

# Mindfulness *in* Action

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*Making Friends with Yourself  
through Meditation and  
Everyday Awareness*

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## How to Meditate

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If you are going to make bread, you need both flour and water for the dough. The practice of meditation is like the water, while your daily mindfulness and awareness, or your practice of mindfulness in action, is like the flour. To make the dough you combine the two. In this book, meditation is our starting point. Later on we will talk more about applying mindfulness in everyday life and about how meditation and the post-meditation situations work together.

### Attitude

The basis for the practice of meditation is appreciation. Every breath we take is a gift, naturally pure and good. We appreciate every pebble in the riverbed, every apple on the tree. Ordinary activities are in themselves powerful and worth appreciating. From this point of view, there is no such thing as a contaminated or polluted situation. When we begin to view the world in this way, seeing every situation as part of a natural process, we

bring this attitude to our practice of meditation. We see meditation as a process of natural evolution rather than seeing it as a highlight or something extraordinary.

We might say that the practice of meditation is a process of developing faith—not faith in something greater or beyond, but having faith in the immediate situation. We have faith and trust in the activity of meditation itself. Our approach is not frivolous at all. We are here to practice meditation, not to indulge ourselves.

### Taking Your Seat

With that attitude you take your seat in meditation in an ordinary but deliberate way. As you approach your seat, you should feel that it's good, trustworthy. You should arrange your chair or your meditation cushion carefully. If the space has already been arranged for you, check to be sure that your chair or cushion is in the right spot and that you have what you need, including extra cushions or things of that nature. Then sit down and experience yourself sitting there. Every time you sit down to practice, it should begin in the same way, with an attitude of appreciation.

How you sit down and begin your practice is very telling. Sometimes when you go into a restaurant you storm through the door. There's a sign that says, "Seat yourself." You can sit wherever you like. You walk to your table with a garish swagger and sit down with a big plop. Hopefully, the chair or the booth doesn't collapse under you. You slump in your seat, and as you look at the menu, you blot out the world completely.

Taking your seat in meditation is quite different. You choose your spot with respect. You bend down gently to sit on your cushion or chair, keeping that sense of respect. As soon as you put your weight on the seat, you feel that good posture is possible, and almost automatically you are inspired to sit up straight.

When you are meditating, whether you are alone or sharing

the space with others, you always hold your seat properly. Then you feel that you are doing the practice with dignity. When you sit down to meditate, you are making a connection with the earth, whether you sit in a chair or on a cushion. It's almost as if a message is coming from the earth, encouraging you to hold your seat properly.

## Posture

Posture is very important in the practice of meditation. This is equally true in everyday life, whether you are meditating or not. You may be driving a car, sitting in your living room, or reading a magazine in the dentist's waiting room. Your posture should always reflect an uplifted presence, wherever you take a seat.

Your posture in meditation can actually produce a psychological change in you. You begin to understand that your purpose is already accomplished, just by taking the posture of wakefulness. In a certain sense there's nothing more to do! You don't need a future goal. You can accomplish your goal on the spot, simply by sitting with good posture.

### *Posture in a Chair*

When you practice meditation, you can sit in a chair or you can sit on a cushion on the floor. If you sit in a chair, your feet should touch the ground, or you should put a cushion under your feet. This provides a sense of touching the earth or being grounded, having some foundation for your posture. Also, if possible your knees should be slightly lower than your thighs. Depending on the chair, you may need to sit farther forward or you may need a cushion under part of your bottom. If you can, sit up straight so that your back is not leaning against the back of the chair. This will give you a more upright posture and will

place less strain on your back and neck. It's also better not to use armrests unless absolutely necessary. You want your arms to be able to hang loosely from your shoulders.

### *Posture on a Cushion*

When you sit on a meditation cushion, you cross your legs very simply. Your knees don't have to touch the ground, but it's helpful if they are at least slightly lower than your thighs. Otherwise, it causes a lot of strain on your lower back, and it's difficult to maintain an upright posture. If you find it difficult to lower your knees below the thighs, you probably need a higher cushion.

