

Chapter 6 – Pulling It All Together and Going Forward

We've come to our final chapter. So far we've explored how to sit in meditation as well as to reap the benefits of meditating as we integrated mindfulness into our daily lives. It is as significant to have had the actual experience of sitting and integrating (experiential knowledge) as it was to read and study (cognitive knowledge). We need both to grow in presence.

When we started, we learned that there are two foundations of meditation. One is mindfulness, and the other is concentration, and they are equally important. In insight meditation we surely can solely concentrate our focus on just the breath, and we also learned that we can have concentrated focus on the flow of experience being present with whatever shows up. We work with and learn from all experience. We turn nothing away. We learned to relax judgment and allow and respect all experience and see what each experience has come to teach us. In the quiet of being present, often insights surface to help us know how to work with what we are experiencing.

When I began meditating, with a bit of perfectionism, I struggled to just concentrate on my breath. I assumed that that was what I was supposed to do. When I learned to simply allow and welcome all experience, I naturally relaxed. I was no longer fighting and resisting experience. When my body relaxed, my mind followed suit. Ironically, the more my body and mind relaxed, it was so much easier to naturally develop more concentration on just the breath. Because of this process, I believe that I have become less judgmental and a much kinder person not only to myself, but to others.

We've learned that experiences are fleeting and impermanent. Experiences constantly change; nothing lasts forever. Some experiences are not to our liking, and we may wish they would be different and maybe we would even like to push them away. Some we like, and we might wish they would stay. When things are not going as we wish, we may call that pain or a life challenge (1st arrow)--something that is a natural part of human experience. Or, we could turn it into "suffering" (2nd arrow) by creating all kinds of internal messages that tell us that we are either bad for having the experience or making the situation into something more than what it actually is. We also learned that the fastest way to move through life's challenges is to have the courage to be with them and experience them rather than turn our back and push them away.

Of special importance is that we learned that presence, or being present, is not something that we can create, nor is it something that we can destroy. Presence is always here. The only thing we can do with presence is return to it. We know we are present when we are aware of what is going on in our body. Usually presence quiets the body, and a quiet body invites a quiet mind. In meditation when we have drifted away in thought, we return to presence or begin again by focusing on an object such as the breath. Beginning again is a natural part of the practice. It can be more difficult, and it is not expected, to be present every moment throughout our day. The thing is, the more presence we work into our day, the more agency presence offers us in how to skillfully make choices and allow us to respond to our life rather than to react out of habit and past conditioning.

Many people start out wanting to meditate because they are seeking peace and calm. We've learned that striving for peace and calm usually only keeps it at bay. Being peaceful and calm surely is a wonderful aspiration; it just cannot be the goal of meditation. When it becomes the goal, it invites

struggle and grasping for a way of being that can only come about by letting go and allowing the peace and calm to well up from within. Peace and calm cannot be willed. It is not something to achieve; it is something we allow. To meditate is not about accomplishing anything. There is nothing to do. It is about receiving and allowing the moment to be just as it is. It is not about adjusting the moment to meet some idea of how we think it *should* be. Peace and calm is the natural byproduct of letting go and simply noticing and allowing things to be as they are. Rather than this being a passive stance, it is very active. Peace comes from within. It cannot be found outside of ourselves.

Meditation is so much more than just sitting and concentrating and focusing solely on our breath. When we sit, we are also practicing:

- Being gentle, kind and patient with ourselves. We are learning to love ourselves just as we are in each moment
- Body awareness with each breath or with any other experience
- Training the mind to be concentrated--more settled and focused and not so scattered
- Flowing with moment-to-moment experience, letting and allowing all to be without trying to change or fix anything
- Seeing the impermanent nature of all experience
- Beginning again
- Seeing that anything that arises, whether we like it or not, does not have to be a problem; seeing 1st and 2nd arrows
- Not judging our experience, and sometimes not judging our being judgmental
- Impartiality. Not wanting to be one way over another. Welcoming everything, pushing away nothing
- Not identifying with our experience; not seeing it as “I,” “me,” or “mine;” not taking things personally. Seeing when we have created a fixed self identity and are functioning from that identity
- Bringing our whole self to the experience. This includes the parts of ourselves that we like and those parts we may not like
- Letting go of resistance. Not being in contention with anything that arises. Courageous presence; letting go of the struggle
- Being with experience without seeking answers or solutions
- Expanding our awareness to include experiencing more than just one object at a time
- Sitting without having to accomplish anything. Not having a goal. There’s nothing to do but receive, allow and simply notice the reality of what is
- Being diligent, yet graceful with imperfection. Being neither too loose or too tight
- Listening for insights and being awake to hear them
- Processing our experience using RRAIN (Relax, Recognize, Allow, Investigate, Non-Self)

The thing is, the more you do this in meditation, the more your whole life will resemble what you do during meditation and vice versa.

