

Insight Retreat Center

NEWSLETTER

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Caretaker Wanted

We are looking for a dedicated resident volunteer to take care of the maintenance and basic repairs of the IRC property and to manage larger projects.

A background in any of the following is helpful: construction, handyman, carpentry skills, or perhaps a homeowner who has experience maintaining a home with basic do-it-yourself skills. To learn more, please contact: admin@insightretreatcenter.org

Resident Volunteers: Several practitioners live at IRC for extended periods assisting with the various tasks needed to support the Center. Through their service and in living in a dedicated spiritual community, they have an opportunity to immerse themselves in retreat practice and also broaden the integration of their practice in daily life.

See other volunteering opportunities in the Volunteering section inside.



IRC Email List

For future e-mail newsletters & updates, please subscribe to our email list at www.insightretreatcenter.org

Mindfulness of Breathing on Retreat

Gil Fronsdal

When the Buddha went on a personal meditation retreat for three months, he explained that his practice was mindfulness of breathing. From that time until today, mindfulness of breathing has been an integral part of many Buddhist meditation retreats. Not only has it been an important thread passed down through the centuries, it can also be a very useful “thread” running through a single meditation retreat. Having mindfulness of breathing as a constant through the days of a retreat can be the midline that keeps us from swinging too far from the balance and stability of present moment attention. Repeatedly returning the attention to breathing can decrease the tendency for the mind to wander into the past or the future. It is a way to stay anchored in the present.

On retreat, the instruction in mindfulness meditation usually begins by encouraging a simple, easeful attention to breathing. Trying too hard to concentrate on the breath can often be counterproductive. Rather than straining for 100% unwavering attention, it might be enough to have attention on the breathing 60–70% of the time. This gives ample opportunity to let go of distracting thoughts and begin again with attending to breathing. This letting go and starting again repeatedly is a massage for the mind; slowly the thinking mind relaxes and becomes less and less insistent. Thus, the art of meditating on the breathing is to repeatedly return to it as soon as we see that the mind has wandered off, rather than to force oneself to concentrate. As the intensity of thinking decreases, the mind settles into a more focused, concentrated state.

The simplicity of retreat life and the many hours of meditation provide ample time for practicing mindfulness of breathing. If one is able to sustain attention on the breathing for only 60-70% of the time, doing so throughout the day adds up to more attention on breathing than one can usually sustain in daily life. If one also attends to one’s breathing outside the formal periods of meditation, it helps us settle more and more into the simplicity of being in the present. Standing in line waiting for a meal to start, eating the meal, sitting down to have a cup of tea, using the bathroom, and taking a

stroll around the retreat property are all opportunities to check in with one’s breathing.

The idea of checking in suggests that we are not just slowly increasing our concentration, but also learning about ourselves through the breathing. Breathing can reveal much about our inner state. Over the day, the pattern of our breathing may change, sometimes slower or faster, sometimes shallow or deep, sometimes coarse or subtle. Tension in the muscles used for breathing may vary in location and intensity depending on the thoughts and emotions present. It can be quite effective to gently continue breathing with whatever tension, emotions, or pattern of breathing might be present. It is helpful to maintain continuity of attention to breathing as equanimously and non-reactively as possible. Such continuity can give “breathing room” within which our tense muscles and emotions can come to homeostasis. Giving attention to our breathing can protect us somewhat from our attention becoming preoccupied with interfering, judging, fixing, and reacting to what is happening.

Wandering off in thought is part of practicing mindfulness of breathing; there is no need to see it as a failure or a hindrance. Certainly, getting lost in thought for extended times is counterproductive in meditation. However, the rhythm of wandering off and returning gives us frequent opportunities to notice what it is that prompts the mind to wander off. To notice this, it is helpful not to quickly jerk the attention back to the breathing. Rather let wandering off be the occasion to take a moment or two to notice clearly what the mind is doing and the attitude behind our thinking. If the conditions of the mind that encourage wandering thoughts are not recognized, we are much more likely to wander off again. Taking a couple of moments to notice the nature of the wandering mind, we might also take the opportunity to see if we can relax any tension or pressure associated with thinking. Relaxing the “thinking muscle” tends to decrease the tendency to wander off into thought.

Furthermore, by not being in a hurry to

Continued inside

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

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.

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.

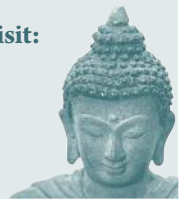
Ebay Giving Works — A simple and easy way to recycle your unwanted possessions and support IRC at the same time. Go to: insightretreatcenter.org/e-giving

Schedule of Retreats 2018

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.

