



Insight Retreat Center

NEWSLETTER

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Donating to IRC

All IRC retreats are offered freely, following the 2600-year Buddhist tradition of dana (generosity). And your generosity is what allows us to continue this beautiful offering. The entire support for everything at the Center—all facility and retreat-related expenses, as well as teachers—comes from donations.

It's possible to make donations of any amount to IRC using PayPal or a credit or debit card—a secure method that is quick and easy. Just click on the Donate button on the IRC website. Setting up a recurring monthly donation can be done there too, using your PayPal account.

You can also write checks payable to Insight Retreat Center and mail them to Insight Meditation Center, 108 Birch Street, Redwood City, CA 94062.

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 qualified Realtor. Carol will contribute her entire referral fee to our Retreat Center, and can serve as your consultant at no charge throughout the buying or selling process. She has helped facilitate this for sangha members in San Mateo, Santa Clara, Santa Cruz and other Bay Area counties. If you have real estate questions or are thinking of purchasing or selling a home, please contact Carol at carolcollins888@gmail.com or 408/348-1385.

Meditation Instructions on Retreats

Gil Fronsdal

Central to a meditation retreat are the meditation instructions the teachers provide. The instructions are treasures, based on the cumulative meditation experience of many people, ultimately traced back to the meditation practice of the Buddha. They are taught as means to calm our agitation, understand our minds, heal our wounds, improve the quality of our inner life, and allow us to be the beneficiaries of liberating insights. They are treasures that create inner wealth.

At the same time, no meditation instructions are the true and unadulterated instructions as given by the Buddha. While the surviving teachings of the Buddha provide effective instruction and teachings about meditation, they are broad strokes requiring clarification and details. In addition, his instructions need to be applied and adapted to ever new cultural settings and personal circumstances. In this way, meditation instructions are cultural constructs providing important suggestions for exploration, experimentation, and evaluation of one's own meditation practice. The longer a person practices a particular meditation instruction, the more the meditation practice is modified to better fit the person. It is somewhat similar to walking in new shoes: the more we walk, the more they gradually wear in to better conform to our feet.

There are many styles or techniques for Vipassana (insight) meditation, each with very different instructions (see additional information at end of article). Regardless of the type of Vipassana instruction offered, one of its most important functions is to help us understand our minds. In a sense, the instructions are mirrors for us to notice what works and doesn't work to help us settle into our meditation. For example, in attempting to follow particular instructions we can learn about what makes it difficult to do so. We might learn about such tendencies as getting swept up in distracting thoughts or in resistance, doubt, expectations, perfectionism, impatience, or any number of emotions. Learning about these tendencies provides an opportunity to become wise about them, both in terms of our attitudes toward them and in ways of overcoming them.

Noticing how we practice with instructions is also a way to learn how to fine tune the different faculties of mind that are involved in meditation. For example, we can learn how to find the ever-changing balance between effort and relaxation, focus and open receptivity, determination and allowing, mindfulness and concentration, as well as between an embodied sensing of present moment experience versus a clear recognition of what is happening in the present.

When we are not successful at fulfilling the explicit or implied purposes of any given meditation instruction—e.g., to become concentrated, calm, mindful, insightful, or to experience some degree of letting go—the instruction is nevertheless successful if we have learned more about ourselves, and perhaps thereby become wiser with how to navigate our inner landscape. In this way, even “failing” with the instructions may mature us along the path of practice. Sometimes people discover more about inner freedom by “failing” meditation than by “succeeding.”

Meditators have many purposes for doing meditation. Having a good understanding of the particular purpose we have when we meditate is useful, because then we can adjust the instructions to better fit our purpose. Aiming at developing a kinder attitude in doing mindfulness may require a different approach than aiming to develop concentration. Using mindfulness to be present with difficult emotions may be different than using mindfulness to rest in the experience of breathing. The skills needed to practice with distracting thoughts may be different than those for practicing with physical pain. While the ultimate purpose of meditation may be spiritual liberation, more immediate purposes may be necessary first.

Regardless of our purpose and the approach for practicing mindfulness meditation, it is recommended that we keep it simple. The Indian Vipassana teacher Munindra-ji often said, “If it is not simple, it is not Vipassana.” Learning how to have clear, present moment awareness that retains a simplicity of

Continued inside

Meditation Instructions, cont'd

being is a skill learned through practice. When confronted with what initially appear to be complicated instructions, the task is to discover how to practice them in a simple, unhurried manner, maybe focusing on a particular aspect of the instruction.

In doing insight meditation, it can be useful to have available, in the back of the mind, a pithy statement describing an essence of the instruction. This may help us to stay close to the simple awareness practice that is at the heart of Vipassana. One such statement is, "Be still and gaze upon everything kindly." Another might be, "Trust awareness of what is, not changing what is." Or perhaps, "Abide conscious rather than self-conscious."

