

Mindfulness in Action
Making Friends with Yourself through Meditation and Everyday Awareness
An Online Course Taught by Carolyn Rose Gimian

Talk One: Making Friends with Yourself

CAROLYN: I'd like to welcome all of you who are here tonight for this odyssey, whatever it turns out to be, and I'd also like to welcome the online audience, who's going to be participating in this course. I'd also really like to thank Shambhala Publications for hosting this event—for, first of all, providing this fantastic space for events, and also for many, many years of providing quality books and programming on meditation, mindfulness, and spirituality. I've worked with them for a long time. I really appreciate what they do and also their support for the work I've been doing, so thank you, Shambhala.

It's an honor and a pleasure for me to be able to present the material that we're working with in these sessions. Chögyam Trungpa, who is the author of *Mindfulness in Action* and many, many other books, was a pioneer in bringing the mindfulness teachings and the practice of meditation to the West. He began talking about mindfulness and awareness in depth in the early 1970s, and yet what he was saying then is still fresh and awake and seems as though, often, it was said yesterday or last week. In particular, the uncanny insight into the difficulties and the chaos that the world is facing is something that I've found extremely helpful, and I hope to be able to share some of that with you.

The title of this course is "Mindfulness in Action: Making Friends with Yourself through Meditation and Everyday Awareness," and in fact, that kind of lays out a threefold approach to the material. "Mindfulness in Action," part 1: Making Friends with Yourself; part 2: Meditation; and part 3: Everyday Awareness. To some extent, although those topics and approaches are going to interweave, we will kind of move through the material in that order.

Tonight I'd like to talk about making friends with yourself as the basis for entering the path of meditation, or making friends with our awareness altogether. "Mindfulness" is such a very used word these days that I think part of what we need to do this weekend is to develop an understanding of what it is. It could mean a lot of things these days. It's like if I say I'm going to teach you how to swim, we might all agree the result is that you don't sink. But what is it? Is it learning the breaststroke? Is it learning the front crawl? Are you swimming on your back? Are you swimming underwater? It could mean a lot of things. And similarly, if we say that we're talking about food, that's just too generic to me. I mean, generally, food would not refer to things that your car is made of, although these days it might.

But food has a lot of categories, and if you want to understand what food you're talking about, you have to be much more specific.

Similarly, mindfulness is used, especially today, to refer to a great number of things. I think to a large extent it does refer to presence, being in the present in a nonjudgmental awareness, but there are many different ways that mindfulness is practiced. In some cases it refers to a kind of one-shot deal, a technique, that you're going to learn and apply. Here, we are talking about a technique, but we're talking about a technique that allows you to develop and have a sense of journey and a sense of path. So it's a much larger topic, and although it's mindfulness, adding the "in action" part really brings it into every aspect of your life, and therefore it also brings it into how you interact with others and the development of empathy and compassion, which are a natural outgrowth of working with mindfulness, and just a natural outgrowth of being a human being, if you allow yourself to, I suppose we could say, relax.

Why meditate? People have a lot of answers to that question, and to some extent the answer might tell us something about the kind of meditation that somebody is doing. I think the main thing I would like to say here is that the point of meditation and mindfulness in this approach is to make friends with yourself in the largest sense. The other headline would be not being afraid of who you are. Meditation is sometimes associated with checking out of your life, or finding peace in the sense that it just seems like too much and you'd like to have some space away from that. While that's a very understandable and human thing to do, it doesn't actually seem, in this era in particular—and maybe it's in every era—to be practical, because there's so much chaos and so many extremes, and if you try to just get away from that, I don't think it works, in the end. Not that you shouldn't have a little peace, in the real sense, but if you're trying to avoid things, whether it's within you or outside, eventually they come up.

I was thinking about, you know, just how extreme, as I'm sure many of you are feeling these days, things have gotten. I mean, we've got these storms going in Louisiana, flooding in the south of the United States. I read today there were flash-flood warnings in Berkeley, California, which just seemed odd to me, but seemingly not, now. So you have things like that with climate change and weather, and then you have the presidential campaigns, and that seems to be the same sort of swings of extremes. Maybe, in some ways, the whole thing is interconnected. I'm sure it is. And we have to live with that. And actually, most of us live in pretty fortunate circumstances in relationship to all of that, living in Western countries. We all have challenges, but some parts of the world have, I would say, extreme challenges.

So this isn't the only thing that you would do, but I think "why meditate?" has a great deal to do with working with those situations and engaging with our world, not turning away from it but engaging in a way that we can actually be kind to ourselves and helpful to the world as well.