So, you can see we’ve been learning a lot of things as we’ve progressed through Chapters 1 through 5. When we become comfortable enough with these practices, we begin to carry these same practices with us throughout our day. I’ve often said that we do not learn how to meditate to become good meditators. The harvesting of the fruit of meditation is the agency we have when we live our life.

When we repeatedly practice, it becomes a habit and eventually a way of being. When that happens, we find that our lives become one that is characterized by mindfulness. We begin to see the relationship of cause and effect in our actions. We act one way, and this is what we experience. We act another way, and that is what we experience. When we understand the causes of our unhappiness, we can begin the process of resolving them. We begin to respond to what life presents us with rather than react out of habit or past conditioning. We begin to know what actions create suffering and what actions create peace and calm. All of this happens in its own time. It cannot be forced. This is about being diligently awake, yet letting go and allowing it to unfold. My experience has been that I've grown faster when I was not trying to "push the river."

Here are a couple of quotes to support the paragraphs you've just read:

From Ruth King (meditation teacher and author at the Insight Meditation Community of Washington D.C.)

"Be lovingly present with your mind in a stable way.
Be with the activity of the mind without war and resistance
with a sense of welcome with what is arising with a sense of care
a sense of being with instead of resisting.
The activity of the mind is not personal.
Do not latch on to what is arising; we can feel the contraction that comes with that.
We are practicing how to deconstruct the habits of the mind."

From Krishnamurti (a well-known Indian philosopher)

"When the mind is still, tranquil, and not seeking any answers or solution, neither resisting or avoiding, it is only then that there can be regeneration because then the mind is capable of perceiving what is true. It is the truth that liberates, not our effort to be free."

Following are two examples that support what we've been practicing. One comes from *The Five Invitations* by Frank Ostaseski and the other is a personal experience of mine.

First, from *The Five Invitations*, Page 207-208.

Written by a participant in one of Frank's mindfulness retreats:

"I used to view mindfulness as something to achieve. The degree to which I could focus on my breath equaled success. I would often critique the time I spent in meditation, such as, 'Well, that session sucked. My mind wandered way too much. I got too fidgety.' I also found myself labeling almost everything that entered my mind during meditation as "good" or "bad." I believed that keeping a scorecard would motivate me to "be better" at meditation, making my sessions more productive and efficient. I wondered if anyone else felt this way, but when I looked around the room, they all seemed so good at meditating. Sometimes I wondered why I had signed up for the course. I never liked practicing (just ask my mom about piano lessons), but I wanted results, so I kept hanging in there.

Then one day, some of your words got my attention: "Mindfulness results in a non-judgmental way of being." This sentence was a catalyst for change in my world. The utter relief I felt at not having to spend so much energy judging everything (including myself) was freeing, wide, and expansive. My

whole body chilled out. My shoulders dropped, my neck stopped hurting, and I stopped cracking my elbow all the time. I began to develop true mindfulness, understanding that it begins and ends with a simple choice to pay attention to what is so. Period. No scorecard. No grade. No labels. No pressure.

Now when I am being mindful, I feel open to things without assigning them a value: pain, joy, sorrow, anxiety. Past, present, and future all become the same. It can all be there, and that's okay. There is room for everything to exist. I am here to notice and learn, not to run away from my most challenging emotions or to crave one state over the other. In fact, when I do run away, crave, or attach value, I suffer greatly because I want things to be different than they are. Yuck!

The practice of mindfulness as I now know it continues to be pretty difficult at times. But more and more often, when I am sitting in silence, I know I am there. Literally, I know I am there. I sense my body. This is so important: I really feel my feet on the floor, the air moving in and out of my nostrils, the little goings-on internally, like my pulse, my growling stomach, my aching back.

Slowly over the course of the week, I felt grief surfacing—grief for all the years I had spent living in my head, judging, critiquing, and analyzing. There are still times when I meditate that I cry about this, but I can breathe through it and later, the tightness is gone. Mindfulness is, and always will be, about getting back to my breath. It feels like a very safe place to land, a home, a loving embrace.