Over the decades of teaching Vipassana in the West, the Western Insight teachers developed a somewhat standard set of instructions that are a "middle way" that works well as foundational instructions for a wide variety of people and a wide range of personal circumstances. They are a basis for realizing the full potential of Insight practice as well as a great support for doing other forms of meditation. These basic instructions sit in the middle of the many different ways the instruction can be modified. One person may be instructed to do the practice with more effort while another may be told to apply less effort. One person may be advised to do the practice together with acceptance of whatever is happening; another person may receive the recommendation to be less accepting of distracting thoughts, to let go of them as soon as possible. Someone who is disconnected from their body may be instructed to focus on the mindfulness of the body; someone with a lot of body awareness may benefit from bringing greater attention to the mind. And at different times in one individual's practice life, one or another of those modifications might be useful. On retreat, ideas for how to modify the instructions can be one of the topics for discussion in meetings with the teachers.

Generally, two forms of meditation instructions are provided on retreats. The first is for seated meditation, the other is for walking meditation. Occasionally, eating instructions are also given at the start of a retreat. The rest of this article focuses on an instruction for seated meditation.

The standard Insight Meditation retreat instructions for seated meditation are given progressively over the retreat, with each morning's instruction building and expanding on the previous instruction. The entire set of instructions could be given all at once, as they were by Mahasi Sayadaw in Burma. However, that is a lot to remember and can give the impression that the practice is complicated. Also, simple instruction on the first day often works well for the initial settling into a retreat, as people sometimes arrive on a retreat with agitated and complicated minds. For this reason, instructions on the first full day of an Insight retreat focus on nothing more complicated than letting go of thoughts and returning to simple mindfulness of breathing. Keeping the practice this simple can calm the mind and help with letting go of distracting thoughts. Trusting that this is all that is needed can be important for not succumbing to any sense of urgency that may accompany distracting concerns.

By the second day, when meditators begin to be more settled in the present, the instruction focuses on mindfulness of the body. Careful mindfulness of the body can be difficult on the first day if there are lots of distracting thoughts or compelling emotions. Providing instructions on mindfulness of emotions or thinking on the second day could easily lead to more thinking. Because the body, in and of itself, is not a thought, simple mindfulness of the body can help with the quieting of thinking.

On the third day, the instructions expand to include mindfulness of

emotions. This follows the instruction on mindfulness of the body because it is much easier to be mindful of emotions if we know how to be aware of present-moment physical sensations. By focusing on the physical expression of an emotion, meditators may find it easier to avoid being pulled into any stories or commentary related to the emotions. Mindfulness of emotions through mindfulness of the body is a way to be present with emotions in a simple way.

On the fourth day, the instruction focuses on mindfulness of thinking. If the thinking has become less insistent at this point of the retreat, it can be easier to observe thoughts without being pulled into them. It may be possible to metaphorically step back to watch the thinking rather than being involved with the thinking. This then allows for fuller understanding of different aspects of thinking, e.g., their emotional component, the energetic and compulsive force that are part of their power to distract, or the interest and fascination that we may have with particular thoughts. By the fourth day it may be possible to learn how to be mindful of thinking so the mind becomes quieter rather than more full of thoughts.

Through these first four days of instruction, breathing remains the default focus of attention if nothing else is more predominant. Mindfulness is only turned toward other physical sensations, emotions or thinking when these become compelling. By otherwise returning over and over to the breathing, breathing becomes a stabilizing influence in one's meditation practice which cultivates both concentration and mindfulness.

For seven-day retreats, the standard instruction may end on the fourth day as different teachers may have different emphases for day five and six. Fairly common is instruction in choiceness awareness or open awareness forms of mindfulness where there is no intentional "anchor" for attention, i.e., a central focus such as breathing that we return to when nothing else is predominant. Rather, mindfulness remains receptive to whatever physical, emotional, or mental experiences arise in perception.

Another instruction on the last days of a retreat might be to notice the quality or attitude present in how one is aware, perhaps with an emphasis on keeping awareness relaxed, receptive, and free of attachments.

At IRC, the instructions are offered as a means for retreatants to have a personal experience of Buddhist teachings, insights, and liberations. While having such experiences can be the goals of the practice, it is usually best to engage in the moment-to-moment practice of mindfulness without any active concern about attaining them. The focus can be to use the basic instruction as a means to abide in a clear awareness of one's immediate, direct experience. Rather than trying to attain particular states of meditation, we first develop a clear, stable, equanimous, non-reactive awareness of ourselves and our experience as it unfolds in the present. Equanimous awareness of one's direct experience in the present opens the door to experiencing the Buddhist teachings, insights, and liberations.