Just as I was getting ready to come tonight, I saw something on the *HuffPost* in Canada about Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, who's in the United States for a little while. He gave a speech, I think, to some university students, saying that fear was easy, but friendship was much more difficult. So I have to thank him for contributing to the talk, because I think that that's pretty true and certainly relates to the work that we do with ourselves and in our lives and in the practice of meditation. Friendship sounds like a good thing, and it sounds kind of warm and fuzzy until you actually try doing it. And in any intimate relationships that people have, I think they discover that it's not easy to be a friend to others, and it's really not that easy to be a friend to yourself.

It's easy to say, you know, "make friends with everything in yourself," "open yourself to everything that's there," but again, it's more difficult. How are you going to do that, and what does that entail, and what does that really mean? I find in myself that there are certain things I'm quite willing to look at, and there are other things that I really would prefer not to—I wish they weren't there, sometimes—but I don't seem to have the choice, and I think that's true for most of us. You can spend a lot of years trying to get away from it. In that sense, meditation is a way to begin to be kind to yourself by opening to yourself. And again, there's the sense of being nonjudgmental, which is hard, so maybe it starts with recognizing how judgmental you are. One of the things about meditation is that it is space, and it's amazing how powerful space is—just leaving some space between one thing and the next, and leaving some space between the thing that you feel about yourself and the desire to push it away or pull it in. So that, I think, is the foundation of mindfulness.

In addition to the difficult stuff, which we all have to work with, one of the *most* difficult things is to recognize and appreciate ourselves, to appreciate the kindness and the gentleness that are within us. I think without those qualities already being there, we would never discover meditation. We would never persevere in it. And I don't know what it would be like if that wasn't the case: that the core is actually quite warm and vibrating and friendly. But that's hard to acknowledge, for many of us. That, I think, is also what this practice provides: a space in which we can discover that as well, and sit with it, or run from it, and then it comes back around from behind, kind of waves at you, whatever.

Another thing is that mindfulness is not easy in a chair, it's not easy on a cushion, it's not easy as a practice, but then, wow, you have all the rest of life. There can be a tendency to think, "Well, I'm going to meditate for ten minutes" or "I'm going to meditate for twenty minutes" or "I'm going to meditate

for thirty days,” but then how does that infuse itself into your life, and how do you work with your life? Anyone who’s done a retreat—group retreat or individual retreat—has probably had the experience of feeling that you’ve had some great awakening or discovery from your practice, and then you have to come back to the dishes, the kitchen sink, the dog, the car, the whole bit. And you discover that there’s still the irritating, irritable person there who in fact may be even more irritable when they encounter other beings who they’ve been able to get away from for a little while. It seemed really great while you were away, and now you find yourself just kind of freaking out.

So one of the great things about this material is that it is not just about what you do when you’re sitting and meditating; it’s about how you can bring this into your life—in small ways but also in big ways. And often it’s not techniques for changing how you talk to someone; it’s more just how you appreciate the space in which you live. And that changes everything. Not that there aren’t some techniques . . .

So I would like to ask people . . . I know this isn’t really very nice to do when you come to a public talk, but it would be really interesting and helpful to know a little bit about your experience, and I’m curious, to begin with—but I don’t totally want to put people on the spot—whether there are some new people who are just beginning meditating, or might even not have done so until tonight. You don’t have to raise your hand, but I’m interested anyway. Yeah? Okay, great. That’s fabulous. Great. Great. That’s fantastic. Feeling the sense of being a beginner is always great, so, you know, welcome to that, having that beginner’s mind.

I wonder if anybody would be brave enough to say something about their background and their practice and why they’re here.

STUDENT 1: Hello.

CAROLYN: Hi.

STUDENT 1: My name’s Molly.

CAROLYN: Hi, Molly.

STUDENT 1: I have been, I guess, dabbling with meditation for about five years now. I was an Eastern religious studies major, so I’ve done a bunch of stuff with school, and recently I have found a meditation

instructor who is my sewing instructor, and she suggested this retreat, so here I am. I'm up to twelve minutes a day. *[Laughter]* That's where I'm at.

CAROLYN: Twelve minutes. Oh boy. Well, you're going to, like, triple that. *[Laughs]*

STUDENT 1: I'm really excited to be here, so thank you.

STUDENT 2: Hello. My name is Miranda.

CAROLYN: Hello, Miranda.

STUDENT 2: I have yet to meditate in the traditional fashion—you know, with seats and thought, as it were. But I am a professional horseback rider, and I find that I have a certain sense of center when I have that relationship with the animal—having to be able to have such control and understanding and compassion with that. And I'd like to be able to find a way to translate that into the rest of my life, because there's a sense of balance and harmony and beauty there, you know, despite how tumultuous that relationship can be.