Once you have taken your seat and adjusted your legs, you straighten your back, not to the extreme but in a deliberate fashion. If you usually have a tendency to hunch over—which could give you a hunched outlook—in meditation you may find that you can straighten up. You sit well balanced in the middle of your seat, not leaning too far forward or back. You feel that you are sitting up straight, almost as though there were a thread attached to the top of your head, which tugs on your head if you aren't sitting up straight and encourages you to sit upright. At the same time, you have a slight concave curve in your lower spine, which helps you to have a solid base where your hips and buttocks touch the cushion. You relax your belly. Your shoulders and your neck are also relaxed but held beautifully in place, so that there is no strain. You tuck your chin in just a little bit.

The quality of your posture in meditation is similar to how you might hold yourself if you were going to ask someone to marry you. Your approach would be semi-relaxed, friendly, and slightly seductive, but also somewhat formal. That's how your posture should be here.

I've noticed that when people see something very interesting or exciting in a movie, they all sit up with perfect posture.

When the movie gets even slightly dull and uninteresting, people begin to slump and do all kinds of things with their hands and feet. But at first they have perfect posture. In meditation, we should feel like the moviegoer at the beginning of an engrossing scene. It is happening, it is your life, you are sitting up, and you are breathing. It is personal and direct. You are sitting upright, and with your head and shoulders you assume a dignified posture. Posture is extremely important.

### *Placing Your Hands*

Whether you are sitting in a chair or on a meditation cushion on the ground, your hands should rest lightly but deliberately, palms down, on your thighs, a little bit above or just touching your knees. Placing your hands is a statement of deliberateness, and it, too, brings a feeling of dignity. This is sometimes called the mind-relaxing posture. Your hands are somewhat open—not clenched—and your fingers are not held tightly together. There's a little space between them. The tips of your fingers are a little ways back from the bend in your knees. You want your arms to be relaxed, not pulled forward nor held too close to your hips. You may have to experiment to find the right spot to place your hands.

### *Gaze*

Your eyes are open, but you are looking somewhat down, about four to six feet in front of you. A traditional description is that you look ahead as if you were holding a plow yoked to a team of oxen.\*

Your eyes might even be half-closed, so that they're relaxed, but it is not a spaced-out approach. You are just there, looking

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\* In this day and age, your eyes would be at a similar level as for pushing a Rototiller, a baby stroller, or a lawn mower.

ahead with an attitude that combines humility and positive pride, if you can imagine that.

Sometimes if you pay too much attention to visual details and colors, you develop tightness in your neck and a headache. In ordinary life we walk and move and look around quite a lot, so the whole process is balanced. In this case, you sit without moving around. Often there's not much noise, either, so everything is concentrated visually. This may result in visual tension, which can become a problem. The idea is not to focus too intently on the visual situation, but just to open your eyes without focusing too precisely on anything. Your gaze should be somewhat soft. In your practice you can experiment and discover for yourself what this means.

### *Mouth and Tongue*

When I was at the dentist recently, she encouraged me not to grind my teeth and not to hold my jaw too tightly. She gave me a technique to help with this, which is to rest your tongue on the roof of your mouth. That coincides with the approach we take in meditation. The instructions for meditation encourage you to open your mouth slightly when you meditate, which helps you to relax. If you rest your tongue on the roof of your mouth, you can relax your whole face and jaw. You aren't clenching your jaw. The tip of the tongue is lightly placed on the roof of your mouth, just behind your teeth. That way your mouth is relaxed. Your mouth is slightly open, as though you were saying the syllable "ah."

### *Mindfulness of Breath*

Once you establish your seat, all the aspects of your physical posture help you to focus your mind on the breath. Having a good seat and good posture almost automatically brings mindfulness of the breath.

The ground beneath you is solid and it supports you. Once you settle in your seat, the main thing that is happening is your breathing and a unified sense of your body and its systems all working together. Everything falls into place, into its *real* place. It feels so good. You find that you fit perfectly into the jigsaw puzzle of the awakened world. There is no struggle or artificiality involved. The situation feels good and precise—almost ideal.

Your breath is constantly going in and out. You can feel yourself inhaling and exhaling through your mouth and your nostrils. Just pay attention to your breath, your natural breath. It might be rough or deep if you had to run to get to the meditation hall. Or your breathing might be quite shallow. It doesn't really matter. Just feel your existing natural breathing. Sit quietly and listen to your breathing. To begin with, just listen to it. In that way you can settle down for a few minutes.

