

# 2009-05-10 Acknowledge Feel Soften

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## SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

Okay, so I guess there's one more thing and that is, I'm actually this week teaching a retreat at hidden Villa, a seven day retreat, IMC puts on a series of retreats in the course of the year. And a number of them are at hidden Villa which is in nature preserve in Los Altos Hills, beautiful place. We rent the hostel and do it there and started last Sunday, and it ends today. And so how the show when I finished my top girls and a little early to talk, then I'll pretty quickly leave so I can get there to close the retreat. And so it's really beautiful. These retreats that we put on, we able to put them on here at IMC and it is really beautiful. They're hidden Villa very still and quiet. Except when the kids come through and happy sound of kids. Kids coming through a lot thing in the garden. And one of the things I taught at this retreat was that there are three aspects to mindfulness practice, or it's possible to look at mindfulness, three different perspectives. And so I'd like to share those with you. And the three aspects are acknowledging, feeling, and softening. And they work can work relatively well as a sequence of practices. They can also be seen as simultaneous, or they can kind of work in different sequences in relationship to each other. And different ones are useful in different settings. So as someone does mindfulness practice, if we get a sense of these three different aspects, like tools, you can use different tools and different situations. Probably the most, one of the most important things in mindfulness practice is the first One is the acknowledgment is to acknowledge clearly acknowledge what's happening in the present moment. And so it could be anything. So we certainly acknowledge the breath may be present for the breath. breath is a very important support for developing mindfulness and calm concentration, insight. But it's not just being present really, it is more than just being present is a kind of a clear recognition of the experience that we're with clear recognition of that breath, oh, this is an in breath. This is what it feels like, like you're getting familiar with it. So you probably all have the experience of feeling acknowledged by someone. Whether someone really recognizes something, you've done some way that you are, and you really feel Oh, I really feel acknowledged, I feel seen. And you've probably had the experience of not being acknowledged and not being seen. And the differences can be quite dramatic. And the acknowledgement doesn't have to be so dramatic. It doesn't mean you have to get an award. just means that they're really there and they see you they acknowledge Oh, I see you're having a hard time. I see this difficult for you today. Or Well, you know, that was really great, but you did. So it was really clear acknowledgement. There's something powerful about being seen to be powerful, but a clear, stable presence that acknowledges something else. So, in mindfulness practice, we're invoking that capacity to acknowledge something. And to notice it to recognize it, not just casually, oh, the breath, breath comes breath goes, you know, I'll get around to eventually. But to really kind of stand and be present and see it directly and clearly, whatever it is, we're noticing. And part of the training of mindfulness is a training to learn to strengthen that capacity to clearly see the clearly acknowledge what's here and now. Now, part of that training is to arrive here right now, to be in The present moment, because it's so easy for the mind to be involved in its habitual thinking, worrying about the future or planning the past, or whatever it might be doing, fantasizing. And so the habit of the mind

kind of spinning off in his thoughts can be lonely, quite strong, but often times, not in our best interest. And one of the reasons we're cultivating mindful presence is so we can be present in our experience in our life in a way that's more in our best interest and more in the interest, best interest of the world around us as well. So if I sit, sit, as I'm sitting here going about my life, thinking about all the problems I'm going to have anticipating then it's useful to remember the saying I forget who said it, that someone said I had a

