

The Meditation Instructions

Three meditation instructions form the core of Insight Dialogue: *Pause-Relax-Open*, *Trust Emergence*, and *Speak the Truth-Listen Deeply*. These instructions, or guidelines, enfold much traditional wisdom. They are used the same way most other meditation instructions are used: by keeping them in mind during practice and recalling them as needed.

There is a paradox in this. The guidelines are kept in mind, but the practice is essentially relaxed and natural. It may not be clear at first how to integrate the intentional nature of the practice with unaffected ease. Patience will be rewarded. Over time, pausing, surrendering to the emerging moment, and fully present listening become quite natural. When more energy and clarity of intention is needed, however, we can always recall the meditation instructions explicitly, to re-center or practice.

Pause-Relax-Open

Trust emergence

Speak the Truth-Listen Deeply

Pause-Relax-Open

Pause-Relax-Open can be understood as one meditation instruction, or as three separate instructions. I will explore them here separately, to allow a fuller and clearer understanding of each component. Yet each one leads to the next; each contains the seed of the others; the broadest understanding of any one of them implies and requires the other two.

Pause

To pause means to step out of the automatic reactions of the heart and mind. If the mind is racing along, detach from the thinking. For just that moment, stop constructing that world. When we pause, when we step out of the push of conditioned thoughts and feelings, awareness naturally arises. Notice this natural awakening. One does not have to try so hard to be mindful. When the torrential thoughts and feelings are not fed by identification, mindfulness is the natural result.

The *pause* is a way of slowing down. It is a way of having some space between what we hear, what we see, even what we think, and what we say. The *pause* is a time when we can really take in what's been said, along with how we are feeling, and the specific flavor of this moment. During the *pause* we become aware of the body, we become aware of our feelings. We come home to being in the moment of this particular experience, right now. Even as you are reading this, even as you're sitting here now, you can pause and simply notice: "What position is this body in?" "How am I feeling, right now?" Notice if you have any tensions or any particular wandering thoughts. The essence of the pause is mindfulness: it is being aware.

Of course, when reactions such as liking, disliking, or other emotions are very strong, we are not as aware of what is going on around us or of our own inner responses. The *Pause* is a time to be aware, but we realize that in order to be aware in this way, we also need to step out of any reaction that has taken us over. Sometimes these reactions are obvious, such as strong anger. We need to pause, to take some time. Most of us have heard the advice, "When you are angry, count to ten before you speak." It is like that.

But positive reactions, reactions that feel good, can also unfold and take us over. You may be in a reaction of excitement, or enjoying something that someone said, but not just enjoying it in the moment. You may actually be moving into your own automated story, habitual and conditioned. It's as if there were a kind of push coming from your past, or from some emotional motor, ready and waiting to be switched on. When something pleasant is switched on we don't particularly want to notice it and let go; we just hang onto it.

The *Pause* lets us step out of that reaction and back into the present moment. We step into knowing the sensations of the body. We step into knowing pleasant and unpleasant sensations as they arise, into knowing a streaming torrent of emotions and thoughts. We become aware in this moment, now. This is the *pause*. Practicing the *pause* can be an antidote for conditioned reactions that happen so quickly that they exclude awareness, will, and volition. Introducing the *pause*, we open to a fresh awareness, stepping into this moment in a new and clean, clear way. This feels like coming home, like resting in the body: "Ahhh, here I am." From this coming home to the present, we can speak in a less automatic way, and we can really listen to each other; we can come closer to knowing things as they are.

Pausing in itself is a potent beginning. Laurie's experience of a one day Insight Dialogue retreat shows how pausing in a meditative context can support a yielding into the moment. As the day began, she was holding back. Then anger began to come forward. Being invited into the moment of dialogue began to loosen something that prior meditation experience had left in a tangled knot.

As practice deepens, the power of the silence grows. At first, the *pause* will primarily reveal reactivity: conditioned responses, automatic and un-free. In the mindful pauses, we find a complex web of conditioning rising into the moment.