When you feel a little familiar with the breath, without straining too much, put your attention on the outbreath. Go out with the outbreath. Outbreath is an experience of the life force. In the Lamaze method of natural childbirth, they talk about breathing out and letting go as you are giving birth. This is a similar approach. The outbreath in meditation is like giving birth to the universe. You just let go.

You follow the outbreath very simply. Go along with it. Don't particularly try to feel the temperature of the breath in your nostrils or anything like that. Just breathe out, and as your breath goes out, you go out, very simply.

Then you are automatically willing to breathe in. You breathe out, and then you have a gap. Without extra effort, you will breathe in naturally. When you look at a beautiful flower, you take in what you see, and then eventually you blink. That's like the gap at the end of the outbreath, which goes along with how you perceive your world. You project out, you perceive something, and then you give yourself a break: you blink. The break



allows your brain to sort out and integrate your perceptions.\* So the whole process is project, perceive, and take a break. That's how we experience our phenomenal world altogether.

Don't try to be too rigid and solemn about working with the breath. Keep everything simple and to the minimum. Working with the breath is a straightforward practice that is direct, real, and also revealing. You are simply being there.

### Working with Thoughts

When you are in that space, holding your posture and following your breath, your mind will start to raise its own questions: "Now what?" "What does this mean? What does that mean?" When all those questions arise, you are reacting to hearing the sound of emptiness resounding in your mind. It is empty in the sense that there is no content in meditation. I'm not speaking literally about hearing a sound but about a reaction to slowing down and emptying out.

Your reaction, or the echo of emptiness, may take the form of anticipation, anxiety, or questioning. You are sitting without an object, without an agenda. You have nothing to do. Your mind begins to question what is going on because it's not used to the stillness. It will start to manufacture all kinds of entertainment.

You begin to realize that you have all sorts of thought patterns. What are you going to do about those? So many thoughts of past, present, and future will arise in your practice of medita-

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\* Chögyam Trungpa seemed to be anticipating modern developments with these comments on blinking. In January 2013, researchers at Osaka University in Japan reported findings that suggest that "blinking does more than stop our eyes drying out: it is an active process that causes the brain to go off-line, into a more reflective mode, before giving renewed attention." See Catharine Paddock, "Blinking Causes Brain to Go Off-Line," *MNT (Medical News Today)*, January 3, 2013 ([www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/254543.php](http://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/254543.php)).

tion: thoughts about your life, your future plans, conversations with your friends and your relatives, all sorts of self-conscious gossip.

Let all these things come through. Let them just come through. Don't try to say whether they are bad or for that matter whether they are particularly good. Just let them come through, as simply as you can. That approach brings a sense of openness. You don't find your thoughts threatening or particularly helpful. They just become the general gossip, the traffic of your thoughts. If you live in a city, you hear the traffic coming through your windows: there goes a motorcycle, there goes a truck. There goes a car, and then there's somebody shouting. At the beginning you might get involved in or distracted by the noise, but then you begin to think, so what?

Similarly, the traffic of your thoughts and the verbosity of your mind are merely part of the basic chatter that goes on in the universe. Let it go through. You relate to sound, smell, sight, and every experience that you have in the sensorial world with exactly the same mindful approach. You see things simply and directly. You're just there, with them and with your breathing.

### *Labeling Thinking*

It doesn't matter what comes up. You don't have to analyze anything when you are meditating. You can simply maintain your dignified posture and pay attention to your breath. The technique is that you look at the thoughts as they arise and say to yourself, "thinking." Whatever goes through your mind is purely thinking, not mystical experience. Label it thinking and come back to your breath.

So you are there. You are thinking. You don't try to get away from your thoughts, but you don't stick with them or encourage them either. Thought patterns are just ripples on the surface of the pond. They come and they go. They merge into each other, and you take the attitude that they are not a big deal.

### *Aches and Pains*

Bodily aches and pains and physical irritations also come and go. They may seem more problematic than your thoughts. But in meditation practice you regard physical sensations as also thought patterns. Label them thinking. Aches, pains, pins and needles—all thinking. This keeps everything simple and straightforward, so that you can appreciate everything as part of one natural process. There might be a loud noise outside, the sound of a train, traffic, or a jet engine. For that matter, you might be sweating or you might feel cold and chilled. It's all thinking, from this point of view.

