

Insight Retreat Center

NEWSLETTER

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News about IRC's New Well!

We are very happy to report that when we drilled our new well in December the output was much better than expected! We stopped at 320 feet and have about 50 GPM (gallons per minute)!

We still have some work to do to get it online, such as installing the pump, plumbing it to the tank, and building a pump house. But it won't be too long before it's completed.

We are grateful to all of you who contributed to the project!

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.

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

Wise Perspectives for Insight Retreat Practice

Gil Fronsdal

A surprisingly high percentage of our happiness and woe is dependent on the viewpoints through which we interpret our experience, views which are often not only unexamined, but also unrecognized. Operating invisibly, they become the source of further interpretations, conclusions and judgments we make about our experience, our selves, and others. When these underlying foundational views are unrecognized they can cast an aura of truth over these secondary interpretations, and therefore support a tendency to believe them unquestioningly.

An important function of insight retreats is cultivating adequate calm and clarity to discover these underlying viewpoints influencing us, and to see them for what they are—provisional, conditional, and distinct from direct experience. This in turn helps us to hold all views lightly, without being under their sway. As the mind becomes calmer it becomes easier to discern which of our viewpoints are unnecessary and which are useful, which lead to distress and which lead to wellbeing, which interfere with the path of practice and which support it.

Meditating on retreat is an effective means to shed unnecessary and/or detrimental views. As the mind quiets, we can discover an ease and peace not ruffled by interpretations that keep us at a distance from the immediacy of our experience. We can even learn that it is useful to let go of active involvement with beneficial views when these are not needed. A mind not active with views gives us access to insights and wellbeing often inaccessible in daily life.

While meditating on retreat could be described as a continual shedding of the views, opinions, and stories on which we base our lives, there are conscious perspectives that support the deepening of meditation in particular circumstances. As long as these support the practice, they are useful to keep. When they no longer serve, they can be let go.

Beneficial views can be pragmatic understandings that support retreat practice, both views about “what to do” and about “what not to do”. Beneficial views of “what not to do” include, for example, that it is useful to refrain

from all unnecessary speech. It is also helpful to believe straining or tensing up in practicing mindfulness is counterproductive. A beneficial view is that it is unnecessary to be preoccupied with every negative judgment, even if there may be some truth to them; they probably have no usefulness in the meditative process.

Beneficial views about “what to do” include ideas of which forms of meditation are useful, which purposes and intentions are supportive, and how to view experiences so that, rather than being distractions or problems, they are understood as the subjects of meditation.

Because there are innumerable beneficial points of view, it is important to not over-rely on them. An overabundance of beneficial views can lead to a proliferation of thought that undermines the quieting of the discursive mind central to the deepening of meditation. When the mind is quiet enough, active thinking about beneficial understandings can be experienced as agitating and therefore unhelpful. It's helpful to “keep it simple”.

However, there are circumstances when it is useful to rely on particular “wisdom perspectives”. These can function as antidotes to unwise perspectives interfering with the practice. What follows are some points of view I have found useful for retreat practice:

“Every Moment of Mindfulness is Beneficial”

While, at times, mindfulness practice may not appear to be providing benefits, insights, or positive feedback, the practice provides many unseen benefits. Sometimes the practice is simply a better mental activity than whatever else the mind might be doing. Each moment of mindfulness counteracts forces of preoccupation in the mind. In fact, each moment of mindfulness weakens the negative mental habits reinforced over many moments, if not hours or years of preoccupation. Each moment of mindfulness also strengthens the mental “muscle” of mindfulness so that our ability to be mindful is ready for times of challenge. Therefore, when mindfulness is not seen as immediately rewarding, a useful beneficial view might be, “every moment of mindfulness is beneficial.”

Continued inside

Wise Perspectives, cont'd

“Right on Time”

Any difficulty or unexpected challenge can give rise to reactivity and opinions which undermine the practice. One can interpret both internal experiences and external events as unfortunate, as obstacles, and as something that should not be happening. Even if there may be some truth to these interpretations, they are often self-verifying. That is, when we interpret something as an obstacle to mindfulness practice, it is the clinging to this interpretation that obstructs mindfulness, that seems to “prove” the thing is obstructing.