Relaxing, we do not turn away from the tension and conditioning. When we stay with these, it becomes possible to apprehend the silence that underlies reactivity. When someone speaks, it is as if words arise out of silence and descend back into it. As in a "gathered" Quaker meeting, it feels as if the silence continued unbroken. Whether one speaks with the voice of God, as the Friends believe, or comes to know the Unconditioned that underlies all conditioned things, it is the *pause* that hints at the infinite.

From the demanding activities of work and family to the subtle awakenings of a meditation retreat, the *pause* offers a touch point of sanity, a reminder of stillness. During the *pause* we can know awareness as co-arising, in each instant, with all that is. In simpler terms, pausing inclines us to calmness, to slowing down, to seeing ourselves in a larger frame of reference. Then we pause, we lessen our grasping of pain, momentarily cease reactivity to anger, realize the emptiness of phenomena, or perhaps simply know peace.

Relax

When we pause, when we step out of reaction and into mindfulness, what do we do? How do we meet our experience in a way that helps us dwell apart from the forces of habitual grasping and aversion, that helps us settle into stable awareness? How do we meet the tension of the body? How do we meet the busy mind? How do we meet the forward push of conditioning, the tyrannical tendency to get wrought up?

Relax, the second element in the instruction *Pause-Relax-Open*, offers us the opportunity to notice the tensions in the body, the turmoil in the mind. It offers the opportunity to settle down and give ourselves time to release habitual thoughts, to loosen the grip of tensed muscles. Of course, we can't relax the body simply by giving it an order; we can't stop the mind thinking by commanding it to

stop. We observe in meditation that our thoughts come up unbidden: they are not entirely within our control. You may notice that, as much as you may want to calm the body, sometimes it just doesn't calm down. To relax means to be present with experience, to cease battling experience. But to relax also means not feeding the reactivity. When we *pause*, we are stepping out of the habitual reactions, and opening the space for awareness in this moment. With *relax*, we meet that experience with acceptance. We may notice that there is tension, let's say around the eyes, around the mouth, or in the belly. We may be able to relax certain parts of the body – this is a very good start, just to relax physically. But there will always be some kind of tension, some kind of holding that remains; this is what we meet with acceptance.

So this *relax* also means to accept, just as it is, whatever experience we find. Remain present with the judgments and hurts, the attachment, glee, or indignation. Turn fully towards these constructions of the heart/mind with accepting awareness. Gone, for just this moment, is habitual rejection and repression. See whatever arises with kindly eyes, with an awareness imbued with acceptance. Acceptance is the essential quality of lovingkindness. Full and present availability to experience, non-rejection, and tenderness take birth and, over time, come to saturate the mind with love. No experience is shut out; even tension and fear are held in kindly awareness. Love is the natural result of complete availability to experience.

Open

The last of the three parts of this mediation instruction is *open: Pause-Relax-Open*. We have seen how in the pause we are stepping out of reaction, into mindfulness. We become present in this moment, coming home to the body, being aware of our feelings. Whatever presents itself to mindfulness – whatever tension,

whatever habits of the heart that we find – is met with acceptance. We relax the body as we are able, and we accept things just as they are. In this mindful and calm state we are internally still. Internally there is mindfulness and calm, awareness and acceptance of our thoughts and feelings.

With this third part of the instruction we extend this awareness and acceptance beyond our own internal experience, to encompass what is outside this thing called “me.” We open the field of awareness to encompass other people and the environment. We meet other people with the same mindfulness and calm acceptance with which we are learning to meet our internal experience. With the *open*, we extend the internal to the external. The awareness gets wider.

It is with *open* that this meditation instruction matures into mutuality. Just as one spreads love to all beings in traditional lovingkindness meditation, one dynamically practices this wide loving acceptance in and for the meditation partner or group. Indeed, not stopping there, one becomes open and available to the natural environment and to all beings. In this extension the individual sense of self, the small, skin-encapsulated “me,” is softened – and even, at moments, disappears.