When you begin to simplify everything in this way, it allows you to relax. However, often you come up with further complaints. You probably know the story of the princess and the pea. She couldn't sleep because there was a pea under her mattress. You may have a similar experience when you are meditating. You might think there is a little metal ball stuck in your cushion or on your chair that is causing you a lot of pain. Or you feel as if someone is sticking a knife between your shoulder blades. All kinds of discomforts arise. It doesn't matter. The discomfort comes and goes. Just be precise, label it thinking, and return to the breath.

If you take this too far, you could strain your leg, your back, or some other part of your body. So don't ignore the discomfort entirely. Rearrange your posture if it is necessary; it's good to do that at some point. But at the same time it's a thinking process, so relate to it as a thinking process.

### *Irritation and Exertion*

Even though everything is quite simple and straightforward in the practice of meditation, you are still likely to develop irritation. You are getting the best of the best, but you still think that there is something better, something more. It can be very

frustrating. At that point, you need to apply exertion. You have to stick with what you have already. You can't ask for more. There's nothing more to give you, in any case! So you have to be content with what you have.

## Group Sitting

Many people will receive their initial instruction in a group and may begin their practice of meditation in a group setting. One very helpful thing about practicing meditation with others is that it shows you that you can actually sit for a longer period of time than you imagined. Sitting with a group encourages you to keep going. You find that you can do the meditation, and you can enjoy it, even when it's difficult! When you meditate with a group, the length of the session will be determined for you. Many groups schedule daily or weekly meditation sessions for the same set period of time: twenty minutes, half an hour, forty minutes, or an hour.

I have found that during group retreats of several hours, days, or weeks, it can be helpful to vary the length of the meditation sessions. Not always knowing the length of the sessions can also be good training for you. For example, you might know that you will be practicing meditation from 9 A.M. until noon at your group retreat, but you don't necessarily know how long each meditation session will be. Sometimes you will sit for only fifteen minutes. Other times you might meditate for an hour. This unpredictability encourages you to sit with fewer expectations, and it will help you find out just what your expectations are.

## Sitting by Yourself

### *Daily Practice*

If you meditate by yourself, especially when you are trying to establish or maintain a daily meditation practice, it's helpful to have a set time to meditate, usually at the beginning or the end

of your day. It's also helpful to have a separate space for meditation in your home or workplace, if you can. The length of your meditation session may vary from day to day, and the length of time may have a lot to do with family and work obligations. If you can only set aside ten or fifteen minutes a day to sit, start with that. You may find that you can set aside more time on the weekends or when you have time off of work. Although the amount of time you sit from day to day may vary, before you start your session each day, it's important to decide how long you're going to sit, and keep to that. If you don't give yourself a set goal, you might give up after five minutes. So decide before you start how long you're going to sit. If you have a meditation instructor, you can also discuss your daily sitting practice with him or her, and come up with a plan to increase the amount you practice each week. Or if you don't have an instructor, you can make your own plan to start with fifteen minutes a day and work up to an hour.

### *Personal Retreats*

You can also do an "in-house" retreat by yourself, where you set aside part of a day or a longer period of time that you can devote to sitting practice. Before you start your retreat, you can write out a schedule for your meditation sessions. If you do an in-house retreat for several days, you can also include meal breaks, readings, and free time in your predetermined schedule. It's good to push yourself a little, in terms of how long you sit, but don't be too ambitious. Be kind to yourself! This is usually something you would only do after you have been practicing meditation for some time.

There is more information on group meditation practice throughout this book. See especially chapter 16, "Touch and Go." For a discussion of personal and group retreats in relationship to aloneness, see chapter 7, "Rhinceros and Parrot."

Altogether, meditation teaches us that we can handle ourselves—our bodies and our minds—properly. Meditating in this way is thoroughly enjoyable. For the first time we are doing something real, something that is totally free from deception.

