**INTRODUCTION**

**Stillness. Listening loudly. The “Dark Silk”. The ‘Comfort’ Culture”**

I sit alone in Bashful Alley Centre. The space is empty of people. I sit still and allow my consciousness to be one of listening, what I call ***listening loudly***. When someone opens the front door in Bashful Alley the air pressure within the Centre subtly changes. You can feel it on your skin as well as on your ear-drums. Another Human Being enters the building and the bell at the top of the stairs clangs. There is now an extraordinary excitement –full of potential and the unknown. We are such complex creatures, intricate systems of energy and information. We are so surprising, so unpredictable, and infinitely capable of change and of aspiration!

In this extraordinary human alchemy, add just one or more persons and the potential for stillness and for penetrating into the unknown, for a descent into the "Dark Silk" of the Dao-De-Ching, goes up exponentially. WOW!

As with all our meetings we begin with a simple and open invitation that is extended to you, ***to bring your attention to your present state of integrity***. "*Integrity"* means wholeness and coherence. Another word to describe this well-organised and integrated state is ***"comfort",*** however like the word ***’love***’ seem to have become somewhat exhausted and weary - words that have pretty well lost their way in modern culture. If we open up to explore and discover the possibility of exploring an improved integrative state, then the reality of our human *interconnectedness* may well reveal itself and with it comes that sense of**:**

***If I blossom you blossom. If you bloom then I bloom.***The culture that surrounds us very rarely supports the still and inwardly turned inflection of attention of the kind that we are about to explore. *In fact in a variety of ways it tends to separate us from present moment experience.* Our culture is rapidly turning itself into the most mechanical culture that the world has ever seen. We more and more behave like machines. Inevitably we become less and less present. We get more goal/target orientated and busier and busier – so busy that we cannot *be* anything any more – in particular we cannot often even *be ourselves*. Think for a moment about the increasing popularity of expensive cosmetic surgery!

So our intention now is to become still (to ‘un-busy’), ***and to bring to ourselves a kind, caring and curious attention.*** This is quite a considerable challenge. As we have considered in the last session ours is *a "comfort culture"*: Invariably we are distracted from personal difficulty and we use clever technology to restlessly and incessantly redesign the world so that we become more "comfortable" with our particular expectations, likes and dislikes, tensions and flaccidities. We do not seem to get wiser this way. What we are about to explore here requires a huge exertion, what I call *an effort of attention****-*** if onlyto break the ‘gravitational pull ‘of comfort technology alone. It requires a vigilant and ***neutral*** watchfulness. It neither pulls us in to our particular likes nor pulls us away from our dislikes. This is sometimes called ***‘The Middle Way***”. Our "Comfort" Culture seems to offer me no sense of the Middle Way, and no real way to happiness and to fulfilment. I observe this within myself: *every time I pull away from pain and personal sorrow, every time I distract myself with clever technology, I can* ***guarantee*** *that the particular fear I am reactively pulling away from, will continue to chase me around- for* ever! Don’t they call that ***“Samsara”?***

So we need to be disciplined and particularly aware at the start of the session, to avoid the subtle trickiness of comparison/judgement. It is often the case in the work that I do that as we start work an individual will say:

*"I was much better last week, wasn't I".*

I usually respond to this by saying simply:

 *"Well we can only begin from where you are right now. Is there any other starting point?"*

 **The Pantomime Principle!**

We reflect on the simple observation that life only exists for us in this present moment. Life is not in the past or even guaranteed in the future.

An individual in the group then introduced us to her wonderful ***Pantomime Principle***. So many of our life-ruining fears and anxieties are ***not*** actually happening in this moment (even though they might well occur again in the near future!) T*he Pantomime Principle* is a wonderful and light-hearted reminder about the way we suffer in the midst of the “heavy presence” of such anxieties. It is a call to remember yourself whenever you are beset with a thought that is spoiling the moment with something from the long dead past: Here is the call:

***"It's behind you!"***

Thank-you Annie for the lightness and enlightenment this shares!

 **Presence and the little self**

The prime concern is not the future of humanity but the ignored presence of eternity. The quintessential requirement right now is simply that you are present. There is something empowering about human presence: ***it always subverts the authority that keeps us trapped in the limited confines of the little self***. It liberates us from suffering. There is something disempowering about being not present and becoming mechanical and reactive. But just how do we ***know*** and become familiar with these integrative and also these disintegrative states. How can we together discover how we might facilitate ***integrative shifts toward true comfort*** ***(“with-strengthness”)?*** We meditate on this in the spirit of openness and discovery. A particular kind of knowing, of ascertaining, of finding-out, invites you to move closer and closer and in a more intimate way to present moment experience. ‘Kinning’ your self is a Big Call!

