



The Art of Teaching Mindfulness: What You Need to Know Before Becoming a Mindfulness Meditation Instructor

by David Nichtern

About the Author

David Nichtern is a senior Buddhist teacher practicing and teaching meditation for over 40 years. He was one of the initial American students of renowned meditation master Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche and studied closely with him soon after his arrival in the United States in 1970.

David is the Founder and CEO of Dharma Moon (www.dharmamoon.com), an online mindfulness-based education platform and global community, emphasizing the integration of spiritual practice with creative expression and everyday life.

He has been featured in The New York Times, FOX News, Netflix's The Midnight Gospel, Tricycle Magazine, Duncan Trussell Family Hour Podcast, Yoga Journal, Well + Good, The You Made it Weird Podcast with Pete Holmes, and many others. David also hosts his own Creativity, Spirituality & Making a Buck Podcast on Ram Dass' Be Here Now Network.

David is the author of the critically acclaimed books, *[Awakening From the Daydream: Reimagining The Buddha's Wheel of Life](#)* and *[Creativity, Spirituality & Making a Buck](#)*. He mentors individual students both in person and online, and leads meditation teacher training programs around the world.

David is also a multiple Emmy winning and Grammy nominated composer, producer and guitarist. He has recorded and played with Stevie Wonder, Jerry Garcia, Lana Del Rey, Maria Muldaur, Paul Simon and many others. Among his many credits in records, film and TV, he wrote the classic hit song "Midnight at the Oasis" and composed the score for Christopher Guest's film "The Big Picture". In recent years he has produced multiple records for and periodically tours with Grammy nominated kirtan performer Krishna Das.

Preface

This e-book is compiled in part from a series of introductory talks I have given over the years to yoga teachers training to teach mindfulness meditation.

However, the practices and principles discussed apply to anyone who wants to learn to work with meditation students.

If you're interested in going deeper with these teachings and practices and becoming a certified mindfulness meditation instructor, I encourage you to check out the Dharma Moon - Tibet House renowned [100-Hour Mindfulness Meditation Teacher Training](#) program. If you have any questions about the training, please visit dharmamoon.com for more information or email us at assist@dharmamoon.com.

Thank you, and sending best wishes for your journey as a meditation practitioner and teacher!

-David Nichtern

Part 1 – The Foundation - Mindfulness

The foundation of what we are going to discuss here is the practice of mindfulness. This practice is really the ground, not just of the Buddhist training, but you could even say of life altogether. I think most of us in this day and age can see that if our mind is one place and our body is in another, we can't really function in an optimal way. If we are out of sync and distracted, rippled with stress and anxiety, we cannot realize our potential or feel fulfilled.

The essence of mindfulness training is to bring the mind and body together, to create harmony and efficiency as we approach the daunting task of living day to day in an increasingly challenging world.

At this point, the word 'mindfulness' has penetrated the English language and western culture. Yet somehow, in the way most of us were raised, we were never invited to look at and work directly with our own state of mind. We have assumed that we have a certain perspective, a place to look from and out at other things in our world. We can explore all these external things with our minds, but we have rarely if ever, looked directly at the mind itself that is creating our ongoing sense of reality.

Mindfulness is often presented as a complete practice in itself, but actually, it is the basis for an entire spectrum of meditation techniques held within the Buddhist tradition. It is about finding that little dot of attention and placing it right here in the present moment. Many meditation practices are based on learning how to cultivate mindfulness so that when we are off the meditation cushion, we can bring mindfulness and awareness to our everyday lives.

Meditation is a revolutionary activity in that we are looking directly under the hood, so to speak. Your whole life, you've been driving this car along, this car called the ME-MOBILE. Maybe it's a Mercedes, maybe it's one of those VWs with the electric guitar you can plug right into it, or maybe it's an old jalopy. But we have rarely, if ever, just stopped the car, raised the hood, and looked

underneath to see what is in there without any assumptions or expectations. It's kind of an innocent thing to do, but it is very powerful. It can cut the momentum of the habitual patterns that dictate how our life takes shape and sometimes get us all twisted up in knots of tension and anxiety.

So this practice of looking at the "I" that's making all our assumptions, rather than being theoretical or metaphysical, is extraordinarily personal and direct - it's highly experiential. In Buddhism, there is a theory and a method to this kind of exploration - a way of going about it. We could just blindfold everybody and put you in a dark room and let you stumble around for a while, but thankfully there is a method and technique to it. There is a way of looking into this thing we call our mind and exploring who and what we are - directly and without any filter or intermediary.

Some activities we engage in - like sports, dancing, music, cooking, etc. - already have aspects of mindfulness training. But really, it all comes down to our attitude and intention. In physical training, for example, there is often not much emphasis on synchronizing mind and body; or training the mind at all. Maybe there is some mention of focus or the 'psychological game,' but it is mostly about getting the physical body in shape.

Mindfulness training has a different flavor than what you often see in the gym - you know, people on the treadmill with headphones on, watching television, and reading a magazine all at once. Conditioning the body is considered boring - so if you can tune out or do something else with your mind, well then, all the better. It's as if we need a way to occupy our minds or relieve the boredom to just get through the workout.

Of course, even with all the physical prowess in the world, someone could still be a nut case inside. Exercise doesn't necessarily guarantee a healthy state of mind, does it? Someone could have a strong, toned body and have cleaned out their whole physical system with diet or nutrition, but that doesn't particularly mean their mind is balanced or stable.

The practice of yoga is a wonderful example of how we can use physical activity as a bridge practice toward mindfulness - traditionally, it is exactly that. Each pose or asana is a form of meditation in and of itself.

As you may know, the point of yoga is not to execute a perfect pose - it's about learning how to pay attention to your body, mind, breath, and senses in a purposeful and focused way. We use mindfulness as a means of synchronizing all of these different aspects of ourselves together and when we do that, we are fully present. When we are present, we are able to take in all the rich information

available to us - this is how we develop insight into how our body, mind, and senses work as an interdependent-whole.

In America today, yoga studios have become a kind of gateway for people interested in transformation of some kind, even if they may not be conscious of that when they walk in the door. New students might just want a tighter butt or flatter abs or something like that, but gradually people start to become more in tune with themselves through the practice.

They start to see how their energy and their state of mind works, how their habits work, how their individual patterns fall into place and how their interaction with other people is patterned. Often once they get a glimpse of that, then they want to go deeper. They want to learn how to work with these things and eventually they may find their way into a meditation course to find clarity, stability and all of the things that everyone is talking about these days: awareness, attention, being present.

The funny thing is those qualities are quite natural - like if you say to somebody, “just be present.” On a certain level it’s quite natural and intuitive isn’t it? Someone doesn’t have to be that intuitive to follow what you’re saying. They have it in the military, for example - “Ten Hut!” And everybody comes to. Or again in sports: if somebody throws a ball your way, if you aren’t paying attention the message is very, very immediate— you’ll get hit in the head - we might even say “head’s up!”

In addition to developing mindfulness, in terms of the Buddhist training, there is also a second tier - how to be more compassionate towards yourself and other people. We could make a big deal out of that but it’s pretty simple. To be helpful you have to be awake. As a yoga teacher or a teacher of anything else for that matter, if you have a very busy mind and you have a big agenda that you want to put onto somebody, or a heavy-handed idea as to what their attitude should be, you could push them too hard or miss what they are communicating, rather than helping them.

One of our biggest assets in terms of these things that we’re talking about is to learn how to be receptive - to allow things to come through. To be receptive we have to be attentive. So mindfulness is just training in how to develop these core qualities - how to develop a ground of attentiveness, receptivity, and compassion.

If we consider the best way to change the world, we’ll find that we have to start with our own mind. Because if you want to change the world but you’re a mess yourself, it is very unlikely that you will actually be effective when it comes to working with others. If you’re filled with aggression and you’re at a peace rally,

you may not be helping the cause.

When we see somebody having trouble, it might be our natural instinct to want to help. Let's say the person is in quicksand metaphorically - we go, "Hold on a minute, I'll help you!" - and with all good intentions we might jump right into the quicksand to help them. Similarly, if we haven't created the ground of any kind of stability in our own mind and now we're going to jump in in order to help others, we might just be creating further confusion.