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## Touch and Go

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At this point in our discussion I'd like to introduce some further instructions for the practice of meditation. These instructions could be especially useful in relation to the discussion of working with the emotions in this section of the book. The touch-and-go instructions were first introduced to be used by people attending a month-long practice retreat or a three-month practice and study retreat, so these instructions are attuned to issues that arise in the intensive practice of meditation. However, they are also applicable to daily practice and they help us in working with our daily lives, or mindfulness in action.

### Attitude

As we've already discussed, in the practice of meditation there is an attitude that brings about possibilities of mindfulness. This attitude is not a matter of forming an opinion. Rather, it is directly cultivating the awareness of mind, which is precisely what mindfulness is. You are aware that your mind is aware of

yourself. In other words, you're aware that you're aware. You are not a machine; you are an individual person relating to what's happening around you.

## Touch and Go

We could use the phrase "touch and go" to describe the cultivation of mindfulness and awareness. Mindfulness in this case is being mindful of the sense of being. The *touch* part is that you are in contact, you're touching the experience of being there, actually being there, and then you let *go*. This approach applies to awareness of your breath in the practice of meditation, and it also applies to awareness in your day-to-day living situation.

In the practice of meditation, touch and go works with how we directly *feel* our experience. The idea of *touch* is that you feel a quality of existence; you feel that you are who you are. When you sit down to meditate in a chair or on a cushion, you *feel* that you are sitting on your seat and that you actually exist. You are there, you are sitting, you are there, you are sitting. That's the *touch* part. The *go* part is that you are there, and then you don't hang on to it. You don't sustain your sense of being, but you let go of it.

With touch and go, there's a feeling of individuality, a feeling of yourself as a person. We are here; we exist. We feel this, directly and simply. Then, we let go, which is a sense of carelessness, of not feeling too much concern.

## *Working with Emotions*

Then, there is a further *touch* that is necessary, which applies not only to awareness of a sense of being but also to the mindfulness of emotional states of mind. That is, one's mental state of aggression, lust, or whatever you are feeling has to be acknowledged. Those states should not just be acknowledged and then pushed off. You should actually look at them. This is an impor-



tant point. There should be no suppression or shying away. You have the experience of being utterly aggressive and angry, or being utterly lustful, envious, jealous, or whatever you feel. You don't just say, "Oh, it's okay. This is what's happening." Or, very politely, "Hi. Nice seeing you again. You are okay. Good-bye, I want to get back to my breath." That is like meeting an old friend on a train platform, someone you haven't seen in a while, who reminds you of the past, and saying to him or her, "Well, excuse me, I have to catch the train to make my next appointment." That attitude is somewhat deceptive.

In this approach to practice, you don't just sign off. You acknowledge what's happening in your state of mind, and then you *look at it* as well. The point is that you don't give yourself an easy time so that you can escape the embarrassing and unpleasant moments, the self-conscious moments of your life. Such moments might arise as memories of the past or the painful experience of the present. Or you may feel the pain of future prospects, what you're going to do after this. All those thoughts and feelings happen, and you experience them, you look at them, and only then do you come back to your breath.

This is extremely important to do. Otherwise, there is the possibility that we could twist the logic all around. If you feel that sitting and meditating, coming back to the breath, is a way of avoiding problems, that *is* the problem. You might feel your practice is extremely kosher, good, sensible, and real, and you don't have to pay attention to all those little embarrassments that happen around your life. You can regard them as unimportant and just come back to the breath. If you do this you are creating a patchwork; you are bottling up problems and keeping them as your family heirloom. Instead, it is important to look at those embarrassments and only then to come back to breath. And even then, after you have looked at them, there's no implication that, if you look at them, it's going to free you and provide an escape from one painful point to another, or that it's the end of the story.

In fact, most of the problems in life do not arise because you are an aggressive or lustful person. The greatest problem is that you want to bottle those things up and put them aside or patch over them, and you have become an expert in deception. That is the biggest problem. Meditation practice is supposed to uncover any attempts to develop a subtle, sophisticated, deceptive approach. It is designed to uncover those patches.

### *Working with the Breath*

The attitude toward breathing in meditation is also related to working with touch and go. Once you are set properly in your posture, you begin to naturally focus on the breath going out of you. As the breath is going out, become the breathing. Try to identify with the breath, rather than watching it. This is the *touch* part. You are the breath; the breath is you. Breath comes out of your mouth and nostrils, goes out, and then dissolves into the atmosphere, into the space. You touch that process; you put a certain energy and effort toward that.