I no longer feel as compelled to grade myself on performance. I have learned that mindfulness is not about achieving some perfect state or being the best at something. It is about me being authentic, imperfect, vulnerable, and, well, human.”

Second, here is a personal account of how I learned to make my entire day a meditative experience.

A couple of years ago I signed up for a weekend retreat at at Zen Center in Jemez Springs, New Mexico. The retreat was billed as a “fun”draiser weekend for the Center. I was drawn to it because of the word, “fun.” I thought, “Ah, this might be a way that I can integrate some fun with some meditation.” From a good German farm background, I learned well how to be responsible, how to carry through on projects, and how to get something done. I also learned that fun was something to be had when the work was done, and on the farm, the work was never done. So incorporating some fun was enticing. Maybe finally I could learn how to play, albeit in the midst of doing something constructive.

I got to the retreat in late afternoon and upon check in and seeing the schedule, I immediately hit resistance. The schedule was filled with a variety of very good things to include meditation, yoga, and massage along with a fundraiser to be held one evening. My first thought was, “Yes, this is good and probably fun, but the focus still seemed like work. It still seemed like it would be a weekend of trying to become someone better than I was before I came.” It seemed like another self-improvement exercise. At that moment all I could do was practice what I had learned: Be present with what is, be with the resistance, feel it in my body, don't push it away, simply allow it to be (i.e. “This is how it is now.”) I did not react. Resistance was simply resistance when I did not react and make it something more with my inner dialogue. (The second arrow)

The next morning I got up early to go to the Zendo (meditation room) for sitting and walking meditation. That remained something I looked forward to doing each morning. But the rest of the schedule I could not (and did not) force myself to do. So I created my own schedule and did my own thing. For example, when there was yoga, I went to the Jemez River and sat on a rock with my feet in the flowing water; when there was massage, I walked to a coffee shop in the small town; when there were other activities, I went to a festival that was going on in town that weekend.

When I sat in the river, I felt the water rolling over my feet. I heard the birds singing. I felt the wind on my skin, and I knew when the sun was shining and when it was blocked by clouds. And at the same time I felt the muscles in my body relax. When I was in the coffee shop, I sat outside at a table in the shade and read a book that I brought on the trip with me. At times I felt the coolness of the breeze and at times the breeze was really warm. I bought a cup of coffee and a shortbread/pecan cookie, one of the best I had ever eaten. It is interesting that I had time to even taste and cherish the coffee, as well as each bite of the cookie. When I was done eating the cookie, I even tasted the desire and craving to go up to the counter to get another one. I allowed myself to be with the desire and consciously chose to not get another one. I watched people enter and leave the shop. As I did this, I watched thoughts arise. Some were judgments. I just noticed them without identifying with them, and I didn't beat myself up for having them. I was simply being aware of what was happening in the moment. When I was at the festival, I actually heard the music and sensed my distaste, or aversion, for the volume. I simply allowed all that to be without judgment. I observed a lot, and I knew when my focus of attention was on what was happening, especially on what was happening on the inside of my body. I knew when I was judging what I saw and when my mind had a more equanimous tone. And during some of these times I recognized thoughts like, "I really should be with the group doing the other activities." And though I was consciously aware of those thoughts, I did not buy into them. I simply saw them as thoughts. And all during the weekend, I was with the group for general things. I ate with them and was social when time permitted. I really enjoyed all of that as well. I'm not sure if any of the other participants were even aware that I was doing my own thing.

*On the last day of the retreat, we met as an entire group for a final check in. When it came my turn to speak, I began by saying that I had to confess that though the schedule was a really good one, I had a lot of resistance to following the program for the weekend, and that the only part of the schedule I participated in was the sitting in the morning. I also mentioned that I was not confessing this coming from a place of guilt. For me, it actually was a sign of growth. In my life I have typically done what I was supposed to do. I've been the good soldier who does what is right and what is expected. I follow the rules. So, this was a step out of character for me. I also mentioned that I came here to have fun. I told them of my experiences of being really present with everything when I was sitting in the river, the coffee shop, and at the festival, and that when I was **simply being present** (you might now see where I got the title to this book) with what I was experiencing that everything seemed more easy and fun. To let go of control of how things had to be, to not have to work so hard at having things be a certain way, and to release judgment was all so freeing. What interesting insights! It surely was peaceful no matter what. Even the moments when I had some aversive thoughts and did not buy into them were peaceful. I also mentioned that I have worked so hard on myself over the last 40 years trying to undo some childhood trauma. This weekend I was not trying to undo anything. I was not trying to become something different or better. I was simply being me as I was in each moment. I was loving myself just as I was, and that has been something that has not always been easy for me.*