My teacher, the late Tibetan meditation master Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, used to call this 'idiot compassion'. In modern lingo we might call it "enabling". We mean to be compassionate and we're trying to be compassionate, but (a.) we don't have the clarity required to see what is actually needed and (b.) there could be an underlying drama of trying to make ourselves feel better by fixing somebody else - which can distort our perception of what might actually be helpful to the other person.

In Buddhism we talk about starting from the ground of the situation - what are the basic realities of whatever it is you are going to be working with. You can look at anything in this way. So if we are going to look at meditation, the different practices we do; what is the ground of it? What is the basis of it? Where are we starting?

The basic ground of meditation practice is our current mind as it is. That is a powerful, powerful point. Many people come to a practice like this with some inspiration - that they could have a better mind, a cooler, groovier, more enlightened mind. And somehow it will be possible to water ski up a spiritual ramp and sail off into some kind of magical happy realm. Sometimes I see people who want to take this approach and I want to say - "Hello? You wouldn't do this at work would you? You're not raising your kids this way are you? With a wish and a prayer?"

Starting where you are may be uncomfortable; it could be both physically and psychologically uncomfortable. You could be restless, you could be bored, you could be irritated, you could be frustrated, you could be horny, you could be hungry, you could be speedy, your back could hurt, your knee could hurt, you could be exhausted, you could be desperately lonely, you could be totally convinced that instead of doing mindfulness meditation practice what you really need is Ben & Jerry's Cherry Garcia ice cream. But that is your mind! Right there, that is the mind that meditates in this tradition. You don't get to trade it in and go, "give me the one with the gold hubcaps and leather trim." You have to start right where you are, that is the basis of this practice.

As mentioned earlier, our approach is to develop some clarity about where we are and what we are doing. People respond positively to clarity. In any kind of teaching situation we can usually see when a presenter has clarity in their presentation. When the teacher is clear in her own mind and clear about how to communicate, then a very nice flow takes place. But if the teacher is disorganized or confused at the beginning of a class and then begins to present in a confused way, you can see that reflected in the students. It is one of the beautiful things about teaching - you get immediate feedback. It's one of the richest situations we experience in our world - teaching and studying. It's a big part of who we are and why we are alive - to learn and grow and share our knowledge and experience.

An Introduction to the Elements of Meditation Practice

The meditation practice that we're going to start with here - to begin to develop mindfulness in our everyday life is called *shamatha*. *Shamatha* is a Sanskrit word that means "calm-abiding" - settling down. If your mind is restless and speedy, that's not shamatha yet. That is our ordinary mind, not bad or dysfunctional or anything like that, just whipped up and spinning. We are all familiar with that kind of mind. Some people are very upset with that mind. People come to me and say, "I can't stand my mind. My mind drives me crazy!" They are usually talking about a certain kind of momentum and speed in the mind - a kind of agitation and randomness.

There is a word in Tibetan, *kuntak*, which means, loosely, "frog mind". It just jumps around like a frog. If you watch your mind, even for just a few minutes, you'll see we've all got a frog mind. You'll be thinking about junior high school and the next minute you're thinking about what's for dinner and the next minute you're really angry with somebody.

It is like a movie set with nobody at the security gate saying, "You can come in now." or "Hold on, we're not doing that scene right now." The actors are just coming on and off the stage whenever they feel like it. It is a kind of random discursiveness. When we meditate that's exactly where we start. And instead of

trying to squish it or trade it in, you just start there and go - “Ohh, ok, that’s the ground.”

So let’s say a little bit more about ‘mind’ before we get into the practice of mindfulness itself. In the Buddhist tradition there are probably a hundred words for different aspects of mind. The mind we’re talking about here is called *sem* in Tibetan. It means, “that which is able to relate to other.” It’s that part of the mind which relates to all the other things that are not considered to be that mind. This quality of mind goes, “Oh, I know you, you’re so and so. Oh and you have blonde hair, and oh you’re scratching your face, not mine.” That mind is creating frameworks, and communicating dualistically with the world in an ongoing basis. That’s our *sem* mind, which is a big part of our everyday mind.

That mind can be happy, right? It can have sense of, “things are going pretty well for me today, I’m having a good day. I got what I wanted from that situation - I got what I needed from that.” Or, “this day is not working out for me. The universe is against me today!” So there’s this kind of dance going on between that kind of mind and what seems to be external objects of all kinds, external phenomena. The world that *sem* perceives, in most cases, is kind of jumbled, in the sense of jumping around like a frog and then obsessing on whatever is temporarily in front of it.

Sem mind is also very subject to habitual patterns. If you are depressed, over and over *sem* goes to the shelf and takes out the book that says how much life sucks. And it reads the book over and over again, and has a whole story and narrative. And that mind might be chanting, almost like a mantra, “I was treated so badly, my life is so bad, it’s so hard, I can’t stand it, I can’t be this way any more...”

Or that mind might be like going, “Gee, I have an image of a whole different world...where everybody loves each other and it’s all sweet and gooey and nice and everybody is kind.” Or you might be in lost in a sexual fantasy for 15 minutes solid. That is where that *sem* mind might be placing its attention and effort at the moment.

So we have a mind that is able to place its attention somewhere. Like, if I said, “Hey, look at me!” Your mind is able to tell you, “place your attention on David.” If I asked you to do a backbend; you could relate to that and make the backbend the object of your attention.

So the point of our *shamatha* meditation is to stabilize that *sem* mind. According to this tradition that is an important element of meditation: to create a little bit more sense of ease in that mind, as well as some mental stability and balance. So that’s very good - if we never went any further into the Buddhist teachings, that

would be enough to change somebody's life. I think in some sense you could say shamatha is not really even Buddhist, it's universal. Before my son Ethan was born, his mom and me took the Lamaze training. It is *shamatha*. They tell you, "Ok, your mind is going to start freaking out now because your body is going into red alert. There is a little alien that's going to try to split you in half and come out of you."

"So instead of getting frantic and anxious, why not bring your mind back to your breath as a way of stabilizing yourself, your energy and your mind. Come back to the breath. As you start to drift off again, come back to the breath again." And it works! Nobody at the Lamaze class said, "let's do this ancient Buddhist practice called *shamatha*." They said, "just be with your breathing."

Once we understand the principle of mindfulness, we can try applying it to our actual life. The core principle is taking our mind and placing it on one point, on one object as a way of stabilizing our mind. It could be anything really. But as your mind wanders, the practice of mindfulness, the essence of it, is bringing your mind back to one point, one object of awareness.

One time I was sitting in my doctor's office, waiting to have blood drawn. I was full of anxiety because I hate injections and needles. I used to get faint every time a doctor or nurse approached me with a needle! So this time my doctor, who had actually taken one of my courses, says, "Dave, do your meditation practice. Bring your attention to your breathing." And I think, "Oh, that's good. I only teach this stuff." So instead of placing my attention on the thought of this giant needle lurching toward my poor little arm, I just brought my mind and attention to the breath. This is the essence of *shamatha*, the practice of *shamatha* - the heart of the mindfulness practice.

Breath As the Object of Meditation

So you may be wondering why we encourage people to use the breath as the object of *shamatha*? Well, (1.) it's always there, right? You could be out in the middle of your day and think - "I don't have my special incense" or "I don't have my candle" or my statue of Buddha or whatever - but your breath is always there. (2.) The breath is very much related to our vital energy. So in a way, you are tuning into your life force at the same time. So it's very organic. (3.) The breath has the quality of connecting to the mind, which is more ephemeral - the mind is sort of more like a gas than a solid. The breath is slightly more tangible though. You can find the breath. Like in old movies when somebody wants to know if you're alive they put a mirror in front of your mouth to see if you're breathing.

So to practice mindfulness - we place our attention on the breath as a way of stabilizing that frog mind. We say, "Hey froggie, come here, pay attention to this." So we're talking about placement of attention. Yoga teachers will work with that a lot. You're going to want to place peoples' attention as you're teaching them: "I want you to be aware of the knee. What's happening with your knee? Rotate..." You know, all these wonderful ways of describing where you want people to focus...but first you need to capture the person's mind, their *sem*, and help them to place their attention.