- **March 29–April 1** Insight Retreat with Ines Freedman and Lori Wong
- **April 8–15** Metta Retreat with Nikki Mirghafori and Donald Rothberg
- **April 20–29** Awareness and Wisdom Retreat with Andrea Fella and Alexis Santos
- **May 13–20** Insight Retreat with Gil Fronsdal and Ines Freedman
- **June 3–10** Insight Retreat with Gil Fronsdal and Kamala Masters
- **June 16–21** Insight Retreat in Spanish (Retiro en Español) with Andrea Castillo and Bruni Dávila
- **June 25–July 2** Dhamma-Fields, Dhamma-Nature Retreat with Ajahn Sucitto (registration opens 2/25) Participants in this retreat will take the 8 Precepts; no evening meal.
- **July 21–August 4** Mindfulness of Mind Retreat for Experienced Students with Andrea Fella and Alexis Santos. Retreat in the practice style of U Tejaniya.
- **August 9–12** Insight Retreat with Ines Freedman and Nikki Mirghafori (registration opens 5/9)
- **August 15–19** Insight Retreat with Andrea Fella and Pamela Weiss (registration opens 4/15)
- **September 9–29** Three-Week Insight Retreat for Experienced Students with Gil Fronsdal (registration opens 4/19)
- **October 4–8** Five Day LGBTQI Insight Retreat with John Martin and Bruni Dávila (registration opens 6/4)
- **October 18–21** Insight Retreat with Ines Freedman and Max Erdstein (registration opens 7/18)
- **October 28–November 4** Insight Retreat with Gil Fronsdal and Paul Haller (registration opens 6/28)
- **November 11–18** Insight Retreat for People in their 20s and 30s with Gil Fronsdal and Max Erdstein (registration opens 7/11)
- **November 26–December 2** Insight Santa Cruz Retreat with Bob Stahl and ISC Teachers TBD (registration opens 7/26)
- **December 9–16** Insight Retreat with Gil Fronsdal and Andrea Fella (registration opens 8/9)

To register, for schedule changes, additions and more, visit:
insightretreatcenter.org/retreats/
or email info@insightretreatcenter.org



Volunteering ~ Helping to Care for IRC

IRC is run entirely by volunteers. The continuing support allows us to both take care of the Center and offer retreats. Join us at a monthly Work Day or fill out a Volunteer Form at: www.insightretreatcenter.org/volunteer

Work Days: To help take care of IRC, please join us on the following Work Days: 3/10, 4/7, 5/12, 6/2, 7/7, and 8/25. Register on the website Work Day page or go to bit.ly/IRCworkday. Questions: Eileen: messinaeileen@gmail.com, 650/269-5801.

Garden Days: In addition to our scheduled work days, volunteers are needed to help with gardening and landscaping projects at other times. Please email us at gardening@insightretreatcenter.org if you'd like to offer your time.

Service Leaders: Though most of the work of running our retreats is shared by all the participants in the 45-minute time period devoted to work meditation, the system also depends on the five Service Leaders, experienced retreat practitioners who both sit the retreat and serve the retreat in leadership positions as cooks and managers. Though they have more responsibility and devote more time (usually about 3 hours each day) they still spend most of the day in formal meditation.

People who qualify to be service leaders can sign up to serve as cooks or managers as frequently as it works for them. If interested, please fill out a Volunteer Form on the website or contact admin@insightretreatcenter.org.

Resident Volunteers: See front page

Breathing on Retreats, cont'd

return the attention to breathing, we might be more able to let go into the experience of breathing. Instead of pouncing back on the breathing or bearing down, it might be more effective to relax into the experience of breathing.

Once we return to attending to breathing, the skill of practice is to then sustain the attention. Here also, it is best not to try too hard. Certainly it is important to set one's intention to sustain the mindfulness on as many breaths in a row as we can. If we don't value the opportunity to do so, the mind is less likely to cooperate. One way to cultivate continuity is to focus the lens of attention to have as clear an experience of breathing as available. This asks us to do more than just follow the rhythm of breathing in and out. It includes recognizing clearly the particular sensations and physical movements that are in play as we breathe. It asks that we have a relaxed interest in discovering how each in-breath and out-breath are unique, with their own texture and pattern of sensations. We can become familiar with the difference between the experiences of inhaling and exhaling. During part of the exhalation, there may be a natural letting go that we can ever so slightly emphasize or relax into. By allowing this letting go to continue for a nanosecond longer than it would on its own, concentration may begin, over time, to strengthen.