To support mindfulness and the path to liberation it is useful to view any difficulty or challenge as occurring appropriately, “right on time.” We can even imagine looking at a wristwatch while thinking “right on time!” This perspective is a reminder to take whatever “is happening” as the subject of mindfulness practice, not as a distraction from it. It is similar to adopting the perspective that “there are no mistakes on retreats”—there is only the next thing we include as part of the practice. To view each arising experience as simply the next thing to meet with mindfulness can lead to great equanimity. It is a view that provides a kind of infinite forgiveness for any personal foibles we may find ourselves engaging in on retreat; instead of lingering with self-recrimination, we dedicate ourselves to remaining in the flow of present moment awareness.

“I Am Responsible for Myself; Others Are Responsible for Themselves”

This is an encouragement to avoid becoming preoccupied with what other retreatants are doing. Taking responsibility for other people’s retreat practice can easily interfere with one’s own practice. It may even interfere with theirs. The alternative is to remember that the task each retreatant has is to practice as wisely as possible with whatever arises on the retreat. Whether or how others assume this responsibility for themselves does not need to be our responsibility. In leaving each person responsible for their own practice we allow them to learn the lessons that they may uniquely need to learn. At the same time, we learn the ability to be free of preoccupation with other people, including being distracted from our own practice through preoccupation with others.

Not taking responsibility for others is not the same as being aloof or indifferent. It can be seen as giving people freedom from our over-involvement and over-judgmentalism. It can also be seen as allowing people the opportunity to do the inner work that only they can do. Every person matures on the path of liberation by how they attend to their own inner life; on retreat, it is best to focus on attending to one’s own. If one is on retreat with a relative or friend, it is useful to discuss beforehand how to appropriately leave each person responsible for themselves.

“Whether We know It or Not, We Practice For the Benefit of All”

Not taking responsibility for how others practice doesn’t mean we need to be unconcerned with their welfare. I believe Buddhist practice reveals we are all deeply and mutually interconnected; we are all kin to each other. We can learn from one another, inspire one another, and realize how much the path of liberation is an interpersonal path as much as it is a personal one.

When we engage in our practice, even if we believe we are doing it as a means to heal and resolve our own suffering and inner struggles, our practice does benefit others. On retreat, each person’s dedicated practice supports the practice of the group. Each person’s growth and transformation through the practice can inspire others to practice. Furthermore, each person’s resolution of their inner demons makes them a better member of our human family. People maturing on the Buddhist path mature ethical-

ly; they become refuges of safety for others. Knowing our practice benefits others even when we are not actively intending to do this can give added motivation to practice.

“The Dharma Knows Better Than We Do What We Need to Practice With”

Sometimes retreatants come to retreat with expectations of how they will practice, what issues they will be working on, and what will happen. Most commonly the retreat unfolds differently from what is expected. Unanticipated physical experiences appear; surprising emotions emerge; unforeseen concerns and memories loom large. Some of these unexpected phenomena may be unresolved issues which appear “right on time.” Some may be underlying thought patterns and emotional attitudes that, invisible in daily life, are revealed during retreat. And sometimes events at a retreat may evoke emotional reactions we hoped to avoid while on the retreat.

Often people respond to these unexpected occurrences by becoming perturbed about why they appear and then spending time trying to understand why or to fix “the problem.” Or we might become discouraged when we can’t let them go or ignore them. Occasionally they might illicit fear, especially if we feel a loss of control or a fear about how things will unfold. We might interpret such occurrences as distractions from “real” practice. However, if they interrupt us from continuing in the moment-to-moment flow of mindfulness and concentration, we make these reactions the focus of attention.

We don’t have to understand every physical and mental thing that happens to us during retreat. We don’t have to be in control of what arises within us as we practice. And we don’t have to see any of these as distractions. Instead we can trust that these are all things that are appropriate to include in the practice. To accept everything as equally appropriate for our mindfulness allows the practice to touch all of who we are. It helps ferret out all the areas the practice needs to address if we are truly to discover the inner freedom of the Buddhist path.

The issues we face on retreat arise because of causes and conditions. We do not need to know what these causes and conditions are in order to practice with what arises. If we view them as appropriate it can be easier to include them as part of the practice; it is as if something in our subconscious or something about how the practice unfolds “knows” what needs to happen next. I like to think of this as “the Dharma knows best” what should occur. We don’t have to understand “why” something is happening, we only need to be mindful of what is happening, including our reactions to it. It is in transforming our reactions into responses of equanimity, non-clinging, and compassion that the practice comes alive.