There is another built-in side effect of using the breath as the focus of meditation. Through the process of trying to place our attention on our breath, we notice that our attention is not on the breath a lot of the time. When you start doing this practice, in the first 2 minutes you're going to see exactly what I'm talking about. The instructions are simply to place your attention on and be with your breath. You're going to do that about 2 or 3 times in a row, and then your mind is going to feel like a merry-go-round. You're going to start thinking about eating chocolate chip cookies, your schedule, shooting your boss, having sex - anything besides the breath. So the side effect is you begin to learn and become aware of your own wandering mind and what it's actually doing moment by moment.

In the yoga/meditation workshops I co-teach, I figure I have the clean up job. I'm just like the janitor. I come in after 3 hours of seeing students wrapping themselves up like a pretzel and all I say is, "we're just going to sit still for 10 minutes here, and just watch the breath and see what arises in your mind." They look at me and they go, "who let that guy in here?" As if this is the worst punishment anybody could ever administer!

A common aspect of working with this practice is that we often encounter fear! It's ironic, isn't it, that at the end of the day, we would be afraid of just being with ourselves? You would think, "Hey, I know me, I live with me. I know this person." But the truth is that we don't know ourselves completely. The prospect of being alone with ourselves and just settling in with one's body and mind and breath, is often quite scary to people.

So we have to be willing to be explorers. We're not just taking the conventional route here - otherwise we'd be over at the gym with the airpods in our ears and the TV on. So by going down this path you're already saying - "I'm an explorer, I want to look into my world further." We're going to have to get naked with ourselves, so to speak, on the meditation cushion. All we have is our body, our mind, and our breath. The fruition of this practice is the dawn of a feeling that that is entirely sufficient - that our own well-being is based on nothing else.

That we can experience a depth of presence and well-being that needs no other reference point. And so we start where we are, which might be kind of speedy, or lazy, or aggressive or whatever have you. Whatever it is we bring it to the cushion. We sit down, place our attention on our breath and watch our mind arise. You'll see the mind as it is: ephemeral but compelling. You'll recognize it and you just come back to your breath. Pretty simple huh? That's *shamatha*. That is starting to practice mindfulness.

This kind of taming and self-familiarization process is the ground for everything else we develop in the meditative traditions. Later on you might say, "well, OK, so now there's some element of stability, what should we cultivate?" Because you see, even in the Buddhist tradition, some people have stopped there. They said, "Oh, I've tamed my mind, I'm here." But then there were whole other schools and traditions that branched off and went further.

They ask, "What about other people, now that I've tamed my mind?" How stable is the mind when you feel like you've got your zen thing happening, and somebody puts their yoga mat 2 inches too close to you? Where did that equanimity go? 2 inches! I'm not talking about they came and bombed your home, they just put their yoga mat 2 inches too close to you and your zen is totally gone!

So in the second stage we begin to work with others. First we work with ourselves, and then we can begin to spread out. In my life, I have found that this mindfulness practice goes with everything else in life. It doesn't really matter what else you do - if you're a teacher or a basketball player or a banker. Practicing mindfulness is like a good mixer, it goes with everything. When you see somebody who is trained in or naturally has this kind of quality, it is very appealing. When you go to a restaurant, if the waiter is mindful - it right away enhances the whole situation, as opposed to when they just plop the food down on the table. It has nothing to do with Buddha or anybody like that; it just has to do with the exchange - having some grace to it. Mindfulness brings gracefulness to everything. An abundance of mindlessness deteriorates the fabric of our life. It makes everything distorted. You can't even have a proper argument; you just start throwing things. Mindfulness even goes with arguing. Sometimes you need to have an argument; but you could do it mindfully, right?

The other universal mixer is compassion. It even goes well with something like war. If we have to have wars, if there is a compassionate attitude, it's better for everyone involved than if there is a kind of vengeful, small-minded, hateful attitude. It's hard to imagine that, isn't it? Mindfulness and compassion. Police can be mindful and compassionate or not. Right? They could take somebody in the back room and beat the crap out of them, or they can stop somebody from

doing something that's harmful to themselves or others.

So we're talking about the real world here. We're not trying to say that this world isn't the way that it is. But these are universal remedies to make it a better place to live. Mindfulness and compassion are remedies that mix and infuse. And there are definite ways to practice them. We start with ourselves and then it spreads out from there.

Part 2 – How to Actually Meditate

Meditation Instruction

So let's talk about how to practice mindfulness meditation:

To begin with, we take a physical posture that will allow us to minimize our activity at the body level. Traditionally we start by taking a comfortable cross-legged posture with our butt on a cushion. If you're sitting cross-legged, you'll want your hips to be up higher than your knees, otherwise it's going to create strain on your legs and lower back. So if your hips are tight you can use more cushions and if they are looser you can use fewer. So you're creating a good strong, stable seat, hopefully without too much strain - a seat you can maintain for a while with a reasonable degree of comfort and ease. As an alternative you can kneel on a meditation bench or some cushions or sit upright on a chair with your feet flat on the floor about shoulder width apart and ideally not leaning against the back of the chair.

Of course these kinds of positions might take some getting used to at first and you can make whatever adjustments you need to to get started. The premise here is that you are really connecting with the ground - mother earth. You are actually sitting on the ground, not just perching like a little bird. Then you can just rest your hands, it's pretty natural just to float your hands down, rest them on your knees or thighs- palms down. This position is actually a mudra, or gesture, called "resting the mind". Right away you should feel like you're moving into a more settled, stable physical posture.

Next you should have a sense of your spine being upright. You may or may not be used to this, but we don't want to strain - so you need to be sensitive to yourself and work with your body, not against it. To get the feeling of it, you might want to slump over - just curve your spine and let your head hang all

the way down. Then roll your spine up, one vertebra at a time. There's a feeling of natural uplift, and uprightness without stiffness. You don't have to hold any tension in your shoulders, so you can relax them. Your back is strong and your front is soft and open. You're not being defensive or tense - you have strength and openness.

Next you can tuck your chin in just slightly; there's a feeling of containment, of coming into oneself. Relax your jaw.

For this practice we have our eyes slightly open in a soft downward gaze. It's a diffused gaze oriented toward a spot maybe about 4-6 ft. in front of you on the floor - the gaze just rests there. Sometimes this is called "seeing without looking." There's just a feeling of relaxed awareness. Your mouth can either be closed or just very slightly open.

You can always just go back and go through these points of posture and re-settle yourself at any time during the practice. Most of us are not used to sitting like this, and if it begins to become painful you can just shift your posture and bring your knees up in front of you. Just continue the mindfulness practice and allow the circulation to come back and then resume, take your seat again, and take a fresh start. So there can be a middle way between the feeling of torturing yourself, taking a Spartan approach, and indulging every itch or feeling of restlessness. Just remember: "not too tight and not too loose."

Having taken your seat in this way, you begin to direct your attention toward the breath. We call this part placement of attention. And as I mentioned before we will place our attention on our breathing. As to where to focus the attention on the breath, one possibility is the tip of the nose. You can place your attention there, just feeling the cool air going in and out at the tip of the nose. Or you can place your attention on the abdomen rising and falling with each breath. Or you can just feel the flow of the whole breath going throughout your body.

This attention to the breath is done with a light touch - sometimes we say only 25% effort. The rest of your attention is divided among a general sense of awareness of the whole space, awareness of thoughts and feelings coming and going, and a feeling of openness without agenda. It's no problem if you hear sounds, like the sound of a fan, or feel the wind on your skin or maybe smell something. You just allow those things to happen. But your attention, the thread of your attention is on the breathing.

Now at a certain point you will notice - "Oh, wow, my attention is not on the breathing at all. I'm thinking about my grandma and the apple pie that she used to make. And how there's nobody left on the planet who can make an

apple pie like that anymore.” At some point you just sort of notice a gap in that particular story line - that particular thought breaks for a moment and you become aware of the fact that you were thinking. At that point you can just say the word “thinking” to yourself. You recognize that you were thinking about something and then you just gently bring your attention back to the breath. There’s no judgment or evaluation necessary - there is no “good thinking” or “bad thinking” - it’s all just “thinking”.