I've had a lot of practice. problems in my life, most of which never happened. It's not to not to deny that there are problems people have. But how many of your difficulties you struggle with are anticipatory. That Oh, oh, no. If so, I didn't have my usual software here today, my cushion that I sit on. So I went to the rack out there to get a cushion. That, oh, I've got a problem. I won't find just the right cushion. It won't fit my back just right. I'll be uncomfortable through the sitting squirm. People see me as making sure squirming in my cushion will be run out of town as a meditation teacher, that'll be the end of me. So I sat down on a new cushion and it worked fine. So you know, the mind can spin off and wander off. Often these kinds of concerns, and then and what's unfortunate sometimes is that we can have anticipatory problems and then it can be self fulfilling. So, you know, someone is sure that he is going to not treat me nicely, one more time. And then he shows up and you grow. And then he doesn't treat you nicely because you grow and then it you know, just proves I knew it. But the reason he treats you treat you poorly is because you grow and you grabbed because you anticipated and so it can be quite, you know, difficult. You know, the imaginary world we create sometimes manifests itself in the world and self fulfilling ways. So where we sit in the past, spending a lot of time remembering rehearsing the past. pulling, pulling all the difficulties that we've had ever had in the past and categorizing them, organizing them, building them up. And some people get weighed down quite a bit. by spending a lot of time remembering all the difficulties you've had in the past. Of course, it's sometimes useful to remember those and think about them. But it's possible to be weighed down by them as well. So to learn how to let go of excessive thinking about the past, excessive thinking about the future, can be in our own best interest because it lightens the load. Because oftentimes here and now, there's not as many problems as there is there and then. So if you live there, and then then there can be many, many more problems. So to acknowledge this first party really acknowledge requires us to acknowledge what's here. It might be acknowledging, or here is a person Thinking about the future a lot. Here's a person's thinking about the past, to really acknowledge that's what's happening. Now something different happens. Something important happens when we acknowledge, clearly acknowledge, clearly state really notice. Wow, here, I'm thinking about the future. When you do that, you're stepping back a little bit from involvement in future thinking, maybe the future doesn't stop. But you step back, and you no longer see it. You don't love it in that movie. So, I, you've probably all been to a movie, movie theater, and been engrossed in the action on the screen and just completely involved. And then this guy behind you, this kid behind you, starts crunching on his popcorn. And you realize, wait a minute, I'm in a movie theater. And you kind of look around and all these people show these heads in the darkness. You look around you see the light streaming above you, wow, this is a movie theater, it's kind of dark in here and, and there's images on the screen when what they're doing there and you step back, and you're not in the movie anymore. But you see it you see the situation to see where you're at. And it's a whole different relationship to the experience. You don't want to do this too much in watching a movie because part of the fun of the movie is getting lost in the screen. But it's not something where we want to do a lot in life. To get lost in the movie of life often causes difficulties. So mindfulness is declare they acknowledge Here I am Here I'm thinking about the future. I'm in the mood. I'm in the movie of the future. And in doing that, realize it's a movie realize that it's just a creation of the mind or the past.

So to learn to acknowledge, is a training to be present is a training to not be enchanted or lost in what's Here, but rather to find this place of stability that can acknowledge the place that from which you