I also see that that is what meditation is. Meditation is simply being--simply being present in the moment and receiving whatever presents itself, feeling it in the body, not trying to fix anything or change anything, or judge that things “should” be different. It is simply experiencing the moment as it is with an understanding of the reality of what is present. When we are not in contention with what is happening, life is just more peaceful. We can even have peace in the midst of chaos or in the midst of an experience we would prefer to not be having. If we sit with the attitude of trying to become something different from what we are at that moment or coming from the stance of trying to improve ourselves, we are sitting with the wrong attitude. We would be basically saying that how we are right now is not okay.

By sitting with things simply as they are, over time we are allowing whatever change we might aspire to happen to take place. We don't change our behavior by willing ourselves to change. We change behavior by simply noticing what is not working and by what leads to suffering and by noticing what is working and to what leads to happiness. Over time we will migrate to that which leads to happiness. By simply being with what presents itself, we are making it possible for us to connect to our innate, inner wisdom which helps us know how to respond in terms of what to do and how to work with a difficult situation, rather than to react out of habit. Our work is to simply notice what is happening in this moment with impartiality, to let go, and then allow change to unfold. Along with this, I must add that depending on the difficulty of the situation, it may also be helpful to have a confidant who has a good ear and who can give feedback.

May we all have a little more fun and peace in our lives! With practice, we can make much of our entire day be a mindful, meditative experience! Another way to say that is that the more we practice, the more we can fully be present for our life. This is not about becoming someone better or removing parts of us we don't like. It is simply about “being authentic and real.”

Going Forward

All homework has been designed with three parts – Sit, Study, Integrate. In order to grow in practice going forward we need to continue to do all three. We talked about that when we study we grow in intellectual or cognitive knowledge, and that when we sit and when we integrate, we grow in experiential knowledge. All is necessary. When we study, we are learning what it is that we are to experience while we sit and when we integrate. Without study, we would not know what to integrate. If we only read and take a class, what we learn simply remains as something that gets stored in our store consciousness. That knowledge remains as something that is nice to know. That knowledge does not necessarily get applied nor does it become a part of who we are. It remains a record we have stored in our store consciousness, something to remember. The example given in an earlier chapter was the difference between the knowledge gained from reading about how to eat an orange versus the knowledge gained from actually eating an orange. It is only through experiencing what we study that what we study becomes a part of us. You can read about building muscles in a book, but in order to actually build the muscles, you must work out. Likewise, we need to sit in meditation and mindfully integrate the concepts learned through study to build the mindfulness muscle.

One more thing. We do this not just for ourselves. We do this for the benefit of all beings. One way to look at this is that in meditation we are not trying to change the world, we are changing ourselves, and in so doing, we are changing the world.

Thoughts About Practicing After This Class

- Not about attainment, but about discovery
- Seek joyfully and playfully because that is the only way you will delight in what you find
Lighten up!
- See the grasping in being compulsive and intensive
- A most significant part of my learning process has been to “notice, receive, let it be, feel it in the body”
- Rather than a vow or resolution, set a daily intention that is doable and measurable
- With relaxed diligence, trust your intuition on what is right for you. There is no need to push the river
- Love yourself enough to give yourself the space and time to grow. Grow from a stance of kindness to yourself
- This is not a fast path, and though it is a sure one, it takes time
- Peace comes from within, it cannot be found outside yourself
- A major part of my practice and of my staying awake is a lot about being quiet and listening with the ears of my heart, and then from what I hear, act. Trust the process of mindfulness
- From Suzuki Roshi, Zen master responsible for bringing Zen to the West
“When you walk in the fog, it takes a while to get wet”
- Also from Suzuki Roshi,
A good thing to remember – “You are perfect as you are right now; and you also have work to do”

So now that you’ve taken this course, what do you do now?