Conclusion

As the practice allows us to experience our potential for ease, peace, and kindness, we become increasingly sensitive to how the views we form affect our well-being. While some views may distance us from this potential, others may be in harmony with it, perhaps even arising from the vision this ease, peace and kindness provide us. It is useful to remember the understandings that come from this inner vision. Perhaps some of the aphorisms offered in this essay may be useful. And at times, when the vision of freedom and kindness is clear enough, we don’t even need positive views, we only need to see clearly.

IRC Email List

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

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

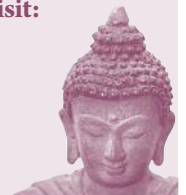
Schedule of Retreats 2019

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 12–21** Mindfulness and Wisdom Retreat with Andrea Fella and Alexis Santos. A retreat in the style of Sayadaw U Tejaniya
- **May 12–19** Insight Retreat with Gil Fronsdal and Ines Freedman
- **May 24–27** Insight Retreat with Ines Freedman and Diana Clark (registration opens 2/24/19)
- **May 31–Jun 7** Insight Retreat with Sayadaw U Jagara and Nikki Mirghafori (registration opens 1/31/19)
- **Jun 19–23** LGBTQI Insight Retreat with John Martin and Teacher TBD (registration opens 2/19/19)
- **Jun 30–Jul 14** Mindfulness of Mind Retreat with Andrea Fella (registration opens 1/30/19)
- **Jul 30–Aug 4** Insight Retreat in Spanish with Andrea Castillo and bruni dávila (registration opens 3/30/19)
- **Aug 14–19** Insight Retreat with Andrea Fella and Pamela Weiss (registration opens 4/14/19)
- **Aug 29–Sep 2** Sex, Race, Money, Dharma: Insight Retreat for People in their 20s and 30s with Max Erdstein and JoAnna Hardy (registration opens 4/29/19)
- **Sep 15–29** 2-Week Experienced Students Retreat with Gil Fronsdal (registration opens 4/15/19) Prerequisite: attended at least four 7-day or longer silent Vipassana retreats.
- **Oct 3–6** Insight Retreat for People in their 20s and 30s with Max Erdstein and Matthew Brensilver (registration opens 7/3/19)
- **Oct 20–27** Insight Retreat with Gil Fronsdal and Teacher TBD (registration opens 6/20/19)
- **Nov 3–10** Just Sitting, Clear Seeing: the Meeting of Zen and Insight with Max Erdstein and Brian LeSage (registration opens 7/3/19)
- **Nov 18–24** Insight Santa Cruz Retreat with Bob Stahl, Mary Grace Orr, and Teachers TBD (registration opens 7/18/19)
- **Dec 8–15** Insight Retreat with Gil Fronsdal and Andrea Fella (registration opens 8/8/19)

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: Feb 23, Mar 23, April 27, May 11, June 15, July 20, Aug 10. 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.

Awareness of Thinking

Andrea Fella

Thoughts are a natural function of our mind. Another function of the mind is to be aware. The mind does its job of producing thoughts and emotions, and the mind also can know thoughts and emotions. Since the mind both produces thoughts and is aware, sometimes we might think both those things can't happen simultaneously, believing that if I'm thinking, I can't be mindful. But it is possible to be mindful while thinking.

We usually cannot simply choose to stop thinking. Thinking is a conditioned phenomenon. Yet we can cultivate conditions that will reduce the number of thoughts in the mind, and meditation is one of those conditions. And even when thoughts continue to arise, we can learn to be mindful of them. Awareness of thinking is particularly supportive for daily life. If we have the idea that we cannot be mindful while thinking, huge chunks of our daily life are out of bounds for mindfulness.

So the first thing to recognize, when we notice that we're thinking, is: this is the mind doing its job. A thought is just a thought. We can very simply be aware that thinking is happening. With this simple recognition, we are becoming aware of the natural functioning of the mind: the mind is thinking.

Thoughts arise in the present moment. Thoughts of the past are not actually in the past. They are happening right now, in the present moment. Thoughts of the future are not in the future, they are arising now, in the present moment. Sometimes we can recognize a thought is just a presently arising phenomenon, but it's easy to be seduced by the content of thoughts. Thoughts seem to create their own little world, and then we move into that world and inhabit it. It's a little bubble of delusion. We have a habit of moving into that thought bubble and losing mindfulness. But it is not necessary to lose mindfulness while thinking.