acknowledge is a place of stability. And part of the training and mindfulness is to train in that place of stability. So you're in an argument with someone or have a difficult conflict with someone, and you feel really uncomfortable. And so you acknowledge, oh, I'm really uncomfortable. This is discomfort here. And you find a place to say discomfort. I'm here uncomfortable from a place of stability, or some little bit of stability, as opposed to being in that movie of discomfort kind of pushed around by it. Oh, here's this comfort. To take a moment, just a moment to acknowledge I'm uncomfortable in this conflict means that you're not caught up into discomfort and you're more or less likely than to be pushed around by your discomfort, less likely to react out of that discomfort. So the first part Mindfulness is to acknowledge and it's a beautiful thing to cultivate and develop, there can be a lot of resistance to doing it. Because there's a keep up a relatively relaxed ongoing stream of acknowledging, noticing, this is happening now this is happening now runs up against the habit of the mind, the currents of the mind that follow its usual habits. And there could be a lot of interest in following its usual habits. There's a lot of momentum there. And so we're working two streams are kind of working currents are working side by side, the current of deliberate attention and the current unconscious absorption and thoughts and concerns. And we're trying to strengthen that place of deliberate presence, deliberate acknowledgement of noticing. So we have to keep that position. We have to keep it up. Just keep doing it. After a while becomes more easy and second nature. So the second aspect of mindfulness is the feeling. And what I mean by that is, is experiencing the felt sense of an experience. So it's one thing to acknowledge that I feel uncomfortable. It's another thing to then to really allow yourself to feel that discomfort, not to really feel it as a way of getting lost in it, but to feel it so you discover what it is more fully the process of discovery and the process of discovery that's not intellectual in terms of thinking and analyzing, but it's quite immediate. to really feel the immediacy of this experience here more fully, what are the different aspects of it? I feel uncomfortable. That's pretty vague. Now that I've acknowledged it, what is it actually, my shoulders are tense, my belly is tight. And I feel kind of nervous. So now we know something. So it may feel that nervousness may feel that belly. We feel it, feel it, as opposed to react from it. It's kind of a further extension of the acknowledgement. It's part of the investigation that we do in mindfulness practice, to get to know something better. And this is very important because often the initial acknowledgement of something, we acknowledge the surface of it or acknowledge kind of the most odd you know what to say, but it's kind of like, generalized first. And we don't want to stay general, we want to start getting specific. And so we were in the felt sense, allows us to feel more specifically. Also, by in some situations, the felt sense to allow us to feel it means we're not in conflict or an opposition with what we're feeling. If it's difficult feelings, often people don't want to touch it. They're in resistance to it, but The second trading of feeling it is to drop into it and allow yourself to kind of really sense what is really there. It means that we're in touch with what's going on, it's possible with the acknowledgement part, which is kind of like naming it or whatever, it's a little bit more mental, it's possible to be a little bit removed from your life by staying in that kind of acknowledgment mode. The feeling part means that you're actually in it and connected.

The third aspect is to soften. So to, to acknowledge, to feel and then to soften. So as we as we're present for something and feel it, then is there some way that it's possible to have some softening with it. And I use the word softening very carefully as it's careful choice. Because if I had said Relax, relax is Maybe harder to do. You might feel some tension. And perhaps you can relax it. But sometimes chronic tension cannot be relaxed that easily. Where there's a contraction in the, in the mind, can it be relaxed that easily. But in my vocabulary to soften means you don't have to relax attention. But you kind of create kind of a field of softness around it. You make space around it, again, just you're not in conflict with it. There's a kind of allow allow and sort of space for to allow to be there. And that softening might translate to relaxing, something physically, of letting go of something, or it might just be kind of a generosity of spirit towards something. Oh, here it is. always hold it softly. And it might have to do with how we relate to the experience. The experience itself that we're paying attention to might not soften

But the awareness that knows it can soften. So if I'm feeling again like you know feeling uncomfortable someplace I could kind of tighten up in my mind. I don't really want to feel that or I could I could be a really diligent mindfulness student I'm good Okay, I'm going to pay attention to this discomfort and really bear down on it was I bear down on it, I remember soften. Oh, I'm kind of tense and how I'm paying attention. Or I'm my awareness is kind of retracted. So maybe I can soften the mindfulness, the acknowledgement, if they can soften how I hold this experience. The experience itself is as difficult as ever going to be, but I can hold it softly. So to speak in different situations, these different elements of mindfulness can be particularly useful. So for example, if you're really tense or agitated, it could be that the softening part of it is good to emphasize, softening, accepting. It could be that you're sleepy or really calm, and you don't need to soften anymore. And what's needed is a little more sharpness and precision or energy. And then perhaps the acknowledgment is useful to be more precise with acknowledgement and name and see what's there. Perhaps there's, there's not so clear what's going on. So you need to get into it more. And so getting into the felt sense might be useful to feel it. So to acknowledge, to feel and to soften, sometimes it can be done sequentially in a relaxed way, okay, what what needs to be acknowledged Right now Can I can I allow myself to feel it and there can be some softening. And having done that, what needs to be acknowledged next? so often. And so by doing those three steps, we're also staying in that deliberate awareness mode, as opposed to letting our thoughts or old habits kind of carry us away and be caught up in this and that doesn't mean we're stopping the old way of thinking. But we're stepping out of the movie. So the mind is busy thinking about something. Oh, acknowledge that Oh. mind is thinking what's the felt sense of a thinking mind? What does it feel like? That what you're thinking about what does it feel like to be thinking or what it feels like to be thinking it's feels really tense. A lot of contraction in the eyes and the jaws or whatever it really think about that because a feel that tend to feel it. And now Can there be certain softening around the tension connected to thinking exactly be done sequentially like that. Or it could be that sometimes it's useful to stay in acknowledgment mode for quite a while. Sometimes it's useful to drop the acknowledgement or stay with a feeling though you stay with what's Hartsfield's. Sometimes it's the softening that needs to be emphasized the most. So those are my thoughts today. So

we can take some questions.

