

Linda Clair
Five-day Meditation Retreat
Kallara Conference Center, November-December 2021
Transcription from Audio Recordings

File 2B – Sunday afternoon discussion

Linda: How's everyone going? You settling in? Starting to look a bit war-torn. Seats are being taken up.

Question: I've been a bit all over the place. Particularly in this sit, just coming back to the breath, it feels sometimes difficult to locate the breath.

Linda: So you can't feel it down in your abdomen?

Question: A lot of the time I can but it does become a very light sensation, and I tried to follow it down to that, but it feels like the mind gets in. It's harder to actually come back to the breath, and sometimes when I do I can't really feel the breath as a tangible sensation.

Linda: It's going to be so subtle at times that you won't be able to, and you don't need to. So if you can't feel it what happens? There's this fear that the mind is going to come in and take over everything, but that's not necessarily the case. So don't struggle to locate it. If you really feel you need to feel it, like you've maybe got involved in thinking, maybe put your hand on your abdomen just to feel it moving again, but you don't need to be always locating it. Sometimes it becomes almost ethereal and light, and there's no need to do that. And your body is still breathing. It's going to keep on breathing whether you're aware of it or not. So that feeling the breath in the abdomen is just an anchor, it's not a way of getting away from the mind or the thinking. It's just to have that stability, that beat, to remind you – "Okay, I'm breathing." So sometimes it will be very tangible, other times not.

Question: Yes, I guess what happened was – and it's day one so I'm expecting to be all over the place – but I've been coming back to the dominant sensation in the body, different things at different times, and I would place my attention there. Then with things outside of the body as well, like sounds and smells. But feeling really all over the place doing that, and really emotional as well. Then in this last sit I dropped all of that and came back just to the abdomen, to just keep it simple, and that felt right. And there was that familiar feeling of seeing something and letting go. So going with that, and then the breath became very light.

Linda: So what do you want to happen?

Question: I guess what I want is more stability. I want to be able to see the mind more clearly and come back to the breath.

Linda: That's such a good answer! So do that, just keep going. Like you said, it's just day two – one and a half – so just keep going. Especially today everything will feel like that. It's like you're trying to get your legs, your groundedness. When you first come to something like this of course your mind is going to be shocked, and really try and get you. And you're trying to be here and use every moment of this valuable time, and you will get overwhelmed at times. So when you realise you are becoming overwhelmed and emotional – and there's nothing wrong with being emotional – just keep it simple, come back to the basic practice. So I wouldn't flit around too much with the body; if there is one sensation that is really dominant and extreme you can't help but feel that, but don't flit around too much, going around. Just keep it as simple as you can.

Question: So come back to the breath as much as possible as the dominant thing?

Linda: As much as possible, but if there's something else, like in your head, if that becomes very strong just be with it, you can't help but notice it, and that will ground you, that will really ground you. But try not to flit around too much and do too much. If you feel that's happening just bring it back, keep it simple. You'll notice the other sensations, feel them, but just use the breath to stabilise you when all that's happening. Because everything does become faster. You start seeing this and that and everything really quickly, and you really do need that stability, and that's what this practice is about. So keep doing that. You are very stable as it is, more stable than you realise. So just keep working on that.

Question: I have a question about being present: when I feel I'm attentive and present, after a while I go, "Oh, I'm here." Then I realise I'm thinking that I'm here, so maybe I'm not present. Somehow it all becomes a bit of a grey area. I don't know if I'm present or I'm just thinking that I'm present. I'm totally overthinking it. So I don't when I am present and when I am not.

Linda: No, that's true, because when you are really present you are actually absent. So there is no one there to know that you are present. But as soon as you start thinking about it, of course as you said, you are *not present*. So when that happens you don't get into analysing whether you are present or not, you just simple come back to the breath, come back to the body.

Question: It seems like I am still to some degree present. I can still feel my breath for example, while I'm thinking that. I suppose there are different degrees of it.

Linda: Yes, there are different degrees of it, it's a very relative thing. Everything is relative, nothing is total, nothing is finite. So there are definitely degrees of being present, but the more you think about it the less present you'll become. So it's up to you to not get into, "How present I am." Just cut that, come back to the breath. It's very tempting to get into that but you'll just go down into another thought and get very complicated and then mixed up, so you need to cut it! Even though it is so tempting to go into that thought about presence.

Question: It ends up feeling like resistance, if I overthink it.