Trust Emergence

We’ve seen how in this practice we pause and step out of reaction, to meet the moment with acceptance. We relax and accept what we find. Then we open this awareness wider, to encompass all that is around us, and to meet the other with a mindful, accepting heart. In that moment of meeting, we trust emergence. In that moment we realize we don’t know what’s going to come up next. We don’t know we’re going to say, or what someone else may say or do. We step into that not knowing with acceptance, and trust in the unfolding of things.

First of all, this means that we have no particular agenda. We are not trying to accomplish a particular task, such as getting a point across, developing a plan, or making a new business contact. We are simply entering into this moment with full awareness, and seeing what comes next. Much may be accomplished during Insight Dialogue, including emotional and spiritual release, group formation, and intellectual breakthrough. But these are natural results, not goals. Insight Dialogue is a meditation practice, not a communication or relationship exercise. In trusting emergence, part of what we are trusting is the basic dynamic that good things — such as open communication and wise relationships — will naturally evolve as we become more mindful, relax our tensions, accept the moment, and open our awareness to each other.

A group gathered expressly for meditation provides a rare opportunity to meet life in a radical way, stripped of social norms regarding productivity and accomplishment. From such a practice we learn new ways to live. The guideline *Trust Emergence* calls us to experience what it is just to be with another person, or a group of people in the present moment, not looking forward to something that may happen in the future.

From a practical standpoint, to trust emergence is to move easily with the flow of the dialogue, not feeling pressured to make a point or interject our contribution before the “right” moment passes. In meditative dialogue each thought that arises must be released, sometimes after being spoken, often when left unspoken. If you find yourself attached to a particular idea, let go and trust that the idea will remain prominent if it has the energy to do so. If the idea fades before you contribute or before you feel resolution, be willing to let it go. If you find you continue to be moved by the idea, no problem. You, too, contribute to what emerges; speak your thoughts. Then let go again. Each attachment to people and

ideas is released. In a world where everything changes, it is clinging that causes pain. Going with the change, simply rest in awareness. Hold the simple question, "What is emerging now?" Let go of imagined control of experience. Remember this guideline and dwell lightly in the moment, moving with the shifts in topic and mood as a leaf floats along the boundary between brook and sky.

The meditation instruction *Trust Emergence* suggests a quality of not knowing, an uncertainty about what is going to come next. More positively, the word emergence implies an open expectancy. The world, the particular forms of experience such as sensations, relationships, and words, are emerging in surprising and unpredictable ways. It is similar to the ways birds fly through the air in large flocks, forming beautiful patterns. One doesn't know exactly what forms are going to emerge and indeed the birds themselves don't know. But those patterns are the result of all kinds of other factors at work and these beautiful patterns simply emerge, just as the colors in the sunset simply emerge. Indeed, when we are observing nature, we get a sense of the constant emergence of life, of change. And it is that sense of change, that sense of the unfolding present, that is inherent in this meditation instruction to trust emergence.

When we encounter another person we don't know what they're going to say. In fact, when we speak we don't even know what thought is going to come up next in our own mind. And, when we don't know what we're going to say and we encounter another person who doesn't know what they are going to say, of course, we can't possibly predict what is going to happen between us in this conversation. In Insight Dialogue we recognize the exquisite insecurity inherent in complex humans meeting each other. This not knowing humbles us into full attentiveness, creativity, and care.

More deeply, *Trust Emergence* points us towards the fluid and impermanent nature of experience. Mindfulness reveals changing thoughts and feelings, unpredictable and uncontrolled. Any attempt to grasp at experience yields frustration. But if we yield to this arching sense of change – which can be felt in the body as well as recognized in the mind – each moment comes alive with possibility. When someone speaks, we may attach to our reactions to what they said. In that moment, we can remember to trust emergence and let go, and our reactions no longer control us. Rather, we become aware of reaction as itself inherently impersonal and impermanent. No longer dominated by the chaos of change, new possibilities emerge.