When we notice ourselves thinking, most of the time we’re commenting, judging, evaluating - grading our own term paper as we go. That’s the part of the mind we’re talking about now - somehow, something is noticing what is happening. We notice this flow of commentary. In meditation practice we’re going for a slightly different type of observing. Which is without the judgment, without the commentary, without the evaluation. You just notice it, you see it as it is without any kind of attempt to manipulate or evaluate further.

We create what is called the “abstract watcher” or “witness”, which is a more refined self-consciousness. It doesn’t have the kind of crude, judgmental quality of like, “oh stupid, why did you think that!” instead it can be, “oh, a-ha!” It’s just seeing your thoughts and patterns arise and noticing them.

Gradually the practice moves towards finer and finer perceptions of our own mind. What we begin to see is that our notion of self is this built up thing. It’s an accumulation of layers of self-consciousness. Such a complicated scheme is actually totally unnecessary. That is a very big insight. That is why Buddhism was so revolutionary during its time and equally so nowadays. The whole notion of building up self-centeredness is something the Buddha identified as a process that actually creates pain and anxiety. Instead we can just be. But to start with, we just notice what’s happening with our whole big story line and watch it come a go like watching cloud formations come and go in the sky.

So when you’re practicing meditation and you notice that you are thinking, instead of rejecting or pushing it away to get back to the breathing, you just lightly touch in on it. You actually feel the texture of your mind and what it’s coming up with. Then you let it go and come back to the breath. This approach is called “touch and go” - it’s like a dance, you just do the “touch and go”. So the idea is not to boycott our mind, but rather to see that a lot of the patterns and stuff that come up habitually, even though they seem quite solid and powerful and real, are actually ephemeral. The abstract watcher notices that without commenting further. It’s just a light touch of awareness that sees that.

What’s naturally going to come up as you begin to practice is that you start to feel your resistance to actually being present. Intriguingly, the dawn of genuine

practice, when you really practice meditation, is boredom. So if you say to me, “I’m really getting bored with this.” I say, “great, you’re starting to really get into the practice.” Now, you might think, “OK this guy is really nuts. Now he’s telling me I should take time out of my busy day to just sit here, do nothing and get bored.”

But what is this boredom? To further clarify we say there are two kinds of boredom that you might experience doing this practice. The first boredom is what is known as hot boredom. It’s a kind of restlessness, like ants in your pants. What you’re craving is some entertainment and something happening, and it’s starting to get like “alright already, where’s the action? Where’s my remote control, where’s the TV, where’s the refrigerator, where’s somebody to talk to, where’s somebody to yell at, where’s a drama to unfold, where’s some gossip, where’s the new movie that’s coming out, where’s my dinner, anything!?!”

We recognize that it is our mind that is craving, seeking entertainment and activity out of habit and now it’s starting to slow down and settle. That friction is what we are calling hot boredom. “Let’s go, ring the damn bell already!” That is our mind. Our body is just sitting there, but inside our mind is spinning up and revving fast. This is the mental speed that we’ve become accustomed to, and it’s being cut into with this practice - meditation practice is slowing us down.

My recommendation is that when you feel hot boredom, stay with it. Don’t let that be the boundary, and say “oh, I’ve got to get up now and check my email.” Whatever drama you encounter, just sit through it and watch your mind. Feel the energy, and stay with the technique. That’s why we call it ‘practice’. We’re practicing not getting swept away by our thoughts and mental activity. We are practicing not immediately reacting to something that comes up. You will experience your own resistance to slowing down; your own restlessness, your own speed, and your own impatience, but the recommendation is just to try to stay with that and recognize what we are calling hot boredom as a necessary stage of the practice.

The second stage of this boredom is what’s called cool boredom, which is really the onset of a more spacious state of mind. I used to say it’s more like English people, but I’m not sure if that’s true anymore since I haven’t been to England in a while. It’s like, “Hello, nice to see you! Why don’t you come in? Have some tea?” English people used to be like that, at least more than Americans. They had more of a culture of enjoying an open uncluttered kind of exchange, a kind of more spacious encounter. So that’s the cool boredom where you go, “Oh, having a glass of water now.” It’s mixed with more simplicity and appreciation. Maybe for the first time you realize that water actually has a taste.

There is a sense of space opening up - a bigger space - not just giving into every distracted impulse. And that is often a huge relief. Also there develops a sense of finding the breath and coming back more consistently. And there is a stability that develops at a certain point - not that thoughts don't arise, it's just there isn't so much of a fixation on them.

When I look at the master teachers and see what their realization of these practices is like - one sign is that there's an absence of stuck-ness - like something having to be this way or that way. Some of these great Tibetan teachers are so playful and light. And yet powerful at the same time because there's nothing that has to happen. You and I often come from a place of something having to happen either this way or that, but the unbiased mind doesn't really have an allegiance to the outcome. As they say, it could begin to feel more like a "journey without goal" - more open and playful.

Recently I had a student come talk to me about a weeklong meditation retreat he had just finished. At about the 3rd day, he had a kind of epiphany. He realized, "Wow! If it wasn't for my mind and my body this would be really easy." It was either one or the other, from moment to moment. If his body felt ok, his mind was just whirling around. If his mind was kind of relaxed, he had a pain in his back that would just take up his whole mental space. Or his knees would hurt. When your knees are really hurting, it's hard to pay attention to the breath; your attention just goes to the pain.

So the beauty of all this is - we're not trying to circumvent any of that. We just work with it. We work with our pain, our hunger; whatever it is, let it be there. Include it. If it becomes too much, of course, we need to attend to it. But we stay with the practice as much as we can. Since that is our situation actually, that is reality, so it's better than working with any kind of mental fantasy or whatever. Eventually fantasies are going to pop and leave you high and dry and reality will just keep coming - it's very reliable.

One image given by meditation teachers in the past is that we are riding our mind and energy like a horse and rider. We are riding reality, riding the breath, riding the mind. The horse keeps moving, it has its own motion and energy, and we can develop the ability to ride it. We are riding and the horse is the mind. So there's no way to permanently pacify it exactly, you just have to learn how to be a good rider.

Part 3 – Working With Your Mind

In the Buddhist tradition there's a vast array of techniques for cultivating what really boils down to 2 things: awareness and compassion. So you could say this 2500 year old tradition boils down to how to develop those 2 qualities. The qualities of awareness and compassion are considered to be innate in human beings. In Sanskrit they're called *bodhicitta*. *Bodhi* means 'awake' - it has the connotation of being awake, present, aware, conscious, all of those qualities. And *citta* is 'mind' and, interestingly enough, also sometimes translated as 'heart'. According to Buddhism the seed of consciousness is considered to be in the heart. So *bodhicitta* could be translated as 'awakened heart' or 'awakened mind.'

The basic idea is that we have awakened heart already, naturally. You woke up with it this morning - already intact. It's the basic nature of a human being - the core, the essence. The \$64 question then becomes, "why do we have to cultivate something that we supposedly have already?" Like if I told you, "you're rich already. You can stop working so hard to get rich because you've already made it." That would be quite a revolutionary thing to say to somebody, right? Even with these practices, you could have your whole momentum going towards acquiring some kind of goodness, developing some kind of awareness, and if we said, "wait a minute! Stop, stop, stop. You already have it." Who would believe me? You'd think there was some kind of trick or gimmick.

So what is the trick? The trick is simply, from a Buddhist point of view, that we don't recognize this awakened heart. Through a thicket of habitual patterns, we have developed a convention of not recognizing our own awareness and our own compassion. So what we talk about in Buddhism is obstacles or *kleshas* - the *bodhicitta* has been obscured or covered over. A perfect metaphor for that would be the sun. It's always there, right? But if you have a cloudy day, you don't see the sun. There is all kind of evidence of it, there is light and heat, but you don't see the sun on a cloudy day.

