**Bashful Alley Meditation Group**

**Monday 11th May 2015**

**Introduction: Journeys, arrivals and destinations**

**Three questions:**

***1) Where have we come from?***

***2) Where are we going to?***

1. ***Where are we now?***

We all have had our separate individual journeys to arrive here this evening. We are all individuals and all different, have different starting points, we live different lives, have different expectations hopes, aspirations. We meet together here to explore meditation. I think meditation concerns the third question : "***Where are we now?"***.

Becoming more present, by arriving in this moment more fully may turn out to be the best place to learn from our past (“***Where have we come from?"***), and to prepare for our future (***Where are we going to?")***.

***1. Where have I come from***

I am running barefoot along Morecambe promenade. It’s a diamond clear day in early spring and there are breathtaking views over Morecambe Bay. You might not have noticed this but the paving stones on the promenade are dimpled. This makes for quite an interesting challenge for bare feet. If I don't stay present and ensure that my feet are soft and open, it can be quite painful. It keeps you focused. I am approaching that statue of Eric Morecambe when I meet with Gloria and Cess who are enjoying a bracing walk along the promenade. Meeting people you like in this setting, it seemed quite natural for me to sing to them:

*"May your arms be as warm as the sun from up above*

*Bring me fun, bring me sunshine, bring me love… "*

After hugs of introduction Cess went on to ask me about the possibility of forming a meditation group to meet one evening at Bashful Alley. It is fascinating how we write scripts about our past. It creates a timeline to possible futures. I warm to the idea that this gathering here tonight came from a chance meeting and a song!

*"… In this world where we live there should be more happiness*

*So much love you can bring to each brand new bright tomorrow.”*

For me, a chance meeting and a song are a great start to consider best how to prepare myself for the next hour as we meet together to explore meditation!

***2) Where do I come from?***

In all kinds of ways I am interested in this simple question:

***What does it mean to be a human being in a good state?***

Perhaps we are all similarly interested? Although what we might take to be 'a good state' may well be different for different individuals. To me *a good state* means something like: being happy fulfilled, contented, balanced whole and healthy. To consider a good state, I begin with where I am are now and not where I've been and not where I would like to get to. I call this ***a special effort of attention*** and it's very interesting to me. It is also, I suggest, a vital starting point for us to come together as a group to meditate. It's very much about arriving in the present moment, about becoming present. This can be remarkably tricky. Often we fret about the past. We have fears about the future. Often in the moment we simply worry whether we are ***any good. Such judgmental and comparative thinking spoils the life we have no***w. It pulls us out of the present moment. However, notice that ***if we are aware*** of these obstacles, then this too can also be a great starting point to meditate. I guess the point is that **presence** and **awareness** are important and equally important is our **absence** and **unawareness (inadvertence)** It all comes down to observing and noticing and avoiding giving yourself a bad time through judgmental thinking.

***Becoming***

I am very privileged at times to work closely with pregnant Mums. This is the ultimate expression of creativity, feminine mystery and love. A recent Mum-to-be sought a natural childbirth through a course on hypno-birthing. She introduced me to an affirmation that she has learnt:

***"I become my birthing body."***

 I loved this expression and expanded it to include all the things that I love to do:

***I become my: running, walking, talking, reaching, singing (etc.) body.***

What it invites us to do is simply to move-up-close-and-personal to our present moment experience, and **to become more intimate with the sensations of a living body in this moment.** It is clear in this sense that to be ***mindful*** is also to be ***bodyful.*** Again the opposite to being mindful/bodyful is interesting and equally full of potential. Think for example about mindless violence and aggression. Once again there is something constructive but only if we are present and aware of the suffering inherent a state being mindless/bodyless. It may even turn out to be the seeds of forgiveness and compassion.