In its lack of goal-orientation, Insight Dialogue is very much like traditional Buddhist walking meditation. In walking practice the meditator walks back and forth along a short path, relaxed and mindful of each step as it is taken. One is not walking to a destination. Walking practice is not about movement; it is about stillness. The meditator cultivates a wide and clear awareness, and into this field of awareness arises knowing of lifting and placing a foot, or of the general movement of the body. This awareness is calm and still, even as the body and mind are moving. As the mind calms down, one becomes familiar and comfortable with the rising and falling experience. Thoughts are released as they arise. Even the intention to turn around at the end of the path becomes a distinct event that rises and passes away. Clearly, any plan to reach a destination, let alone to get somewhere in a certain amount of time, would affect this simple and refined awareness practice. And so we trust emergence.

To trust emergence is to dive into the unfolding present. We sit still and feel the body. Sensation and awareness themselves blossom into the now. As meditation deepens, this trusting takes on a quality of surrender. Experience dissolves every

instant. Sometimes the arising is prominent, sometimes the dissolving. We let go into both. A friend who practiced with me for two years, whose primary path is her shamanic training, has identified emergence as a place of magic in Insight Dialogue. Our capacity to sense the flux of being can be heightened in this relational practice, and it can be mysterious. In such a flow any grasping at experience is like a catch in fine fabric. The mind hooks the moment and the snag becomes what is called “real.” Emotions, thoughts, and sensations are frozen by the grasping mind, becoming “your” experience and “my” experience. Surrendering into the flux of being transforms static experience into pure process. Thoughts become thinking. Emotions become emoting; the self becomes simply knowing.

Speak the Truth – Listen deeply

Up to this point we have been exploring how we can bring awareness and calm into our contact with other people. We explored the instruction to pause into mindfulness, stepping out of reaction into the moment. As we pause, we can relax and accept what we find, and open our awareness to encompass external as well as internal experience. In that moment, we trust emergence, resting in the flux of experience. We meet the impermanence of things, and experience both the delight and the insecurity of change and not knowing. We attend to what the next moment will bring.

It is in this vibrating and aware moment that we listen and speak. It is in this vivid state of mind that we encounter each other.

The simple guideline *Speak the Truth-Listen Deeply* invites us to re-examine verbal communication. To speak the truth we must know the truth. We are referring to the subjective truth, the truth of our experience. Therefore, we must listen internally in order to discern this truth. Speaking the truth is based upon

mindfulness. Clarity arises when the mind is energetic, mindful, calm (*Pause-Relax-Open*) and unattached (*Trust Emergence*). This clarity is the source of discernment; the guideline *Speak the Truth-Listen Deeply* reminds us to cultivate this clarity.

As we learn to perceive the truth of our own experience directly, we begin to know the difference between reactive speech and words that come fresh from the emerging moment. But in most moments, the mind is awash in thoughts and emotions. To which do we give voice? When a thought or feeling presents itself, we can instantly speak it, or observe it and let go. We may choose to ignore or suppress a thought, perhaps feeling it is too private, unkind, or simply not worth sharing. We may speak quickly out of habit or excitement, or perhaps we feel our words will be of real value in this moment.

When asked to speak the truth, we are called to examine not only what is true but what is useful, and even what is in some way right for that moment. Truthfulness, the Buddha taught, is the foundation of right speech. Of course, by truthfulness he primarily meant saying what you know to be factually true, and not saying what you know to be untrue. This teaching carries with it a sense of stability, fortitude, rightness. Its rightness, however, can also be discerned in even the little truths of each moment. These can be spoken with confidence. So this meditation instruction calls us to be mindful of arising thought, discerning as to what to speak, *and* confident in speaking it. Underlying the feeling of confidence is a sense of stability and centeredness. The voice that speaks is not simply the voice of a separate self. It is also the voice of the circle, or of the relationship emerging through us. We are encouraged to feel at ease with ourselves, confident of the group's lovingkindness. There is a boldness in this that is not aggressive or ego-

bound. This is simply trusting the thoughts, intuitions, and inspirations of the moment.