So the sun seems to be the best metaphor for this kind of primordial, awakened, open energy that is self-existing. Nobody has to go up and stoke the sun. Unlike a cell phone that you have to plug in every night to recharge, you don't have to recharge the sun. And in the same way it's said that our own basic nature does not have to be recharged, conjured up, concocted, or created. Our *bodhicitta*, our awakened heart, has the same quality of self-existence as the sun. But like the sun on a cloudy day, from our point of view, it's sometimes obstructed - so

you can't see it or you don't recognize it.

This is a profoundly important point if you want to practice meditation. I think a lot of us have a subtle notion that spiritual practice is obtaining something - that if you work hard enough you can get to enlightenment or whatever you want to call it. Most of our projects are set up that way. Most of our lives are set up towards thinking that somewhere in the future the payoff is going to happen. How often do we just actually appreciate what we have right in this moment? Even if it's simply having a sip of a tall, cool glass of water with no sense of payoff in the future - just complete fulfillment in the moment.

I don't know if you've ever noticed, but isn't it funny how people go to a great restaurant and right away start talking about other restaurants - "oh, I went to this place and that place and they had this and that." They're right there! Instead of having a great meal, they start talking about other restaurants, other possibilities. This trick of the mind is to continuously expect a sense of fulfillment in the future and dangling from experiences in the past. We find ourselves hung out to dry between the past and the future. If we are lingering or we are nostalgic, we can get stuck somewhere in the past. And then we get stuck dreaming about the future, dreading or anticipating some upcoming experience.

Sometimes when we hear about nowness, as in the 'power of now' and "be here now" and the 'now' this and the 'now' that - you might feel, "where the heck is 'now'?" It keeps moving. And as soon as somebody said 'now', it was already 'then', right? So it's not such an easy thing to grasp. In fact, you can't grasp it. By its very nature, it is ungraspable.

So, as we try to find the elusive now with our mindfulness practice, we also have to find our elusive mind with our mindfulness practice. The first trick is finding your mind in the first place - where is that little sucker? When we go to find our mind it seems to have the energy of a little squirrel or a little chipmunk or as we said earlier, a frog. It's sort of jumping around from topic to topic. It's like a James Joyce novel - just a continuous flow of discursive thoughts with no periods, commas, paragraphs, or page numbers. If you chase it, it runs away. If you try to coax it in, it squiggles around. It's very oily and wiggly. So because the mind is ephemeral, it's sort of hard to grasp it. You can shake hands with somebody, but try shaking minds. Yet, all day, every day it's our mind that is leading the charge and governing our activities.

So for example, if I said to you - "raise your right hand." Mind has to do the work first, your hand cannot raise itself. Your mind will raise your right hand by first of all, deciphering the meaning of that, and then encoding your body with instructions that go to your right hand. And then if you're lucky, on a good day,

you can do it.

So mind is considered, in the Buddhist tradition, to be supreme. It's the top of the totem pole. It's governing everything, even if you're doing yoga, and you go into whatever tricky pose you might have, your mind is the one that's navigating the whole situation. It's saying - move this way, whoops, balance, shift. So, of course mind and body have a very, very interesting relationship. Perhaps we conceive of them as two separate things, but really they are like an old married couple – hard to tell who is doing what sometimes, sometimes cooperating and sometimes bickering.

So what does it all mean? If we try to talk about being mindful, what are we really saying? At the simplest possible level, if you remember fire drills at school, the teacher says, “All right children, now be mindful; pay attention; line up. We are going to quickly but mindfully leave the building.” Before the fire drill, everybody's attention was all over the place. One kid was drawing on the wall with crayons, another was shooting paper clips across the room and some kid had his finger in his nose. So the teacher says, “all right children, be mindful, come together, we're going to line up and leave the building.” She gathers up all the energy in the room and gets the children to take action. We're not talking about something that different in terms of how to practice mindfulness.

The everyday scattered state of mind that we have is what normally precedes our effort toward being mindful. Periodically, in ordinary day-to-day life, our mind naturally gathers itself and comes into focus on its own. You could be in the middle of doing something and your mind's buzzing, the phone rings and you think, “oh, I better pull myself together and answer that.” And then you go to the phone, pick it up, figure out who's calling, and then focus on having a conversation with that person.

So naturally during the day, all day, various inputs, various influences, are acting as a sort of meditation bell. That bell is ringing periodically all day long. It might be your partner calling and saying you need to go pick up the kids. Or it might be the timer on the microwave saying it's time to take your meal out. Things arise and naturally draw your attention from wherever it was, to one point.

When we do experience the present situation, it seems to have 2 qualities. One is that it is like awakening from a very active daydream. We are coming into a space that is less governed by fantasy, expectation and anxiety. In a sense it's more ordinary, less dramatic. Ordinarily our mind might be more like a movie trailer, or a sports highlight reel – loud, fast and intense. We want that energy, that sort of adrenaline rush. We've become hooked. As a society we're hooked on adrenaline. It's the drug of choice really. In one aspect our mindfulness practice

is like coming off an addiction, of being hooked on adrenaline, hooked on speed.

Then the other part of it is just like an opening of a flower - an expansion of the liveliness and vividness of our perception. One of the intriguing things about sense perceptions is that they only operate in the present. You can have memories of them, but the memories of the senses also only operate in the present moment. The actual experience of perceiving or even remembering any perception is in the present. In the Buddhist view, the 5 sense perceptions are considered to be inherently sacred. They are said to be identical to the awakened energy of a Buddha or an enlightened person. That energy is not somewhere else. It is exactly through these sense perceptions that you can experience all kinds of enlightened energy.

So what is this awakened energy, this *bodhicitta*? What is that? Is it something we have? Is it something we create? Is it something we can strive for? The first point is that it is something that we have that exists right now. When we touch into the present we have a much more powerful recognition of bodhicitta. But we can also recognize that bodhicitta is like a tomato - our spiritual practice is like growing tomatoes. We can cultivate the causes and conditions for that tomato to grow but it is equally important to understand that you can't just manufacture a tomato. I guess Monsanto might disagree but traditionally speaking, a seed is a natural thing. We can only cultivate the ground, the environment in which that tomato will grow.

What we're doing here is fertilizing the ground with our own real experience. Sometimes my teacher, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, used to say that our confusion is like fertilizer. We don't throw it out; we recycle it and create the causes and conditions for the awakened mind, the tomato, to manifest.

So this bodhicitta, this awakened heart, is completely intrinsic - however the experience of the awakened heart can be obscured and obstructed by habitual patterns we have. One of those habits, for example, could be that we are hooked on adrenaline. Which is simply a habit, right?

But, why come down? What is said in the traditional teachings is that even though it feels like we're having a great time, all that adrenaline and speed and grasping is actually the root of our suffering. Of course we have to really think that through, to see if it's true or not.

Whenever we become involved with an obsession it continuously needs to entertain, display, energize, bubble, crackle, whip, and sparkle us - there always has to be an acceleration or ramping up going on because at some point it's going to start to wear thin or run down. It's really the same principle as addiction. We

need to add more to it, we need to keep heightening it, keep raising the bar. So the main point is that if you look for where our underlying anxiety comes from, where the sense of struggle comes from, where our dissatisfaction comes from, it may be that it comes from continuously having to fuel that entertainment mind.

Part 4 – The Source of Our Suffering, Confusion, Anxiety & Stress

So this whole framework takes place in what is known in Sanskrit as samsara. It is a world in which we feel like we are a hamster spinning on a wheel, with the repetitive quality of our habitual patterns cycling over and over and over again.

Samsara is based on ignorance – but exactly what is being ignored? For one thing, we are ignoring the fundamental fact of impermanence. We are ignoring the fact we ourselves are impermanent, that everything we contact and every situation we experience is impermanent. What we are lacking in samsara is the kind of intelligence that can help us navigate as our situation evolves and changes. In the samsaric version of reality, we basically solidify a sense of ‘I’ as the center of the universe. Somehow there’s an ‘I’ that is centrally located and everything else manifests in relation to that.

So we can think, “I like you. You’re a good person.” Or we can think, “I don’t like you so much, could you please leave?” Or, “You can stay or leave, I don’t really care that much in your case” or maybe, “I didn’t even notice that you were here!” ‘I’ sets up central headquarters, and then surveys the landscape.

