world—and at times these wishes seem out of reach. The wishes of love, of kindness, of caring are very human wishes. What happens when these deep wishes meet the vicissitudes of life? At times, the wish for well-being and happiness collides with the impermanent, uncertain nature of life, and reactivity, greed, aversion, and confusion result. We have a deep wish for safety. As we also recognize vulnerability, uncertainty, and impermanence, fear is born, anxiety is born.

As we learn to bring mindfulness to that anxiety or fear, we sometimes try to orient to wisdom, perhaps telling ourselves, “Vulnerability—that is just the way it is.” And this can be helpful. Yet sometimes as we

orient towards wisdom in this way, we can subtly deny the deep wish for safety.

It is as if we believe that when things are impermanent and out of control, the wish for safety, happiness and ease is invalid, that it’s not the right wish. In a subtle way our minds can use our understanding of the teachings to deny those deep wishes, which are actually an expression of metta, of love, of compassion. They are wholesome wishes. Yet our relationship to these wholesome wishes often includes craving or a belief that if I were doing things “right,” these wishes would be fulfilled.

This craving around our wholesome wishes creates a collision when our experience is impermanent and uncertain. The hidden demand that these wishes be so creates anxiety, fear or reactivity. The expectation, the craving for a particular outcome around these wishes—that is what wisdom asks us to let go of. Wisdom doesn’t ask us to let go of the wishes themselves. In fact, I think that wisdom asks us to embrace those wishes. Wisdom understands that these deep wishes are wholesome, natural, human wishes. It asks us to simultaneously open to the nature of things as they are and to open to love, without clinging.

Whenever we are suffering, not only is there a doorway to aligning to the nature of life, there is also a doorway asking us to open to love without clinging to love—to truly have an open heart. Wisdom asks the heart to stretch and hold both, without resistance, without fear, without expectation.

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## Service Leader Teas at IRC

Twice during weeklong retreats, teachers and Service Leaders meet for “Service Leader teas” after supper, during which the teachers offer tea to the five Service Leaders—the two Managers, Kitchen Mentor, Lunch Cook, and Assistant Lunch Cook. Service Leaders are retreatants who, together with the teachers, are responsible for the overall care of the retreat.

Practicing as a Service Leader is one form of Buddhist training offered at IRC—both in work-practice and in offering service to the other retreatants. The issues, challenges and joys of being a Service Leader are important parts of their retreat practice. Service Leaders participate in most of the meditation schedule of the retreat, which encourages a dynamic and supportive relationship between meditation practice and the varied circumstances of their service work.

The teas are a chance for retreat teachers to work closely with Service Leaders, supporting them in using their work as a way to continue to develop in their practice. They are also a chance to check in about what is happening in different service areas. Because they offer a time to get the “pulse” of a retreat, the teas are often quite inspiring. It is wonderful to be able to support retreat participants’ dedication to practice.

**Several frequent Service Leaders shared their perceptions of the teas:**

*In what way do the teas support your practice?*

**Rachel Casper:** Participating in teas is practicing for life and integration right in the middle of the retreat. They allow me to mentally regroup during the retreat, to practice right speech and create space for a reality check: “Is this how others are perceiving things?” “Am I breathing my own fumes?” “Where has my thinking wandered from the Dharma?”

**Liz Powell:** Hearing each Service Leader’s check-in often fills my heart with gratitude for the depth of others’ practice, and inspires learning and sensitivity to areas where I might not otherwise have been aware.

**Eileen Messina:** The ability to speak my experience aloud in the group helps clarify it, and hearing others’ sharing gives me different perspectives to try on. Teachers sharing their perspectives on what we Service Leaders have observed broadens my understanding. The teas also make it clear we are collaborating in creating the retreat container, partners with the teachers. Also, I’m learning to ask for help!

*How does meeting with the team and the teachers serve the retreat?*

**Rachel:** I felt quite nervous at my first tea, not knowing anyone very well and not confident in my role, yet really grateful afterwards. I was able to listen to the shared knowledge of more experienced service leaders and the teachers’ guidance, and came away with a better perspective on the retreat and tools to take to other retreats as service leader. The teas allow teachers to guide us, offering course correction. This serves each retreat very well, because as cooks or managers we only see a sliver of the whole, whereas the teachers have a different perspective, since they interact individually with more people.

**Eileen:** I can speak about an issue coming up in the kitchen and get advice or feedback from the teachers or other Service Leaders. That helps me in my interactions and builds confidence in my abilities. Being vulnerable about “mistakes” seems easier in the group, and encourages others to be honest about their own obstacles. Hearing what is going on with the Cook and Assistant Cook helps me serve people better as Kitchen Mentor.

**Liz:** At the first tea I attended, I was touched by the care and gratitude with which the teachers prepared and served us tea. The teas reflect a similar sense of care, as service leaders discuss anything that might be needed to keep a retreat smooth and supportive for each and every retreatant