We can be aware of thinking and at the same time know the content of thinking. When we are meditating we sometimes have the option to set aside the content, to just let it go. Yet, there are times in our day when we need to think; this is part of how we function as human beings! So at times it can be helpful to acknowledge the content of thinking.

My teacher Sayadaw U Tejaniya gives a suggestion for exploring awareness of thinking in daily life: let 50% of the attention be connected to the content of the thought and what is happening in connection to that content, and 50% of the attention be connected to how the thoughts are affecting us. There's a thought, and there's the effect that it has; we can be aware of both.

In meditation practice, we might be able to disengage from the content of thoughts and set them aside, yet sometimes we don't have much control over setting them aside and they continue anyway. If that's happening, rather than getting frustrated and trying to force the thoughts to stop, we can be curious about how the thoughts are affecting us, right now. We can ask ourselves, how is thinking affecting the heart, mind, and body? Is it creating tension? Are there bodily sensations? Are there emotions arising? Investigating how thoughts affect us is a broadening of awareness; not pushing the thoughts away, but rather checking in more widely with our experience: How are these thoughts affecting me?

Sometimes thoughts can be very powerful, and we might find it impossible to be mindful of them or even of how they affect us. If you find when trying to be mindful of thinking that you are caught by the content and lose mindfulness, that's a good time to try putting your attention elsewhere, perhaps on some clear and obvious physical experience that is somewhat easy to stay mindful of.

If the thoughts are very emotionally charged, it might not be helpful to turn to awareness of breathing. Since the breath is often affected by strong emotions, attending to the breath when emotions are very strong might simply pull you back to being caught by the emotions and thoughts. Choose a different physical experience instead. Connection with awareness of seeing or hearing can be helpful, or perhaps with awareness of an obvious body sensation away from the visceral part of the body, such as contact of the hands or feet.

If the content of thought is not so strong, one helpful way of being aware of thinking is to notice how thinking is happening, rather than connecting with the content. I sometimes call this noticing the "modality" of the thoughts. There are many different ways that the mind thinks: it may think with images, or as if one is speaking to oneself, or as if things are being heard, like listening to radio. Thinking can also happen through a kinesthetic sense in the body. At times I find it useful to use a quiet mental note around the modality. For example, if thoughts are happening as images, I use the note seeing. I know I'm not actually visually seeing, but it is a way of acknowledging how the mind is aware of thoughts. Seeing is happening. Or hearing is happening. Using a note that acknowledges the modality rather than the content can help us to be aware of thinking more easily.

Keep a playful attitude about experimenting and exploring whether it's possible to be mindful of thoughts, before you assume it is not possible! More often than we think, we can be aware of thinking.

The Next Generation of Insight Retreat Teachers

Together with the Insight Meditation Society (IMS) in Massachusetts, IRC is about 1/3 of the way through a four-year training program for a new generation of retreat teachers in the Insight tradition, those fully authorized to teach and guide students in residential retreats. IRC guiding teacher Gil Fronsdal is core faculty of the training program, along with Joseph Goldstein, Kamala Masters, DaRa Williams and other senior teachers in our tradition. We are fortunate that the cohort of twenty trainees are wise, committed, and well-practiced. Collectively they have spent a total of many, many years on retreat. Some are already actively teaching at various Insight centers around the country, and we look forward to having several of the trainees teaching at IRC this year.

IRC and IMS (and separately, Spirit Rock Meditation Center, which is offering a concurrent training program), have made a commitment to cultivating more diversity and inclusivity in the ranks of authorized retreat teachers, and 75-80% of the two current trainee groups self-identify as people of color. This is a huge step forward for the Insight movement in the West, and the hope is that it leads to the dharma being offered much more widely in communities that have been underserved and overlooked in the past, and offered by people who are part of those communities. It's an inspiring development in the dharma, and IRC is delighted to be part of it. In the coming six months, teachers from the current cohort of trainees who will be teaching at IRC include Andrea Castillo and bruni dávila from our own IMC/IRC community, both of whom teach the dharma in English and Spanish at IMC and in retreats at IRC. In addition, Tara Mulay, who co-leads the San Francisco People of Color Insight Sangha, and Jozen Gibson, who formerly led youth programs and now serves as Board Chair at Brooklyn Zen Center in New York, will be teaching with Gil in IRC retreats this spring. Check the retreat schedule for registration information