So coming back to the exquisite challenge of which thoughts to speak and which to let pass into the ether, we find ourselves confronted with ambiguity, extreme subjectivity, and even mystery. No one answer can be given. We share those inner experiences which, for whatever reason, feel right to share. They may be persistent. They may seem valuable to you or others. They may sparkle with the light of recognition. One does not have to defend such thoughts; they are spoken as the truth of that moment.

The forthrightness of confidence and truth are balanced with an attitude of inquiry. Indeed, Insight Meditation itself is a form of inquiry. The question “What is happening now?” or, as Zen master Seung San would say, “What is this?” is central to knowing the arising and passing away of phenomena. This inquiry is at the heart of the meditation instruction *Listen Deeply*. The clarity and mindfulness of the pause is applied to external as well as to internal experience, that is, to the voices, words and appearance of others. In order to listen deeply and be fully present to someone speaking, we must be mindful. We can't be lost in our own created worlds and still be present for the other person. When someone is speaking with the quality of truth, speaking what is right for this moment, we are called to be commensurately present and aware. This is the only way we will be able to receive fully what is said, to receive it with the same energy and awareness with which it is spoken.

Deep listening is a particularly helpful means of investigation in Insight Dialogue. As we listen we can explore particular words or whole phrases, gathering meaning with intellectual precision or intuitive depth. In using language, we employ words we learned as children, with meanings and

associations constructed through the aggregated experience of our lives. Our words bear connotations conditioned by our parents, friends, and teachers; by the films we've seen, the books we've read, the cultures we've encountered. When we speak, we draw on these rich and personal associations – all that background is evoked in every word and every phrase. When someone else listens to us, our words evoke meanings from their personal web of associations. No one can ever understand what we say in exactly the way we mean it, and we can never understand anyone else's utterance in exactly the way they mean it. This is natural, and cannot be overcome entirely: language is a profoundly conditioned medium of understanding.

With deep listening we can also explore the non-verbal channels of communication: tone of voice, the rise and fall of pitch and volume, facial expression, and the nuances of posture and gesture. These signals, too, have been shaped and conditioned by our experiences. We can learn much from a voice as it mirrors the deep, internal life of the speaker, but our associations never quite match another's. We learn to listen with our whole bodies as awareness becomes more subtle. We perceive with our eyes, ears, and whole being. We notice the other's reactions to our misunderstandings, even when we do not know how or why some miscommunication occurred.

When we bring mindfulness and calm awareness to the act of communicating, we begin to see more of the associations that words and gestures have for us, that were perhaps previously invisible to us. We may become able to watch as reactive thoughts arise, watch the emotions go into reaction, and watch the body as it responds to these words. We become sensitive to the nuances of shared presence. We can see then that this meditation instruction *Speak the Truth-Listen Deeply* presents great potential for learning and a great challenge, because verbal

communication is the source of so much confusion, miscommunication and stress. The strength of people being profoundly present with each other, grounded in deep mindfulness, observation, and acceptance, opens a door to communication that contextualizes our differences. We accept differences and realize heretofore hidden commonalities. This unimpeded interpersonal contact is naturally deep; it simply flows from the strength of presence.

Listening deeply can have both active and receptive aspects. Active listening is an exploration of phenomena. It is similar to the way one brings inquiring mindfulness to the body or feelings in traditional Insight meditation. Is this stable or changing? Is this thought coming from a self, or is it a conditioned response? The mind leans into the present moment, supported by energy and focus. The receptive aspect of listening is more like the open awareness of Dzogchen meditation, or like some forms of Insight or Zen meditation when tranquility is well established. Here, we rest in the moment, alert to what arises, not seeking to examine or analyze experience. Phenomena simply arise in the field of awareness. This quality of inquiry is clear, bright and stable as experience unfolds. We lean back, relax, and know not only what arises but also awareness itself. With practice, one can move fluidly between this leaning forward and sitting back. One is not better or more right than the other; there are simply different skillful ways to be mindful.

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Meditating Together, Speaking From Silence: The practice of Insight Dialogue

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