CAROLYN: Do you do jumping, or are you doing dressage or what?

STUDENT 2: Classical dressage.

CAROLYN: Really?

STUDENT 2: Mm-hmm.

CAROLYN: Oh. Okay. Great.

STUDENT 2: So it's a very theoretical and meditative practice in and of itself, with a lot of repetition and lots of working with your heart and your understanding, and listening without having verbal communication. And I find that my relationships with my animals are a lot more successful, in my communication, than with other people. So I'm looking for myself, in that sense, to be able to have that

same level of vibrational communication with myself, and then being able to translate that to interpersonal relationships.

CAROLYN: That's great. I think you have a lot to bring to this. I look forward to seeing how that comes into our work together.

STUDENT 2: I hope it does at all.

CAROLYN: I think it will. Yeah. Do you train horses? (I'm going to just push this a little bit; it's the first night!) Do you teach, or compete, or what's your . . . ?

STUDENT 2: I teach the horses, and then I also have students . . . people students. [*Laughter*]

CAROLYN: Yeah. Which are easier?

STUDENT 2: Oh, the horses by far. By a long shot.

CAROLYN: [*Laughs*] Yeah.

STUDENT 2: Because a horse doesn't ever . . . the animal doesn't have the capacity to lie to you, you know. They have a lot of ego that doesn't . . . it's not an issue. If something hurts, they'll tell you. If something feels good, if something is relaxing, they'll tell you immediately. The communication is very clear. It's very direct. But you have to be receptive to getting that information from them and have the compassion to understand the difference between "I'm grouchy today" and "today I'm in pain."

CAROLYN: Interesting. Yeah.

STUDENT 2: And so that's kind of been my life's work.

CAROLYN: Great. Thanks. So a couple of other hands. Yeah.

STUDENT 3: Good evening. My name is Steve. I've been meditating on and off for about twenty years, and I'm also self-taught through books and whatnot. I've never had the experience of being in the presence of a teacher. I'm a retired physician, and that's why my meditation practice, you know, would come and go. I'm here because one of the things I wanted to do in my retirement was to become a better meditator. And also to fill in when I miss no longer being a doctor.

CAROLYN: Right.

STUDENT 3: That was very precious to me.

CAROLYN: I bet. Yeah. Well, thank you. I look forward to learning more about that. So this is really the first time that you've had, like, person-to-person . . . ?

STUDENT 3: Yes, ma'am.

CAROLYN: Yeah, I started with books. I think a lot of people begin with books. But I . . . not quite for twenty years. [*Laughs*] That's great, though. Yeah.

STUDENT 4: My name is Susie, and I'm a complete beginner. I'm one of those people who read a lot. I'm completely in my head. So it's like I'll read about it—I'm fascinated, I'm really interested, and that goes for so many things—but always stay in the bit that's in my head rather than actually trying to do things, you know. So yeah, first time to actually experience it rather than just read about it.

CAROLYN: Great, okay. And there was somebody here? Yeah.

STUDENT 5: My name's Erica, and yeah, I think I've been trying to meditate and develop a practice for a while, but sometimes it can feel like a to-do list item—like, "Okay, I did it, and it's done. Okay, next."

And recently, I've been thinking about, yeah, bringing it into my life and realizing that I do get caught up in doing, doing, doing, recognizing the idea of, "Wait, what if I don't *do*? What if I just sit or don't get caught up in my head? What if I focus on my body and being in my body?" And I know that when I have been in my body, and when I am centered, and when I do let these things that you're talking about that are such struggles—like trying to accept myself in every way, and all the things I

struggle with . . . I know that when I do have a consistent practice and when I do have a center space that I can rely on, then I'm better at those things in my daily life and being kinder to myself, I suppose. So I really want . . .

CAROLYN: And have you done some group practice before, with other people?

STUDENT 5: I've done the kind of thing that you're talking about, in terms of retreats—mostly yoga meditation retreat kind of thing. And I know exactly what you're talking about in terms of being like “Zen” and then you're like, “Hey, you annoy me,” when you get home. [*Laughter*] But I would like to have more of a group practice, because I'm usually on my own with meditation.

CAROLYN: Okay, that's great.

STUDENT 5: So I'm happy to be here.

CAROLYN: All right, well, thank you. Okay. That's helpful. I'm really excited that there are new people here. I think this is a great practice for beginners, as well as for continuers. And it brings us, again, back to this idea of investigating what mindfulness is altogether. In terms of just the use of language, if you look at the two terms “being mindful” and “being mindless,” it's clear that we already have some understanding, because we've had these terms in the language. “Mindless” we all know about, right? Mindless is when you walk into a wall or, you know, you discover that you've left the sugar in the refrigerator and left the milk out on the counter overnight, or whatever. There's that kind of thing. Maybe there are more fundamentally mindless things, but that's an everyday occurrence.