We are in the process of arriving mindfully and body-fully into the present moment.

Let's begin:

**Meditation1) Arrivals:**

**Checking-in with Beginner’s Mind**

 ***To bring the body into stillness, to sit still does not automatically guarantee a quickening of perception***. It requires an intentional effort on our behalf for this to be achieved. ***The effect is both enlivening and awakening.*** Sometimes when we are fatigued, sitting still can lead to the shutting down of consciousness that we call ***sleep***. Perhaps we can appreciate now why an erect and upright spine and are a poised head are so important!: They promote alertness. Sleep is of course vital, nourishing and essential. Sleep has sometimes been referred to as "the poor mans Nirvanha. Well -the opposite of being poor is being rich and certainly there is an extraordinary wealth of sensations that flows like a mighty river through the present moment. We have reflected on some of the most accessible and imminent of those sensations. We are particularly focused on the ones that don't start and stop, that don't come and go.

In this "Arrivals" meditation we allow our attention to lightly check-in with ever-present sensations and the glimpse of eternity that they offer us– but only if we are present…

…Allow your consciousness to become that of an awareness of support. There is as ever, a rich sense of how certain key-areas ***receive*** physical support from the floor or chair. A comfortable sense of easing into that support, of settling down into it will often brings with it a sense of an opening and spreading of these regions as they receive support…

…Your backbone is an important rod of support through the centre of you. Your backbone may respond to the base of this support by opening and lengthening. The backbone, as a central armature can then become a better place to balance and manage the right and left sides and also between the back and the front of you. Developing a sense of the subtle difference between the back and front is sometimes enhanced by the thought of a set of caterpillar tracks as on an earthmoving bulldozer. Start at the top of the back of your head and let these two tracks drop down to either side of your spine until they pass through the seat bones or feet. From the feet or seat-bones the tracks continue onwards and upwards as they open you up through the front and then, at the top of your head they loop around to continue their journey back and down the length of the back...

…The sense that is awakening right now is the Body Sense. Sometimes this is referred to as the ***Intero-ceptive Sense.*** This is such a good label because it conveys a sense of the interior environment. It is of course the inner landscape that supports the life that we have in the moment. Insides and outsides and the boundaries between are so important. We are checking in with the core Intero-ceptive sense and linking this sense with the inwardly turned inflection of attention. We enter more deeply into the exceptional richness of this inner- sense by expanding your consciousness to the global nature of your skin. The skin is such an important boundary marking off the inside and the outside of you. Touch receptors are densely packed into the skin. Touch is vital to the developing human being. Without the nourishment and the stimulation of touch our capacity to fulfil our potential as human beings is seriously flawed and impaired. The developing sense of self in infancy requires the vital living human presence of touch.

We check-in on the skin from head to toe and then zero-in on the regions around the mouth and nostrils. These areas receive, not support but the air that becomes the present moment breath. The rise and fall of the rhythm of the breath is rich and detailed. Move up closer to the rise and fall. Each breath is different from another. Even though waves on the shore may at times be regular and even, they are always subtly different. So it is with every breath.

Right now we pick-out and check-in with whatever is the most vivid sensation related to the breath. These sensations may change from breath to breath. Also what stands out as vivid for you may well be very different from the individual breathing next to you.

At the point of entry of the breath, as it enters from the outside to begin its journey on the inside, it becomes something directed, a current or a stream of breath as opposed to the more diffuse air around us. This stream or current will spread out and eventually touch every aspect of the inner domain – no nook or cranny, cell or sinew will remain untouched and unnourished by the vital touch of the breath.

We are intending to use the breath as if it were a stream along which we can make a journey on into the inside, into the inner landscape…

…For a few minutes follow your breath. Move up close to your breath…. Take in the detail…and the fullness of each inhalation and exhalation…

…Your brain weighs three or more pounds. This is only a tiny proportion of the total body weight. Yet your brain draws on more than 25% of the oxygen coming in on the breath. This illustrates how important the brain is to the life within. So a fair amount of energy of the breath will eventually find its way into the structures of your brain. We are going to follow it there.