One can get a sense of the great range of different forms of Vipassana meditation in Jack Kornfield's book Living Dharma: Teachings and Meditation Instructions from Twelve Theravada Masters which describes the meditation teachings of some of the great Thai and Burmese meditation masters of the twentieth century. Particularly important for the Western Insight Meditation movement, which includes the Insight Meditation Society, Spirit Rock, the Insight Retreat Center and others, is the Vipassana practice taught by the Burmese meditation master Mahasi Sayadaw (1904-1982). To a great extent, the Mahasi style meditation approach has been the basis for both the Buddhist Insight and secular mindfulness movements. The Mahasi instruction lends itself to secular uses, partly because it is relatively easy to present it without any recourse to classic Buddhist teachings.

More Ways to Donate

Donate Your Car: Make a tax-deductible donation of a vehicle you no longer want, working or not. The Center for Car Donations will handle pick-up and all paperwork needed, and IRC will receive 75% of the sale price. Tell them you want to donate to Insight Retreat Center. Call (855) 500-RIDE and a representative will schedule your pick-up appointment and guide you through the process.

Amazon Smile: a simple and automatic way for you to support IRC every time you shop through Amazon, at no cost to you. You can find a sign-up link on this page of the IRC website, or use the Amazon Search link on our Donate and IMC's Recommended Books pages.

Stock Transfer Gift: Follow the instructions available on the website to initiate a stock gift for IRC.

Matching Gift from Employer: If your company has a matching gift program, ask them for its matching gift form. Our legal name is "Insight Meditation Center of the Mid-Peninsula." We are a 501(c)(3) organization and our tax ID number is 77-0450217. Please send your donation and the matching gift form to Insight Meditation Center, 108 Birch St, Redwood City, CA, 94062.

IRC Email List

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

Schedule of Retreats

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.

2019

- **Aug 29–Sep 2** Sex, Race, Money, Dharma: Insight Retreat for People in their 20s and 30s with Max Erdstein and JoAnna Hardy.
- **Oct 3–6** Insight Retreat for People in their 20s and 30s with Max Erdstein and Matthew Brensilver (reg opens 7/3/19)
- **Oct 20–27** Insight Retreat with Gil Fronsdal and Nikki Mirghafori (reg opens 6/20/19)
- **Nov 3–10** Just Sitting, Clear Seeing: the Meeting of Zen and Insight with Max Erdstein and Brian LeSage (reg opens 7/3/19)
- **Nov 18–24** Insight Santa Cruz Retreat with Bob Stahl, Mary Grace Orr, and Teachers TBD (reg opens 7/18/19)
- **Dec 8–15** Insight Retreat with Gil Fronsdal and Andrea Fella (reg opens 8/8/19)

2020

- **Jan 26–Feb 2** Insight Retreat with Gil Fronsdal, bruni dávila, & Gullu Singh (reg opens 9/26/19)
- **Feb 22–29** Insight Retreat with Gil Fronsdal, Dawn Scott, and Neesha Patel (reg opens 10/22/19)
- **Mar 27–Apr 3** Brahmavihara and Emptiness: A Study and Practice Retreat with Ven. Analayo, assisted by Max Erdstein (reg opens 11/27/19).
- **April 10–19** Awareness and Wisdom Retreat with Andrea Fella and Alexis Santos. (reg opens 12/10/19)
- **May 3–17** Experienced Practitioners' Retreat with Gil Fronsdal and Andrea Fella (reg opens 12/3/19)
- **May 22–25** Insight Retreat with Ines Freedman and Nikki Mirghafori (reg opens 2/22/20)
- **Jun 4–7** Insight Retreat with Ines Freedman and Max Erdstein (registration opens 3/4/20)
- **Jun 17–21** LGBTQI Insight Retreat with bruni dávila and John Martin (reg opens 2/20/20)
- **Jun 27–Jul 3** Insight Retreat in Spanish with Andrea Castillo and bruni dávila (reg opens 2/27/20)

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: Aug 10, Sep 14, Oct 19, Nov 16, Dec 7. 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: 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.

Thank You Ines!

Very often we hear retreatants at IRC marvel at the organization of the systems and tasks needed for 40-some people—many brand new to the Center—to take care of each other and the Center itself during their stay. Founding Managing Director, Ines Freedman, has been the invisible hand behind much of this, and a prime mover in the establishment and overall success of IRC. She has been involved in every major decision, from our initial search for the perfect property, to the development of the detailed systems that allow IRC to be run entirely by volunteers, right down to the choice of lighting fixtures and floor coverings. Ines is stepping down this August 1 for a well-deserved rest after many years of full-time service.