Then, as you breathe in, you boycott your breath; you boycott your concentration on the breath. That is the *go* part. As your breath goes out, let it dissolve. Then, just abandon it; boycott it. So breathing in is just space. Physically, biologically, one does breathe in, obviously, but you don't make a big deal of it.

Then another breath goes out—be with it. So the process is: out, dissolve, gap; out, dissolve, gap. It's constant opening, abandoning, boycotting. In this context *boycotting* is a significant word. If you hold on to your breath, you are holding on to yourself. Once you begin to boycott the end of the outbreath, it's as though there were no you and no world left, except that the next outbreath reminds you to tune in. So you tune in, dissolve, tune in, dissolve, tune in, dissolve. This is another way of saying touch and go, touch and go, touch and go.

## Labeling Thoughts

As we know, many thoughts arise in the midst of practice. “Well, back at home, what are they doing?” “When should I do my homework?” “What should I write about next?” “What should I paint?” “What’s happening with my investments?” “I hate that guy who was so terrible to me.” “I would like to make love.” “What’s the story with my parents?” All kinds of thoughts arise naturally. If you have lots of time to sit, endless thoughts occur.

We have already talked about labeling thoughts as part of the practice of meditation. It is a very simple technique: we reduce everything to thinking. Having discussed relating to the emotions in terms of touch and go, we should address the importance of also labeling emotions as thinking. Usually if you have low-level mental chatter, you are willing to label this as thought. But if you have deeply involved emotional chatter, or fights and struggles in your mind, you call those *emotions*, and you want to give them special prestige. Acknowledging emotional states of mind through the technique of touch and go does not mean that emotions deserve special privileges in our practice. We might say to ourselves, “I’m actually angry, it’s *more* than my thought.” “I feel so horny, it’s *more* than my thought.” That can easily become self-indulgence or a means of avoidance, a way of avoiding the realm of actual mind. In the practice of labeling our thoughts, it’s important to view whatever arises as just thinking: you’re thinking you’re horny; you’re thinking you’re angry. As far as meditation practice is concerned, none of your thoughts are regarded as VIPs. You think, you sit; you think, you sit; you think, you sit. You have thoughts, you have thoughts about thoughts, and further thoughts about those thoughts. Call them thoughts. You are thinking, you are constantly thinking, nothing but thinking. Everything is included in the thinking process, the constant thinking process: thought, nothing but thoughts and thought patterns.

## Walking Meditation

Up to this point we have been focusing entirely on the sitting practice of meditation. However, there is also a practice of walking meditation. If you take part in a group retreat, it's very likely that you will be introduced to walking meditation as a practice that you do between sessions of sitting meditation. You may also do walking meditation practice at home by yourself, between sessions of sitting meditation, when you want to practice for a longer period of time.

In group situations, sometimes people treat walking meditation as an opportunity for dramatic display, to compensate for the fact that when you sit, you can't do very much, whereas when you stand up and walk, you can at least exercise your self-existence. That is regarding walking meditation as comic relief, a time to do something extraordinary, or self-exploratory, self-expressive. That is not advisable.

Walking practice is still practice. Instead of paying attention to your breath, you work with the movement of your legs and the overall awareness of walking. Your body still has good posture. You raise your right leg, taking a small step forward. Then you touch the sole of your foot to the floor, and then your toes. Then the left leg takes a step: your heel presses down, then the ball of your foot touches the ground, and then your toes; then the right leg steps forward again, and it continues like that. It's a very natural, ordinary walk.

Your eyes are open while you're walking, of course, but generally you lower your gaze, rather than looking up or looking around at everything. Usually, during walking meditation, you are moving in a circle with other people around the room. Sometimes people walk quickly, almost racing relative to everybody else, or a person may walk *very* slowly. So you have to maintain an awareness of those in front of you and behind you.

In walking meditation you fold your arms at the level of your belly, with the right hand over the left. You tuck the fin-

gers of your left hand in, making a fist around your thumb, and the fingers of your right hand cover your left fist. So your arms aren't just swinging or hanging at your sides.