We are intending to use to stream of breath to journey into a very ancient and vital part of the brain. I've called it Security G. C. H. Q. (See the opening Meditation from session 1 for more detail). The system constantly filters the raging torrent of information. It even continues to do this during sleep. Think of it like a Black Box, a complex system that sifts through information and sensations. The computations that go on in the box answer a simple question:

 ***Is this situation/person/circumstance safe?***

The answer to the question comes out as a ***Yes*** or ***No*** at the other end of the Black Box. If it is a ***No*** then we will close down and move towards a red alert alarm-state. Then the protective barriers slam down. We will tend to regard others around us with a sense of threat and mistrust. The social engagement circuitry will shut down. The brain will release various emergency chemicals like adrenaline as a preparation for survival and for the flight-fight-freeze reaction. Obviously this does not create a state in which were open to learn new things and to form new relationships, or to explore new possibilities. If the answer to the Black Box computations is ***"Yes"*** then your brain will release chemicals like BDNF and various endorphins which promote the beginnings of trust and then the social engagement circuits will open up.

We leave check-out from this ancient system with a deep sense of gratitude. We are survivors from prehistory because of the way that its functioning has pulled us through many dangers and difficulties. The most important point here is that we want ***to establish a place of balance and equilibriums from which to observe this alarm system***. It can get hooked-up in all kinds of bizarre ways and it can create intense and life ruining discomfort. An overwhelming sense of threat and imminent doom may be triggered by something as simple as being asked to say your name aloud to a group of people! What it is that might create such intense discomfort may well be utterly inscrutable to another human being who will probably have a completely different set of hang-ups! The essential mindfulness process begins by becoming watchful over such discomforts. It is invariably the case that if I let such discomfort prompt me into an avoidance reactions then I will never be able to move beyond the fear, and it will continue to cattle-prod me and shape my behaviour in life ruining ways in the future. Loving kindness to oneself can be tough!!

We sit in the hope of finding equanimity with regard both to comfort (what it is that we are drawn and attracted to) and to discomfort (what it is that we withdraw from, that which repels us). We simply wish to notice these states in a kind caring and compassionate way.

To end this meditation we bring attention back to the surface and return returned to the interface of the skin and to the sensations around the lips and nostrils. As we come back to the world and to those around us we acknowledge the way that this security/alarm system looks after our security.

In gratitude to the system we have just been visited we end with a wish:

"***May I be safe and well and may this wish extend to all those around su. We wish that they also may also be safe and well***.

**Meditation 2) Nine round breathing**

 **Creating space in the rhythm of the breath**

In the last meditation of the evening session, we used the same light-touch gesture between thumb and finger that we used last week. This light touch helps to focus your attention and to return to the moment of suspension between the in-breath and the out-breath. Keeping your concentration and maintaining a focus on this on-going transition can be quite tricky. Your brain has to work quite hard. Particularly those regions of the brain that maintain a focused and concentrated effort are called upon. This effort of attention can be very tiring. It is almost as if a ***mental*** muscle fatigues as it works so hard. So we need to be vigilant whenever your mind drifts off, because your mind will get restless and will become bored and hungry to move on to a new stimulus. It will tend to do this as the ***mental muscle*** fatigues. It's no big deal if this happens. It is like carrying some fresh loaves from the oven. If one drops on the floor and you pick it up quickly and-- if there is no one in the kitchen- well nobody knows. Similarly if you lose it in the breathing awareness procedure– nobody knows. There is no great problem -simply bring your attention back to that key moment in the breath cycle- the transition from out to in-breath. The discipline and training here is for your attention to remain present centred.

As you settle into this process we erect a somewhat more elaborate framework around it. This is the 81 breath routine. Now we are all for sure, going to breath 81 times in the next half hour (we certainly hope!!). That the breath will happen 81 times is pretty nigh certain, we are simply going to keep track of them in order to help to anchor our attention to the present moment breath.  The 81 upcoming breaths are organised into nine rounds of nine. Each of the nine rounds then divides into three lots of three. In a round of nine we start with the attention on the right side for 3 breaths. ***Your breath is coming in through both nostrils*** but you are focused at the start of a round on the sensations on the right for those 3 breaths. Then your attention moves over to the left for the next 3 breaths. Next your attention moves to 3 breaths in which you take in both sensations sides, focused on the sensations around both nostrils. After completing the first round we loop back to the next round of 9 until we complete the 9 full rounds. You might think about like a round of golf where you start at the first tee and progress around- only instead of 18 “holes” we go round for 81!

or the first three or so rounds I will talk you through- guiding your attention from one side to the other. the final rounds are done silently.

We close the evening session with a deep sense of appreciation for the special presence each individual has brought to the session and the wish that all may be safe and well and continue to be caring and watchful of integrity and comfort for themselves and each other - and to let-go of what ever is…BEHIND YOU!!