This ‘I’ has 3 modes of experience, which are very central to the wheel of samsara continuously spinning - they are ‘Passion’ [liking or wanting something], ‘Aggression’ [disliking or not wanting something], and ‘Ignorance’ [ignoring something because we don’t care either way about it].

These 3 modes color every single activity in which we engage. Certain things we like and want to draw in.... “Ooh lovely - would you like to go on a date with me?” On the other hand, “This person sweats too much in yoga class, I hope they don’t put their mat next to me”. Or not really noticing our cashier at the grocery store because we’re paying our bill but we’re not paying attention.

Our 3 responses of passion, aggression and ignorance can appear to be so solid at the time. If somebody irritates us, we think they’re a jerk, right? I mean we don’t ever think of the possibility that it’s us, that it might be us causing all the irritation. So ‘I’ has things that ‘I’ want to include, reject, and ignore. These

three actions are the engine that keeps the samsaric wheel spinning, and they are nothing more or less than our own habitual, knee-jerk patterns of thought, feeling and behavior.

The overall texture of samsara is a kind of even more fundamental ignorance. Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche used to talk about ignorance as an active process. He described it as 'ignoring', or 'ignore-ance'. We have to actively ignore what's going on to sustain a habitual pattern, don't we? If we have a really deep-rooted, aggressive habit - when you're pissed off and resentful all the time and you kind of enjoy hanging out there - It almost feels good. I'm back here in my comfortable familiar crappy mood. We call it a klesha in Buddhism. It's an obstruction. It's obstructing your openness, your awareness and your compassion.

But strangely it feels superficially good at the time. We sometimes call this phenomenon the cocoon - the weave of habitual patterns that has grown to be very comfortable and very familiar but it's actually choking the life out of the whole situation.

I have this one friend in LA who is a real practitioner of anxiety. He continuously drums up those kind of anxious, stressful thoughts. When I see it happening I want to play the drums to accompany him - boom, boom, boom, boom, boom. He is chanting: "it's never gonna work, I'm not gonna be able to do this, it's not happening, there's so many obstacles..." It's like a mantra practice in a way. He's practicing being anxious.

If we have a meditation practice, we see over and over again this cocoon, this swarm of habitual thoughts and patterns and how it keeps us from being happy. We can practice letting go and move beyond passing every experience through the filter of passion, aggression, and ignorance.

When we finish our practice, and encounter someone struggling in the exact same way perhaps we can actually have some real compassion and understanding about how to work with that situation. That's called cultivating

relative bodhicitta.

Remember we talked about bodhicitta, the awakened heart? It has an unconditioned aspect but it also has a relative aspect. When we're clicking in with just being awake that is unconditional *bodhicitta*. When we're developing more positive thought patterns and habits on an everyday type level; that is relative bodhicitta. We train in both. Both are important to cultivate. As teachers we guide others to train in both.

In meditation practice, the more you get into it, the more you're on your own in some sense. The role of the teacher at that point is similar to a coach. "Go out there and do it, you can do it." Essentially just encouragement. There's also the idea of the coach pointing out some potential obstacles. There are tricks we can play on ourselves regarding our spiritual pursuits, in pursuing our basic development as human beings. We sometimes fool ourselves by thinking, "what I'm really looking for here is a smooth ride - some kind of comfort and security."

Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche coined the term 'spiritual materialism' to describe this attitude. One of the first books he published after arriving and starting to teach in the U.S. in the early 1970's was called *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*. Spiritual materialism is the idea that spiritual practice is somehow going to be comfortable or pleasurable and is very similar to a materialistic outlook. Sometimes these days it is also called "spiritual bypassing" - a phrase I believe that was coined by psychologist John Wellwood.

So we can, if we're not thoughtful about it, simply transpose that comfort-seeking approach into our spiritual practice. We just take the materialistic trip and import it; pull it into a comfy, push-button world. "I want this to be easy, I don't really want it to challenge my sense of who I am in any way - comfortable, reinforcing, and blissful if possible." Just look at all the teachers and spiritual guides who are promising bliss, and taking people along on that ride. And really we have to look and consider, "how is this different from a new car ad?" How real is it? As teachers, it's good to challenge ourselves as to whether we are promoting this kind of distortion in our own practice or with our students. Especially if we are too concerned with being liked or building a following - not that there is any inherent problem with either of these things - but we should always look at the price tag and also examine our motivation IMHO.

Buddhist practice is supposed to make you more realistic as opposed to creating an artificial sense of happiness. Now, that doesn't mean it makes you unhappy either. That also would be a mistaken idea - sometimes described as nihilism.

So coming back to spiritual materialism - that is a situation in which one is just basically co-opting the practice, the teachers, and the teachings to serve ego. We

want to keep the ego thing and maybe even making it into a giant puffy gooey spiritual ego thing. I'm sure we've all seen examples of this approach. There are plenty of teachers who are just using all this spiritual stuff to puff themselves up and become, as my grandmother would say a big macher, a big shot. There are big time warnings in Buddhism about doing that, but it's still tricky. At this point we can just identify spiritual materialism and hopefully awaken our critical intelligence to make sure that's not what we're doing.

Understanding spiritual materialism can change the way we experience obstacles arising on the path. As we practice, obstacles will come up: restlessness, sleepiness, critical feedback or maybe a general sense of irritation or frustration with the whole darn thing. So what is recommended here is the idea of including our difficulties as part of the path. This approach is a real flip, a very different way of looking at obstacles.

Normally we see obstacles as something blocking our progress. Now we're saying that the obstacles are part of the path itself. It might feel like an obstacle, but actually engaging it is the point, right then and there. There is an opportunity to transform the obstacle thing into a path thing. It takes a lot of effort and courage. It also takes an absence or lightening of our aggression because if we're used to pushing our way through difficulties aggressively, at some point we're going to run out of fuel. If we're used to pushing too hard or holding back and resisting, we will eventually get exhausted and break down. I've seen this many times in regards to how people practice and teach yoga for example.

So the obstacle becomes a positive challenge to work with what is actually there. And then it's not spiritual materialism anymore, right? You're not just saying, "Oh here's a conflict, I'll just go around." You develop your bravery or willingness to engage enough to welcome obstacles. If you want to practice patience, anything that makes you impatient is going to be the best opportunity to work with developing patience. We discussed this earlier - in class you have your zen thing pretty together and you feel clear and focused and then somebody irritates you. And you say, "You're messing up my zen here, I had it all together." But from a bigger point of view, a practice point of view, you have just been provided with a great opportunity to make your zen go wider. At that point you are being invited to go wider and deeper with the whole thing.

Now we could experience a possible opening every time we encounter a challenge. In day-to-day life these things come up pretty fast, so if we don't train in stabilizing our mind on the cushion it's going to be extra hard to flip our perspective out in the field, in the heat of battle so to speak.

Let's say you're having an argument with your husband or your wife, or your

girlfriend or boyfriend or whatever, and you feel your old familiar obstacle, your old familiar habitual pattern coming up. Whatever that is, let's say it's "I don't wanna be here". Whenever the going gets tough in your relationships you recite that mantra: "I don't wanna be here. I don't need this". You feel yourself start to go there. Right then you smell smoke, right? On the spot you can either engage the habitual pattern like every other time or you can soften right then and there and let go. Somehow if we don't develop our foundation on the cushion it's nearly impossible to cut into our habits on the spot. You just won't remember to do it, or won't feel the spaciousness to disengage your programmed reactivity.

Part 5 – Awareness

Our final topic to cover, which I've mentioned already somewhat, is the relationship between mindfulness and awareness. In mindfulness there's the notion of what we called sem - the dualistic mind. So mindfulness is a dualistic practice, we place our attention on a seemingly external object, and thereby increase the vividness of that perception and the stability of the mind that perceives it.