Since the Center opened seven years ago, as Managing Director Ines has been involved in virtually every area of IRC's functioning—helping set the retreat calendar, supervising maintenance and upgrades to our aging building, interviewing potential RVs, deciding on and managing renovation and landscaping projects, approving expenses, making improvements to both the systems that define how and when tasks need to be done and to the physical facility itself—lights that go on when we enter a hallway (but not too brightly when we get up in the night), comfortable beds to sleep on, recirculating hot water that comes warm as soon as we turn on the taps, even choosing cleaning tools and products that work well and aren't toxic! And in addition to all the management tasks, Ines has been teaching retreats at IRC several times a year. We hope that now she'll have more time for teaching both at IRC and IMC.

Ines, we are so grateful for the many thousands of hours you have offered to IRC and IMC over the years. When we look around the Center what we see is a clear reflection of your devotion and discernment. As you retire, we wish you just as many hours of peace, and the contentment that comes from knowing you gave it your all, with the result a lasting benefit to many.

Behind the Scenes Changes at IRC

Many are stepping forward to fill the many shoes that Ines Freedman has worn as Managing Director of IRC. Over a dozen people have roles overseeing areas from retreat registration to facilities maintenance, web-site development to mentoring Resident Volunteers, purchasing and inventory to responding to emails. Dozens of others participate in work and garden days each month or offer their service as managers and cooks during retreats.

Liz Powell, a longtime member of the IMC community and former president of the IMC Board, is taking Ines's role as Managing Director, overseeing 11 functional areas in which more than forty volunteers have ongoing roles keeping IRC running smoothly. Liz spoke of her inspiration for making the move:

I'm very happy to have this opportunity to serve the IRC community as the new Managing Director. Many years ago, I separately encountered individuals who embodied a special quality I couldn't put my finger on. I learned that each of them was engaged in dedicated Buddhist practice, and was inspired to begin that path. An aspiration to live the qualities of the Eightfold Path I saw emanating from those individuals drew me to IMC, and to Gil and Andrea as my teachers.

IRC's Managing Director role supports the community of retreatants, teachers, and volunteers turning the tide of conditioning in the direction of liberation. Coordinating the teams keeping IRC functioning well, working with IRC's Executive Committee to carefully manage its resources and policies, I look forward to helping ensure IRC's continued health. I'm delighted to join in living the Path together and supporting IRC to continue offering precious time and protected space for spiritual development.

We welcome Liz's energy, enthusiasm and discernment in her new role, and offer good wishes to the many others behind the scenes who continue serving to make sitting retreat at IRC a profound and beneficial opportunity for all who come.

Your Questions About Practice

You are warmly invited to send your questions relating to retreat practice to news@insightretreatcenter.org.

A question from a meditator:

I notice when I sit to meditate there are always thoughts, usually in the form of images. These images don't go away, and while they are mostly memories of the past, they usually do not carry an emotional charge with them. When thoughts do have a charge, mostly I don't get caught in them, I just notice them, and understand that this shall too pass. I'm not sure how to work with these thoughts that are images. It seems impossible to stay with the breath for more than five minutes and not lose track, the mind seems to go to sleep, or just to daydream. Can you shed some light on this?

Andrea Fella responds: The experience of images that don't have much emotional charge is not uncommon as the mind settles into some concentration. It can be easy to drift off into these thoughts, but their appearance doesn't necessarily mean we are not mindful! We can be aware of this process of thinking, and whether or not we are aware is more important than whether or not there is thinking.

Even with a just a few minutes of paying attention to the breath, these dream-like images can arise. This sometimes happens when energy and concentration aren't quite balanced. There are different ways to balance the energy, but sometimes just a little bit of curiosity is enough, either curiosity about the process of images arising, or a bit of curiosity about the sensations of breathing. Sometimes it can be helpful to very slightly adjust the posture to be more alert, or to just very slightly open the eyes. With this kind of thinking, usually a very small shift is needed to balance the energy, since the mind is already relatively settled. If you make a larger adjustment, you might find yourself spinning into restlessness!

Legacy Community

By making a simple bequest or other arrangement to include IMC and/or IRC as a beneficiary of your will or living trust, your retirement plan, or your life insurance policy, you help assure that IMC and IRC will continue to make the Dharma accessible to a broad community on a dana basis for generations to come. The Legacy Community is made up of IMC and IRC practitioners who have included IMC and/or IRC in their long-term estate or financial plans.

The Community, along with others interested in making a legacy commitment, are invited to an annual event with the IMC/IRC guiding teachers that celebrates the generosity and gratitude that make IMC possible.

For more information and an online form, visit the Planned Giving link on the Donate Now page on our website. For questions, or to arrange a consultation with IMC's volunteer estate planning attorney, please email legacy@insightmeditationcenter.org.