And “mindful” . . . it's a little bit more tricky and has more nuance, but there is a kind of ordinary understanding of it that we can start with. I think one thing is that we often think of mindfulness as much more judgmental than it is or needs to be, in the sense that somebody's watching us or we are watching ourselves, trying to be mindful, and that what the point of the practice is is to become more watchful or to concentrate more deeply. Those, on the one hand, are true, but in this case we're talking about a larger sense of mindfulness, and definitely something that isn't based on good and bad but is just based on our experience of things.

And certainly, when you are in a difficult situation or a dangerous situation, like you start to skid on ice or you're afraid of something—a sort of physical threat—you immediately find yourself brought

into the present. It's as though nothing else exists. Actually, we might discover that nothing else exists. [Laughter] But most of the time we think that everything else exists, and we forget all about that, right? But when there's a threat or a heightened emotion, then there you are. And that really, I think, is a lot of what we're working with, what we're trying to get to—not in the sense of having to terrify ourselves all the time in order to experience that, but a much more gentle and all-inclusive version of being aware and being in the space, being in a situation. And then, again, the challenging thing is in action, sometimes.

So what we're going to be doing here this weekend is both a practice of meditation which is on a chair or on a cushion, and is not moving and not talking, and then we'll also be doing walking meditation, which is the beginning of a transitional practice, where you are walking and still incorporating mindfulness. We'll be looking at that throughout this course, and then from there we'll also be talking about what comes up in everyday life and bringing awareness or recognizing awareness in our lives.

I think I was supposed to talk longer, but I seem to be at the end. There's room for more questions and answers, since we have time. And it's fun to see the cameraman walk around. [Laughter] If anybody would like to raise an issue . . . or if not, not. Okay.

STUDENT 6: Hi, my name is Gina.

CAROLYN: Hi, Gina.

STUDENT 6: Hi there. So I am a yoga teacher, and I teach an after-school program to elementary and middle school-aged girls, called Project Strong Girls. The idea is to help them really learn how to love themselves and embrace themselves. I guess when you asked what brought us here, I struggle with that myself. So in a sense, I'm a bit of a fraud—you know, trying to teach girls and share all of this wisdom. That's what brought me here; that's really what caught me in the description.

CAROLYN: You're hoping to develop the wisdom by the end of the weekend? [Laughter]

STUDENT 6: We've got three days.

CAROLYN: Good. All right. Oh, phew. Well, that's a long time. We can probably deliver on that! No. Do you use any meditation or mindfulness or other techniques in working with them?

STUDENT 6: I do.

CAROLYN: Yeah?

STUDENT 6: I do. With the younger girls, you have to be a little bit sneaky.

CAROLYN: Sure.

STUDENT 6: We can't bring out the cushions and say, "Okay, we're going to sit for thirty minutes." So we get creative with that. But absolutely, mindfulness—techniques to get them to just still their bodies for maybe thirty seconds. We have little ways to do that. One of the things that I use a lot is . . . we call it a Calm Down bottle. It's like a glitter bottle. You take a water bottle and fill it with glitter and some glue, and it turns into a five-minute meditation timer for the kids. They shake it up and it kind of mesmerizes them, so . . .

CAROLYN: Maybe you could bring one and we could try it. [*Laughter*]

STUDENT 6: It works for adults too.

CAROLYN: Yeah, I bet. Yeah.

STUDENT 6: Yes. So I appreciate you being here, and I hope to glean some wisdom about that.

CAROLYN: Well, I think that's an interesting point that you raise. You know, wisdom is innate, on the one hand, and on the other hand, it doesn't happen overnight. So really, I think the honesty that you're bringing to this is what helps the most. I think sometimes what's the most helpful for a person to hear is that others have these same issues and have had them. And I think we have those issues, you know. A lot of them continue. And certainly recognizing that and being kind to yourself . . . If you can see ways in which you can be kind to yourself and help, then that could be helpful to those you're working with too.

STUDENT 6: That makes sense.

CAROLYN: I think the actual wisdom seminar is next door, that delivers. [*Laughter*] Thank you.

Well, thank you so much for coming this evening. I really appreciate seeing all of you and look forward to working with you over the period of this course. I just realized I'm saying "this evening, this evening, this evening." So we'll have to redo that. They told me I could redo, and I was like, "You can't redo with a live audience!" [*Laughter*] But thank you for your interest in this material and for being here. I look forward to our sessions together and to working together on the practice of meditation and making friends with ourselves.