But awareness is less dualistic. There is still an 'I' in mindfulness – some kind of focus and intention - but there is perhaps less of an 'I' in awareness! When awareness is operating, we have a 360-degree sense of what is happening. Probably what people describe as being "in the zone" is not too far away from what we're talking about. I've heard basketball players describe it. It's as though they are just floating down the court. It feels effortless and they've got the whole picture of the court action all at once. 'I' is not even shooting the ball anymore. There's a hand, there's a ball, there's a crowd, there's the swish sound of the ball going through the net but there is not so much a sense of the "I" who is doing all that. Sometimes when we talk about non-dual awareness, it seems like we are talking about something really far out, but actually we have already experienced this phenomenon more than we might think.

At the moment when you're actually having a sense perception, like when you're hearing a bell ring, for instance, right in that moment where is 'I'? 'I' comes later. While the bell is ringing, outside and inside are very connected, right? So there's not a lot of self-consciousness in awareness. It's un-self-conscious. If you walk into a room that smells like an outhouse or something, at first there is just a powerful feeling of shit smell. 'I' comes later in the thought process when we start to make a judgment about the smell. But before that happens, it's almost like the sense perceptions are flooded, there's a feeling of sheer vividness. So the awareness has this vividness but not so much emphasis on the two points of 'I'

and other.

In the tradition I studied, the full meditation practice is actually called mindfulness/awareness or shamatha/vipashyana. That's the full meditation practice in my tradition. The difference is the awareness has less or no support; it doesn't have a specific object so the sense of subject is also diminished. The combination of mindful attentions and non-judgmental awareness of what arises is what most people refer to as mindfulness these days.

So gradually, as you practice this kind of mindfulness, it will naturally transform into a general sense of awareness. Maybe for the first two years you practice a half hour a day and you notice your breath 8 or 10 times in half hour. That's fine, as long as you do your practice genuinely and honestly, it's going to be productive. But gradually the next step might be relaxing or letting go of your effort a little bit. Like any kind of activity that you do, at a certain point you can relax into it and it becomes more natural.

At Dharma Moon, we use Pema Chodron's formulation of gentleness, precision and letting go as a general grid for calibrating our mindfulness practice. We can be kind to ourselves, practice a method with some attention to the actual details of the technique, and also develop a larger sense of spaciousness, ease and effortlessness about the whole "project".

The focus aspect of mindfulness is like the training wheels on a bicycle. When we first ride on our bike, we do it with the training wheels on. We're on the bike, we can't just space out or we'll drive into a tree or something. We have some stability with support, and then we can experience the vividness of being on the bike. Then our father, our teacher, our bike guru says, "OK, we're taking off the training wheels now." The training wheels come off, but in this metaphor my actual father was holding the bike and running down the street offering somewhat less support. And we're saying, "I know I can do this, I know I can do this, I know I can do this." But we're still bicycle riding with support, right? Then at a certain point he lets go and at that moment of first riding a bike on our own, that's like the experience of awareness we're talking about. There is an uplifted feeling of just being there with everything that is around us – self-existing energy and synchronization.

So in meditation practice when you get to that point where you feel like you can let go of the technique a little bit, just relax a little bit. If you feel shaky and very distracted then you can increase the intensity of your focus/mindfulness technique. However if you feel naturally present and at ease with the breath then you can relax the technique somewhat.

That is the general idea of mindfulness and awareness. Like in music you practice scales, right? But if you're performing, you can't practice scales while you're playing with somebody - at that point you're more into the awareness aspect. You've prepared and you let go. That's a great guideline for teaching too. Prepare and then let go.

The key element in cultivating mindfulness is touching in and creating some kind of precision. The key element in developing awareness is dissolving your effort somewhat, allowing your mindfulness to expand in all directions. In actuality, from day one, our "mindfulness" practice is actually a blend of these 2 aspects. As teachers we can also transmit this understanding at the various stages of working with students - starting with simplicity and clarity and developing more subtlety and nuance as the student's practice progresses.

Part 6 – Helping Ourselves / Helping Others

We are living in a world which has a pace that is unprecedented in human history. There are more people alive now on this planet now than at any time in human history. IMHO any kind of rustic romantic view of some yesteryear of spirituality or turning the clock back to some other more rustic time is sweet and dreamy but perhaps not really fruitful.

So the real question for me, as somebody who has spent 50 years studying and practicing an ancient tradition that goes back 2500 years is: how do we bring what was taught into sync with our lives today? Even if we have mastered these ancient meditation techniques, how can we then integrate that understanding with modern life? That is a tremendously important question to contemplate. We can take a half hour every morning settling our mind but actually integrating that mind with our activities during the rest of the day is where the rubber really hits the road.

What can happen if people study and practice meditation regularly, is that they become more in tune with themselves and the world around them. Then all kinds of sympathetic vibrations can occur and ripple outward to affect others. Our own little daily meditation practice can actually have an effect on society. People might pick up on these qualities we have developed in ourselves. It's possible. The clarity, focus and compassion that come from meditation can resonate with the people in our lives on a day-to-day basis. Eventually we might even become a kind of ambassador of mindfulness. As a teacher you should become an ambassador of what you teach. If you are a massage therapist and are working out a client's knots, there is definitely a way of bringing mindfulness,

awareness and compassion into that. It becomes more about how you do things, then what you do.

If we can, as a group of teachers and students, somehow make that contribution to our society by bringing in this mindfulness and compassion, then we're going to be really successful and have a profound effect on people's lives. If these qualities were on volume knobs, you just turn up their levels a little bit and dial down some of the confusion, anxiety and speediness. It's like a mixing board. We each have to creatively figure out how to bring that into our own world. And we all have to make sure that we're actually helping to create a base that's solid enough, a ground that's solid enough for our students and friends to connect with.

Many of us mean to be helpful; There is often some kind of good intention there. But if we ourselves have too much speed and confusion, then if we go out to help somebody else, a lot of times we end up with two people in trouble. So I want to emphasize over and over again that if we don't have our base camp in order - which is our own strong practice - it becomes very hard, maybe even impossible to mix mindfulness with everyday life and especially difficult to transmit more than a vague idea of it to others.

Another important topic within the Buddhist teachings is the notion of egolessness. When we examine the self, the little self with a small 's' or the big Self with a capital 'S' (whatever we think that might be), we might find that it has no fixed or separate existence to it at all! At that point we might say, "You talking to me!?" Like that De Niro movie, Taxi Driver. "Are you talking to me?" Yes! According to Buddhism, the 'me' that we experience and explore and erect a monument to, can be seen to be a fluid, dynamic, interdependent, shifting reality without any fixed, independent existence at all. Of course not everybody sees it that way, and it's recommended, even by the Buddha, to contemplate all this for oneself - not to just be a sucker and take somebody else's - even the Buddha's - word for it.

And there are certain types of contemplative exercises that we can do - where we try to find this 'me' that we're making such a big deal about. It can be pretty easy to show a group of intelligent people that this 'me' can be somewhat elusive to actually locate. The very 'me' who is insulted when somebody doesn't do something just right, the 'me' that's craving chocolate ripple fudge nut chip ice cream, the 'me' that's desperately lonely, the 'me' that's got it all together - that 'me' is not as solid as we think.

So when we're doing our meditation practice, there's a moment when we realize we were thinking about something else, which is a tremendous moment actually. That is the dawn of awareness on the spot; right there, right then. When people

want to find 'now' – how we actually experience 'now' is as a break in the discursive thought processes. That's what Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche and others have called, "the gap."

And at that point, you look at your thought process and you say - "Oh man, I was in this whole solid mental world. It felt as solid as a rock. I've been sitting here thinking about how much I hate this person, how they've ruined my life." And then snap! You just have this little flash of awareness, you see this shape of a thought and are able to recognize it as such; touch in on it and then actually let it go and come back to paying attention to the breath. That it is a really powerful moment.

It's important to stress again that we're not building something up here. Our ordinary notion of a project can be like, "How do I build this mindfulness thing? How do I make this happen?" Here we are not doing that. We are recognizing and letting go. It is really, really important to understand this point. The fact that letting go could be such a big part of practice is really kind of amazing, because to build confidence of a certain type, to have some of that genuine confidence that comes with letting go, you have to surrender or at least lighten up your agenda a little bit. 'Me' by definition wants to be in control. 'Me' is the part that wants the control. It could be that not being in control freaks you out or you want enough control so that things are sufficiently gloomy for you to feel stable - or making sure things are sufficiently perky so there's no gap - so we never experience any kind of doubt or hesitation.