In taking time to more clearly experience breathing we may also notice the slightest nanosecond pause at the end of an out-breath. Then it can be helpful to gently, calmly let the pause linger just long enough so it is clear that the in-breath begins on its own. There can be a nice sense of surrender in allowing the in-breath to begin with no effort or intention on our part.

Tuning the lens of attention to breathing in can include noticing the growing pressure and movements of expansion in the belly and/or chest as the lungs fill with air. Does this start slowly or quickly? Does the expansion end suddenly or does it slow down near the end? What is experienced in the transition between the end of breathing in and the start of breathing out?

When we become mindful of more aspects of the full experience of breathing, it can be helpful to notice at what points in the cycle of breathing the mind is most likely to wander off into thought. For some people this is during the out-breath, often near the end. For others, it is in a gap at the end of the out-breath. And for others it is during the in-breath. If we know there's a particular part of the cycle where we are most likely to be pulled into thinking, we can then gently stay more alert at that point, vigilant to not wander away from the breathing.

Retreats are a great time to become friends with your breathing. If you do, your breathing will befriend you. You might come to appreciate what a wonderful companion breathing is, a companion to check in with throughout the day. Being in touch with one's breathing is a great support for a wise life.

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.

Your Questions About Practice

You are warmly invited to send your questions relating to retreat practice to news@insightretreatcenter.org. A teacher will choose one or two to respond to in each edition of the newsletter.

Why is fear not listed as one of the five hindrances?

Gil Fronsdal responds: Because fear can act as a big hindrance, it might seem strange that it's not listed among the five hindrances. One reason for this is that not all fear is a hindrance. Some fear is helpful in protecting us. This can be the case with fear of doing unethical acts, of doing harm. There can be the fear of getting involved in activities we know will harm us or others. There can be some healthy fear that cautions us to avoid saying the wrong thing and regretting it later. For dedicated Buddhist practitioners, some fear is healthy and wise. Rather than being a hindrance it can help us be free.

But there is also fear that is debilitating. Debilitating fear involves anxiety, fear fueled by imaginary futures that may never arrive. Generally, there is very little wisdom in fear which functions as a kind of hindrance. There is not enough mindfulness for wisdom to operate.

In order to place debilitating fear into the list of hindrances some people consider it as a variation of the second hindrance, ill-will. However, it is fine for us to make up a list of six hindrances, perhaps adding anxiety as its own hindrance.

Welcoming Ajahn Sucitto

We are very pleased that Ajahn Sucitto, one of the most senior Western monks in the Ajahn Chah lineage of the Thai Forest sangha, will be offering a week-long retreat at IRC June 25 thru July 2. Ajahn Sucitto was born in England and attended university there before traveling to Asia on a spiritual quest. He was introduced to Buddhist practice in Thailand in 1975 and was fully ordained there as a *bhikkhu* (monk) in 1976. After returning to England, Sucitto became a student of Ajahn Sumedho, and was part of the group that established both Cittaviveka and Amaravati, two prominent Thai Forest monasteries there. Ajahn Sucitto was abbot of Cittaviveka monastery for 12 years, retiring in 2014. Since then he has traveled extensively and is much in demand as a retreat teacher, known for his depth of practice and incisive wisdom. He has written many books on dharma topics and memoirs describing some of his pilgrimages, all available on his website:

ajahnsucitto.org/books/. Links to recordings of many of his dharma talks can also be found on his website. We feel very fortunate that Ajahn Sucitto will be teaching at IRC.

When mindfulness of breathing is developed and cultivated, it is of great fruit and great benefit. When mindfulness of breathing is developed and cultivated, it fulfills the four foundations of mindfulness. When the four foundations of mindfulness are developed and cultivated, they fulfill the seven factors of enlightenment. When the seven enlightenment factors are developed and cultivated, they fulfill true knowledge and liberation.

—the Buddha

The Highest Blessings: Life as an IRC Resident Volunteer

We asked Resident Volunteer Judith Randall to share what has been most meaningful in her experience living and serving at IRC. This is her response.