Walking practice relates to your everyday life situation much more closely than sitting practice. It involves movement, and it is a transition from the sitting practice of meditation to what will happen at the end of meditation, when you rise from your meditation cushion and begin to move into walking in the street, speaking, working, and so on. So walking practice is an important link to post-meditation and mindfulness in action. However, it's still part of formal practice. Regarding it that way, as part of your mindfulness practice rather than as a break, you have to pay heed to it. You can do it somewhat deliberately but at the same time freely.

## Group Retreat

### Awareness between Sessions of Sitting

If you plan to do a group retreat for an entire day or over a period of several days or more, you may have questions about how to handle yourself during the periods when you are not sitting. Should you just tiptoe around as if you were walking on eggs, still trying to hold on to your meditation experience? Or should you make a big splash in your interactions with people? Or should you be somewhat dumb and hesitant and try to play along with other people's energy? You will undoubtedly be given instructions for how to behave between meditation sessions. You may be asked to observe silence. Even when silent, however, you are still interacting with others and responding to situations. The point is not so much that you should tiptoe, or make a big splash, or be hesitant. Instead, you should try to recollect the sense of meditational awareness that has developed in your state of being; just continue that way. This doesn't mean especially working with the breath or working with your walking during the breaks, but there is a *flash* of awareness, the

*memory* that you sat. This was discussed in the chapter “Recollection.”

Also, remember your commitment to this particular course, this retreat. You have set your intention in being here. The attitude is not particularly moralistic or a question of behaving like good boys and good girls. It’s a basic recollection of why you are here. And you *are* here; you have sat and meditated; it’s simple and factual.

Another general recommendation for group retreat situations—one that I strongly recommend, as a matter of fact—is to minimize unnecessary chatter. This means you should refrain from conversing or commenting among yourselves. You limit your verbal statements to what is purely functional and necessary. For example, one might say, “Pass the salt,” or “Close the door.” Of course, you may be doing your retreat in complete silence. Functional talking is a kind of middle ground between that and just chattering away. It can be more challenging than silence, because you have to decide what is functional!

Another challenging aspect of a group retreat is the mealtimes, even if they’re conducted in silence. Mealtimes, I have observed, are often seen as a moment of release, a moment of freedom—which is unnecessary. I think we can approach this differently. One problem during meals can be unnecessary chatter, but even if that is not taking place, there can be a quality of meals as time off, a gap, a vacation. You are eating and drinking—no doubt having a relatively pleasant time—and you regard it as completely outside of what you are doing in the meditation hall. There’s a dichotomy, a shockingly big contrast, which is unnecessary. If you cultivate such an approach during the mealtimes or during personal time—thinking that this is your free time, your time to release energy—then obviously your sitting practice is going to feel like imprisonment. You are creating your own jail.

You might feel that the meditation hall is where serious practice takes place, and when you get out the door, every-

thing's free, back to normality or something like that. The physical environment may be somewhat isolated and restricted in a retreat setting, but you still may feel that you can indulge in your own free style during your personal time and proclaim your individuality in some way, even if you do so silently. By doing that, you might develop a negative reaction toward the meditation hall, considering it a jail, while the other places, away from practice, come to represent freedom and having a good time.

The suggestion here is that we could even out the whole thing and have a good time all over the place. *This* is not so much a jail, and *that* is not so much a vacation, freedom, a holiday. Everything should be evened out. That is the basic approach: if you sit, if you stand, if you eat, if you walk—whatever you do is all part of the same good old world. You are carrying your world with you in any case. You cannot cut your world into different slices and put them into different pigeonholes.

We don't have to be so poverty-stricken about our life. We don't have to try to get a little chocolate chip from just one part of our life. All the rest will be sour, but here I can take a dip in pleasure! If your body is hot and you dip your finger in ice water, it feels good. In actual fact, it's painful at the same time, not completely pleasurable. If you really know the meaning of pleasure in the total sense, this dip in pleasure is a further punishment and an unnecessary trick that we play on ourselves.

In sum, the practice of meditation is not so much about a hypothetical attainment of enlightenment as it is about leading a good life. In order to learn how to lead a good life, a spotless life, we need continual awareness that relates directly and simply with life.