So the idea that we're pursuing something, that we're going to be able to control even our spiritual journey might take a beating. "I've got the reins tightly in hand, I've got my technique, I've got my cushion, I've got my spot in the room, I've got my practice." And even letting go of that, at a certain point becomes very, very important. There is a kind of freedom and openness that actually comes with uncertainty - part of the experience that we have when we experience real freedom, real openness is the same as experiencing uncertainty. It's not like "oh, I know what to do now." You enter a kind of space that feels like walking on fresh snow, there are no footprints at all to follow. It can be scary and exhilarating at the same time.

So this is a very important part of understanding what I what could be called a 'genuine' approach towards our own spirituality, in that there has to be some sense of opening to uncertainty, to the quivering and oddly tender heart that is right now beating in our chest. For some reason that I can't really explain, when we enter that space, the quivering heart becomes stronger. The sense of vulnerability, connectedness, fragility, compassion - when we have all that locked down, we can't really access all of our resources.

Like if you are so rigid and you want to help somebody - you know what they need, you know what you can give, it's all locked in. But, if you genuinely enter that space with somebody, you are really entering the space of exchange, uncertainty, openness, and who knows what's going to happen? We don't know. As meditation teachers, we can actually consider entering that space with our students.

This is important. At this point I am directly addressing you as teachers right now. You must enter the space of uncertainty to be a good teacher. This is not usually obvious. We often think to be a good teacher we need to know everything and be in command and control the situation. I think that for most of us who've done a fair amount of teaching, you start to find that the students are teaching you. And they're also telling you, in some way, what to tell them, what to say.

Listening is extremely important for a teacher. I don't just mean the physical act of listening, I mean receptivity. When you walk in the room you need to be able to have a sense of who you're with and, as my teacher used to say, be able to take your seat. It doesn't matter whether you're actually sitting or standing but you're metaphorically taking a seat. If you 'take your seat' at the front of your classroom, when people come in, they'll have a proper relationship with entering the space. Whereas if you're not there and you're not doing your job, there is going to be a lot of confusion and the whole space could get kind of rubbery.

So as a teacher you have to take your seat and there has to be a lot of openness to whatever arises. You'll never know what is going to happen, even if you have a lesson plan. It doesn't mean that we shouldn't prepare; you have to be very prepared at the same time. So my tradition, the way I was taught how to teach is: first you prepare thoroughly. What are we going to talk about? How am I going to conduct this class? Really work it through, study and make a map or an outline. Then forget about it, let it go. You did the work of preparing. If you keep rehashing it, you'll deaden it. You release and then you come into the situation, you take your seat. Be present. Don't rush in. Make sure you look around, see who's there with you. You will receive certain messages coming back about people's state of mind and their energy. And then just dive in and trust, have confidence.

The kind of confidence that I'm talking about here includes a sense of preparedness, uncertainty, and on the spot communication. Our own preparedness could get us to the point where we're too rigid to really communicate. And if we're not prepared it'll be very obvious right away, you'll get that message back from your students. If you're not drenched in what you're

teaching, that'll become obvious too. You'll look and feel phony.

A part of this genuineness is allowing your heart to be touched. If that's not happening when you're communicating with your students then probably something is blocked. Maybe you are holding something back or not willing to commit. The other important part is the ability to not solidify any sense of power in the exchange, so that you can be very fluid at the same time that you're feeling touched and emotionally open.

There is a phrase my teacher used, "the genuine heart of sadness." In other words, it's an authentic feeling that we can tap into that has a tinge of poignancy to it. When you see the whole range of what people are going through and dealing with on a day-to-day basis, there is something moving about it. We as teachers can connect with that and allow ourselves to be directed and motivated by that.

There is another saying that is often paired with "genuine heart of sadness", called, "suddenly free from fixed mind." If you could imagine that combination; it always comes back again and again to awareness and compassion. Awareness. Compassion. Our experience is always fresh and at the same time it permeates right down to our core. So much so that we're not afraid to really taste the world.

Intellectually knowing this is one thing, but to teach based on these principles you really have to come to the cushion yourself. You have to practice and feel the painful part of disassembling some of these habitual patterns for yourself. At that point your meditation practice really becomes about compassion. I think we can all recognize that the letting go part of meditation is extremely profound.

Our counterproductive habits are deeply entrenched, not just at the mind level, but also at the level of emotions and the somatic level. If the mind is stuck, the emotions are probably stuck nearby, and the body is probably stuck right there in the same neighborhood.

Yoga teachers can work with people on these multiple levels; that is what is so beautiful about it. I frequently see people opened up with yoga. Sometimes they don't even know it. Often in yoga class people's emotions begin to flow for the first time in a long time. They might be crying but don't even know why because it is all trapped at the body level.

So you may get into teaching mindfulness through yoga, therapy, sports, art, etc. thinking, "This is good. I'll be able to teach at the health club or hospital or school or whatever and make a few bucks." But at some point it might well go beyond that. You might realize that you are a kind of modern day healer, that in some sense you are a spiritual guide. There are a lot of people in the yoga

world - 20 million or so people now do yoga on a regular basis – if you add in the fitness community (actually much larger), therapy, wellness, culture etc. that mindfulness is touching these days, I think you will find that mindfulness is on the verge of becoming a genuinely mainstream activity. That is unprecedented in the west and also in much of the rest of the world as well – including places that have had these traditions embedded for centuries.

However a student enters this arena, “I just want to tighten up my butt and get my energy going, or I just want to de-stress and get a good night’s sleep, etc...” but they may be in for a surprise; at some point they will meet themselves through the practice and you will be their guide, their aid, their mediator.

Hopefully by that time you will have meditated enough so that you have a deep sense of your own practice. Because you have actually done it yourself, you will better understand where these other people are coming from.

You have a unique opportunity to really help the world with these practices and I encourage you to do so!

APPENDIX:

WHAT'S NEXT?

This eBook is intended to provide an overview for aspiring meditation teachers, as well as for intermediate and newer students. As far as starting a new practice or stabilizing an existing one, developing a routine of 15-20min per day, about 5 days per week is a great beginning.

As you get going with the practice, inevitably your meditation experience will develop and more questions will arise. It can be very helpful to get guidance and support for your practice and/or teaching as you dig in and move along. Here are some offerings from Dharma Moon you might want to check out – to find out more about them please visit www.dharmamoon.com.

100-HOUR MINDFULNESS MEDITATION TEACHER TRAINING

Dharma Moon's signature course is the [100-Hour Mindfulness Meditation Teacher Training](#) co-presented by Tibet House, the North American seat of HH the Dalai Lama.

As we begin to experience the transformative benefits of this practice, it is natural to want to share this gift with others. Our program provides a comprehensive introduction to teaching Mindfulness meditation with clarity, precision & integrity. The program is geared to support busy everyday life people at an affordable cost.

Our teacher training program is also an excellent way to deepen your own practice. The best way to learn and understand something is to teach it to others so this program serves those who wish to teach as well as those who simply wish to further their own practice. Beginners are welcome.

GROUP MEDITATION

Practicing with others can provide the extra support we need to take our meditation practice further and allows us to connect with a community of like-minded people.

Dharma Moon offers a free online [Community Meditation Practice](#) gathering each month. Suitable for both beginners and seasoned practitioners, we gather to pause from the busyness of everyday life and deepen into a longer practice session together.

1-to-1 MINDFULNESS MENTORSHIP

It can also be helpful to work with a qualified Mindfulness teacher who can further clarify the practice based on your personal needs. Dharma Moon offers [1-to-1 Mindfulness Mentorship](#) with our Senior Teachers who will create tailored sessions based on what your particular needs, challenges and goals for your journey. Please email assist@dharmamoon.com for more information.

REACH OUT TO OUR TEAM

Dharma Moon offers additional programs, workshops, classes, and group sits for all levels. Visit our [website](#) to find the right program for you. If you have any questions or would like to connect with one of our team members who can provide you with further support, please email assist@dharmamoon.com