My experience is that I, and most everyone I know, could not have learned how to meditate without either taking a course, reading a book, or having a teacher. Learning how to meditate almost seems to require some instruction and guidance. That is a given. If you were new to meditation prior to taking this course, I suspect that if you do not continue to practice, you may not forget everything, but you will likely lose some of what you learned. The old saying, “What you don’t use, you will lose,” holds true here too. So, if you want to continue growing, you must continue sitting, studying, and integrating. How do you do that?

First, I believe that it is difficult at best to continue doing this all by yourself. Getting feedback and being with other like minded people is important. In larger cities and towns there typically are

meditation centers that offer camaraderie, classes, study groups, sitting opportunities, etc. In Buddhist terminology, such communities are called “Sanghas.” Joining one of them surely would be helpful. If you are located where such a center is not available, there are numerous opportunities online. One never needs to sit alone! There are many opportunities to sit with groups, as well as take classes online. And there are many, many books available that you can read. All that is fine, but continuing to sit and be mindful throughout your day is still the biggest factor in experientially building your mindfulness muscle.

If you want to continue to grow, I offer you the word, “constancy.” And by that I mean to constantly keep doing something to keep mindfulness active in your life. What you do may not be as important as regularly doing something. Set yourself up for success. Doing something small and sticking with it may bring you better results than setting up lofty goals that are hard to realize. Love yourself enough to allow yourself to grow at a pace that is right for you. There is no need to “push the river.”

Here is a list of resources that you might check out. I might suggest starting by sitting with a group over Zoom for their Sunday sit and talk. You would be growing cognitively and experientially by both studying (the talk) and sitting. You could do this in the comfort of your own home. It is up to you to decide what is right for you to do. You now get to create your own next homework assignment. Wishing you the best on your journey.

Mindfulness Meditation Resources (Listed in alphabetical order)

These are the resources I consistently use in my practice and in preparing for classes. There are many more resources available. Feel free to do your own research and find ones that appeal to you.

Barre Center for Buddhist Studies; Barre, Massachusetts

<https://www.buddhistinquiry.org/>

Course offerings; online programs – many different teachers

Dharma Seed (Resource for dharma talks; sort by topic or teacher)

<https://dharmaseed.org/>

Florida Community of Mindfulness; Tampa (home center,) Satellites in St. Petersburg, Fort Myers, and Naples

<https://www.floridamindfulness.org/> (Home Page; find Zoom links for meditation sessions)

Online meditation sessions most days; many other programs; Sunday – meditation/dharma talks

Teachings come from a mix of lineages—Thich Nhat Hanh, Zen, Insight Meditation

Founding Teacher – Fred Eppsteiner

Insight Meditation Center of the Mid-Peninsula; Redwood City, CA (home center of Gil Fronsdal)

<https://www.insightmeditationcenter.org/>

<https://www.audiodharma.org/> (Gil’s website for talks and meditations; website contains talks from many teachers)

Insight Meditation Community of Washington DC (home center of teacher, Tara Brach)

<https://imcw.org/>

<https://www.tarabrach.com/> (Tara’s website for guided meditations and programs)

Insight Meditation Society (IMS); Barre, Massachusetts (home center of teachers such as Joseph Goldstein, Sharon Salzberg and many, many others). They offer many residential and online retreats
<https://www.dharma.org/>

Oren Jay Sofer, California
<https://www.orenjaysofer.com/>

Oren offers residential and online retreats. One of his specialities is mindfulness of speaking and communications

Spirit Rock Meditation Center; Woodacre, California (home center for Jack Kornfield and many others)
<https://www.spiritrock.org/>

Many residential and online opportunities for classes and retreats. Of special interest – Monday nights with Jack Kornfield (7:15 – 9:15 p.m. Pacific Time)

Vermont Insight Meditation Center; Brattleboro, Vermont
<https://vermontinsight.org/>

Sign up for weekly newsletter; get information about online meditation sessions

Course Evaluation

Both the staff at AUMC and I value your input on the “Simply Being Present” meditation class—the content, how the class was facilitated and orchestrated, and any other issue on which you would like to comment. This is important in contemplating any future class or study sessions. Whether you include your name or not is totally optional. You may return your written response at the end of the last class or responses online can be submitted to: Allendaleumc.org/meditation. If you need to, please use back of this sheet or additional pages to complete your responses. Thank you.

Circle whether you took the course at AUMC or Online

What worked well for you in this class?

What would you recommend doing differently?

What comments do you have about the draft copy of “Simply Being Present?”

Other comments. . .

Might you be interested in additional meditation programs offered at AUMC?