This morning after our daily 45-minute sitting, the Resident Volunteers at IRC chanted “The Highest Blessings” from the Abhayagiri Monastery Chanting Book. Though the chant is taken from a sutta meant to describe and guide the monastic community in the time of the Buddha, it occurred to me how helpful some of it is in describing life as a Resident Volunteer at Insight Retreat Center. We are a small group living together in community, “sharing often the words of Dhamma,” as the chant says, even around the breakfast table! We each look after a part of the work that keeps the center running smoothly so that twice a month or so, people can come for silent retreat. And we join those retreats - sometimes participating fully, sometimes partially in order to support the retreat.

For me, this rhythm of work-and-retreat, work-and-retreat is a powerful way to practice. I am “hearing the Dhamma frequently taught” by the flow of teachers who come through, and then returning to my work as Housekeeping Manager (I think of it as “house-caring”) and garden helper, or working together on a group project, or putting the finishing touches on the center before the next retreat. It is simple work, a lot of it hands-on, taking care of each thing “as if it were my own eyes,” as Zen Master Dogen wrote. The chant continues, “Although involved in worldly ways, unshaken the mind remains.” Moving into deep meditative states and out into daily work helps me experience this composure more and more.

That the center is dana-based, and all-volunteer is very meaningful to me. All volunteer. No one is paid. Service is the currency. The Center is supported by people who love it, who love practice, and who want it

to function so that others can come and experience it. Retreats are freely offered and any gifts given at the end “pay it forward” to support the next group that comes. Even the retreat participants themselves are volunteers – everyone offers work practice during retreats. There is no staff; as Gil often says, “There’s no ‘they’ here.” The teachers, too, join the physical work, making breakfast each morning, and cleaning their rooms before they leave. We are all “giving with Dhamma in the heart” and engaging in “ways of work that harm no being.”

There are, of course, challenges. Often I think of spiritual community as a rock tumbler – sometimes we turn and turn, sometimes our rough edges wear away, and sometimes we can shine. The chant says, “patience and willingness to accept one’s faults” is one of the highest blessings. That’s always a very good place to start! We work on our relationships together in our monthly Dharma Practice meetings with Gil or Andrea, and in our occasional “tea times” – peer-led gatherings where we reflect on our lives together in community. And, of course, at the breakfast table.

In this immersion in spiritual community, Dharma becomes a way of life – for me, the center, the core, from which everything else arises, though I may not realize it - just as when walking through the mist, I don’t realize I’m getting soaked through. “Contentment and gratitude,” another of the highest blessings, describes my feeling about living and volunteering at IRC.

Judith Randall has served as a Resident Volunteer at IRC since November of 2015. A Zen priest in addition to her Insight practice, she was a longtime student at San Francisco Zen Center, including ten years at Tassajara Zen Mountain Center. She loves the natural world and can often be found hiking in the woods or along the coast nearby and appreciating the flora and fauna.

Visioning the Future of IMC

Gil Fronsdal

We are at a point where it seems useful to give some thought to the future of IMC, our urban meditation center, and IRC, our residential retreat center. What prompts this reflection is that both centers are now being used to full capacity.

There is virtually no room in the IMC schedule to add any more programs or activities. At the same time, there is momentum to grow by adding new programs and improving the options for existing programs. It is also clear there is much interest in what we offer; it would be wonderful if we could meet this interest.

IRC has reached full capacity for how many retreats we can offer. At the same time, the waiting lists for our retreats continue to grow. A retreat this spring had 260 people apply. After accepting the 40 people our center can hold, we had 220 people on the wait list! It is quite unfortunate that we cannot meet the interest in our retreats.

Growth at IMC is also marked by an increasing number of very capable and well-practiced people being trained to teach. One of the next steps in IMC’s growth is to give them more opportunities to teach.

In discussions about this, one of the most frequent conclusions is how useful it would be to have another property in order to offer more

programs. But when we dream about what kind of property that might be and how we might use it, we come up with a half-dozen equally good ideas. For example, if we had use of a second building near IMC we could expand IMC’s programs. If there were a second property elsewhere on the Peninsula we could serve more people in their local area. If we had a property suitable for residential retreats we could perhaps double the number of retreats we offer.

As we don’t have funds to buy a new property and as we need to be very careful how we might expand, it is comforting to know we don’t have to do more. We are fortunate that what we already have is quite special.

However, some of us will continue reflecting on the possibilities of expansion so that if the possibility becomes feasible we will be prepared. Part of these discussions includes ways to increase our programs in new and creative ways. Most likely, the next step in IMC/IRC’s growth cannot be predicted. As has often occurred in our history, we will probably be surprised by the opportunities that present themselves.

If you have any thoughts or suggestions about the future of IMC, please send a note to insightmeditationcenter@gmail.com.