For instance, I've been trying not to use the word hate. I'm been trying not use the word hate hate. Okay. So when I think about it, I try to soften that word, even though I don't try to not hate. I just Don't try to explain this anywhere I try to not use the word hate. But in that particular moment when you get out of it, and maybe you just explained it

Where is the present moment? I mean,

you know, you are in the present moment.

And you just switched your mind from one degree to another degree. But what happens when the next moment comes along? I'm not confused by the next moment, but in your conversation, you know, the next moment is a next moment and the next moment and the next moment. That comes sequentially, right?

It time is really seen as being sequential. So, if we're have a relaxed presence, staying in the present moment, will and we don't hold on to anything. We don't cling to any ideas or concepts. What we'll become aware of is a street of changing phenomenas changing experiences through time. And so there might arise bubble up, hate, or anger, or ill will. And if we latch on to it and hold on to it, it can stay for a long time, if we would,

the concept of

hate, or the concept or the feeling of it. But if if, if we don't hold on to it, then it generally things tend to arise and pass much more quickly. And so then you're aware, oh, there's, there's a rising of anger. I'm aware of it, I feel it. And it passes arises and passes us aware of a stream of arising and passing phenomena. But as things arise, it's not so easy because anger arises. And then we say, and then we start getting involved in the younger Could he have done that? I'm going to give him a piece of my mind. Here I am, again being treated poorly. And there's a lot of people treat me poorly and this world is unfair. And the resentment builds and builds. And I think of resentment as locked anger, frozen anger. As we do this practice, we're freeing ourselves from the way that we lock onto things, we grasp onto things cling to things. And as we don't cling to the present moment, then the present moment will be seen much more of a stream of arising and passing phenomena.

So is the idea

to live a more positive life rather than this negative life? Absolutely. So do not try to be literally in the present moment.

Joining

the Yeah, so as as I'm present for my life. Then there's more choice about how to respond. And so then, and then as a reflection, what are the most useful way to respond in any situation? And it's much more useful to respond from kindness than it is to respond from hate. And but, but the kindness, kindness only exists in the present moment. You have to be in the present to be kind.

My question was some

understanding that we're not to be in the past, nor in the future, but focus in the moment, the feeling that you mentioned, I was wondering, could there not be a time in our meditation where we decide, okay, I want to clarify my motives for my future, that we can actually utilize the past mistakes that we've made, experiences that we've had and maybe integrate them with Future visions plans. Absolutely.

I said this recently made up it wasn't here. I I went many years ago pulled the book down from the book stacks at Stanford library at random diversity I was in some place where we're usually wasn't in the stacks, just pull this book down open and random. And it was some book on like marketing, which I have no business reading. And, and, and I opened it and said, to have people stay in the present moment is a marketer's dream. So no concern about the future in the past to just shop until you drop thing with mind, Buddhism or mindfulness practice, is not trying to train us to only be in the present moment. Without any reference to the past and the future, I think, important part of human life is to remember the past and think about the future and plan and all that support part of life. It just happens to be that we tend to overdo it. many people's, a lot of people suffering comes from spending too much time in the past too much time in the future, and being attached to that world. And so what we're trying to do here is not necessarily stop thinking about the past the future, but to realize when we think about the future, it's happening in the present. We thinking about the past, it's happening in the present, and we really see it as present phenomena, that we can see it for what it is, and then we can choose when it's useful to think about the past in the future. I think it's useful to learn from our past. and spending time reflecting on is good, and it's important to think ahead and have vision for our future. important part of life. Should we do that in meditation, which is what you said. There are people who will do it in