Linda: Well, that's how you create unnecessary resistance. There's some resistance that is necessary and there's a lot that we ourselves feed by doing that. So you need to make that superhuman effort

sometimes not to get into that and to come back. Because one of the mind's main ploys is to get us confused and to create more resistance than is necessary. So keep it simple, if it starts to feel complicated just come back to the basic, beautiful practice of feeling the breath. Maybe even start counting your breaths then to really make that cut: "Okay, I'm not going to get into this, I'll come back." Or breath very deliberately at times. That's not controlling the breath, that's just reaffirming your intention to be in the body. As soon as it starts to get complicated in any way, make it simple, come back to where you are right now, which is simply in your body. So it's very tempting when you have some sort of realisation to really get into it and examine it and try and prolong it, but the best thing to do is to just let it go and come back to the body, as soon as you start analysing or examining, anything.

Question: Because it brings some sort of anxiety – "Am I here? Am I not here?"

Linda: Well, you're obviously here. And if you start to feel your body it's obvious, "I'm here in my body." So thinking is simply pretending that you're not here in your body. It's crazy when you look at it, so crazy. But it's very accepted, it's encouraged, we think we can't live without thinking, we think our body is going to disappear if we stop thinking. Essentially that's what most people believe: "If I stop thinking my body will disappear, I'll die." But of course it doesn't.

Question: I'm noticing – I think this has been happening for a long while – that my coming back to the breath and then a thought arising happens quite rapidly. It's like a thought comes up and in a little bit of time I come back to the breath. Then – I don't know how long, maybe immediately – it goes out again, and sometimes it's a bit longer and sometimes shorter.

Linda: Well, that's exactly what needs to be happening and that is meditation. So when you're doing something like this it's a prolonged period of that intense effort, the effort of coming back again and again. And if you're not spending very long in a thought, thinking, that's a great thing. But the thing is it will come up again, that urge to think, and you need to come back again, and then again. So what it's doing is wearing you down to a degree, because you will get very tired doing that at times, but it's also wearing down the mind because you're not letting it get away with anything – you're seeing it and coming back. And that's exactly what you need to be doing, so keep that up as much as possible. Make sure you have rests in between, and just keep doing that, that's perfect.

Question: In between sitting you mean?

Linda: In between sitting, I'd say tone it down a bit. Still be aware, try and be in your body. Make sure you have a rest in the afternoon. Whatever you're doing try and be in your body but don't be quite as intense about it because you've got another four-and-a-half days of this, so don't wear yourself out. At the same time, even though when you are doing that it does tire you in a way, it also becomes quite exciting when you see that it is possible to come back, you have got that power to come back. And that's what this is all about – taking the power away from the mind and bringing it back to your intelligence. So it's your intelligence that is bringing you back, because thinking is a crazy thing to do, it really is. Like I said, it's pretending you're not in your body, and you're always in your body.

Question: And it's repetitive and annoying.

Linda: Yes, and it's sometimes enjoyable of course – a lot of people really enjoy getting into thinking, imagining being somewhere else doing something else. But there's also the times you think when you just don't want to.

Question: In the times when I'm not sitting, I'll just keep coming back? In the past retreats I've done some of them have been very serious about the whole time being as present, and always coming back, as much as possible. So maybe tone that down a little bit?

Linda: Don't be too rigid about it. I'd say go for a walk, be in your body, eat your food, sleep. Was that a Buddhist one you went to?

Question: Vipassana.

Linda: This is a bit different to that. It's still intense, it's still going to be incredibly intense, but if you push yourself too much it can be overwhelming and you can produce unnecessary resistance. It can be too much, it can start to become too forceful. And you've got to be careful not to become too forceful because that's a waste of energy. It's like you're going up against a brick wall, and the best thing to do when you do feel that resistance is just to stand with it, don't push it. Just being there not doing anything is more powerful than pushing.

So I would say during the sits do your best. When I used to do retreats during my practice, I would really put the energy in in the morning, and then in the afternoon I'd tend to tread water a bit more, because I would be tired. And then the evening would often be a powerful sit too. So things will change. But just be careful you don't become too forceful because that will just be a waste of energy, and this is all about using your energy the most efficient way, the most valuable way. So put as much into it as you can, but don't push too much; sometimes you just need to step back, tread water, soften a bit. But keep doing that, keep seeing it. You won't feel the effects so much probably during this retreat, you'll feel it after the retreat. So good, that's really good.

So thanks for those questions. It's time to have a break before dinner.