meditation, there are people who do that kind of finding meditate. contemplative time is a good time for reflection like that. Generally, in our tradition, we discourage people from doing it, that in meditation itself, because that most of the benefits from meditation come when we're really fully completely in the present, not thinking about the past in the future. And it and people have such a strong habit of past and future thinking. That if we already in meditation is what people some people are struggling with. So to reinforce that by consciously and deliberately doing it meditation can be enforced a bad habit. So generally, I would say don't do it in meditation. But after meditation or another time, go to sit down to look at a window, go for a walk in nature. Sit quietly and And I think that kind of use it with the kind of contemplation you mentioned, is an important part of life. decided, Okay answer.

And we could do that kind of reflection much more effectively if we have learned how to be in the present fully and freely, because there's more freedom and flexibility, more creativity. If the old habits of concerns and grasping and preoccupations are operating, then the reflections you're talking about is not going to be as creative or as as intuitive as productive. But if we've learned in meditation to free the mind, then it's like having a blip of the best expressed expression but it's like having a blank slate to be able to think freshly newly

face. I particularly like the SEC. The guided meditation that you did this morning and how it was coupled with the Dharma talk and I noticed in doing the guided meditation that I I could I was able to do the acknowledgement part very well and the feeling part, but I got very lost in the third part of softening. Yeah. And I noticed that the, the meditation and as a practice in life as a practice is the third part that is softening is the most difficult practice I really don't under fully understand how softening is a part of a practice in life works.

Well just sitting here so I listened to you. I can feel acknowledged that concerned with how best to answer your question, I can feel that that concern takes certain kind of my energy in my body, my attention goes up into my head a little bit, there's a little bit of contraction that goes on as I do that. And, and so as I feel that, that's a feeling part. And then I, there's a little bit digital as soon as I feel that there's a softening that goes on and around this part of my mind, that's kind of a little bit tightened up kind of wondering how best to answer your question. And, and so I couldn't soften unless I really acknowledge where the where the tightening happened to be. So that's the daily life. That's an example here. Now, how it works. It could be that you're driving your car, it's possible to be ahead of yourself thinking about the destination. So is it living an anticipatory world? It's also possible to acknowledge what's happening here. Oh, I'm little bit tense, as I drive, pushing that stuff. gas pedal. I'm anxious we're getting someplace. And then Oh, so I feel that I feel it in my, my knuckles, my hands kind of in the steering wheel, I feel it to my leg pushing, I feel my body is a little bit leaning forward as I drive. So, can I soften that I felt that can i soften? It might be as simple as softening back into your seat of your chair a little bit, you see it a little softening physical, physical. So sometimes it says his physical sides to it to be clear. Sometimes it's not clear where the physical softening can be. And sometimes it's mental. It has to do with our attitude or the attitude a little bit harsh, harsh, the attitude is hard the attitude is, you know, resistant or something. And, and perhaps so you know if to look around and see where it makes most sense. Also, the word softening might not be the best word different situation. You might experiment with different concepts or approaches in mind. Opening you know maybe opening works better or maybe relaxing or maybe allowing or maybe accepting what what needs to be accepted here what needs to be allowed here. So, experiment with different things that they key thing is the softening part points back to the one of the central aspects of Buddhist spirituality, which is learning not to claim not to grasp. And, and so, when we soften we're keep we're learning to let go of clinging and grasping. So it takes a while to see where the grasping is. But that's kind of one of the key aspects of Buddhism is that letting go? What needs to be let go of so acknowledge feel, and then what needs cutting go

another way of saying it

okay. So,

acknowledgement, acknowledgement takes many forms. And I want to acknowledge all of you. And thank you for coming and for practicing. I feel a lot of friendship and warmth to all of you. So that's my feeling friendship and warmth. And, and I would love to just to soften into that friendship and worth. Wouldn't it be nice Thank you.