However the birthing, the running, the walking, the talking are all activities that ***at some point stop***! True all these actions are mind blowingly rich whenever we are present for them, but they come and they go. That's why it's great to consider some other activities that are in a way more accessible because they don't start and stop. The most ready examples are of course: heartbeat and breathing. Thankfully they don't go away and as such are more readily accessible to the practice of meditation. In the great contemplative traditions breathing rightly assumes a central role that we will soon turn too. But there is another interesting experience that is also ongoing and unchanging. It never goes away and it is ever accessible and that is ***the presence of gravity*** and the way that our bodies are continuously responding to this ever present force. We could make this part of our arriving and meeting and the start of our first meditation. This invites you right now to focus your attention on how your body is positioned in space and where the support is for your body right now.

**Meditation 1: Arriving and Inhabiting the Body with Presence**

There are times when we get pulled out by powerful emotions. When this happens we lose a sense of grounded support. Literally we get pulled off our props! There is a particular skill in which you turn attention inwards to the way your body is responding to the force of gravity. There is no point in sensing something that never changes, like gravity. Nonetheless right now this force moves through your body without which we would have no sense of support from those areas of your body that connect to the ground.

Gently bring your attention right now to those areas of support from the floor or chair and open up to the possibility of easing and softening into your ground of support. Accepting and releasing into that support may even bring about a sense of gratitude for the fact that, as this moment, the universe is supportive and also that we share the support of the ground. Like the diffuse air all around us, the support of the floor is - well just there - we take it for granted. Here and now we simply let our attention open to taking in its presence - it's "thereness".

Consider right now, what for you is the most vivid of sensations from the regions of the body that connect to the ground. The sensations are rich and extensive: Feelings of pressure, of skin to seat-bones, sensations of hardness or of softness, or texture or of warmth and cold. As the "spotlight" of your attention roams around these regions, develop a sense of which of those sensations right now is most attention grabbing and vivid. You might want to **react** to that intensity by moving and fidgeting in order to make yourself more comfortable. This is fine only so long as you monitor carefully how your intention to move flows into action.

**The meaning of 'comfort'**

Making yourself comfortable and finding comfort is very interesting. In a deep sense we are trying to seek comfort through meditation! The origin of the word "comfort" can be very revealing and helpful. It means 'with' (**com**)strength(**fortitude**). Taking strength from within yourself and from the relationship that your support structure has with what is around you is a great start for meditation. If through the process we become more truly more comfortable then, we will have taken strength from our support structure and our surroundings which of course, can further include others in the space around. The modern day use of the word 'comfort' has drifted very far from its origins and has come to mean something more like redesigning and refashioning the environment to accommodate to our tensions and flaccidities. This can only led to a contorted, restless and agitated fidgeting. You see this when someone endlessly crosses their legs first one way then the other. This restless agitation is not a source of the comfort, strength and stillness that we seek through the practice of meditation.

**The contemplative wisdom traditions - an upright spine**

All of the various contemplative traditions seem to be on the same page. They recognise the importance of an upright posture and an erect spine. We can best achieve this older sense of the word "comfort" if your backbone is self-supporting right now. This is not about establishing a correct posture in any way. It's really about how the mind and body connect in ways that maintain, and even improve integrity, order and coherence. The older and original meaning of comfort captures a very important part of the meaning of the integrity and poise that we seek through the practice of meditation.

Perhaps right now you have some discomfort? Perhaps you want to make an adjustment. Be clear and mindful that, as you do this***, it is not reactive*** and that you are present for that intention to flow into, and to open and ease into your base of support. This can bring a pleasing sense of settling down - of arriving. Here we are establishing that all important hyphen (-) or link between neuro-muscular, mind-body, psycho-physical.

We are inviting here a dignity of length to open up through the backbone. It can allow that grounded support to move up from the ground and up through the support structure. As it gets to the other end, to the head and neck, it creates the opposite of gravity, a levity or light poise in the way that your head I sits on top of the column of the spine. Seen with the right kind of opening attention and release, we can settle down, arrive in the here and now and become more present for these integrating possibilities. In this way calm-up! This is an ongoing part of the process of life that always and only ever exists ever in this moment. It is a source of nourishment, replenishment, renewal and strength. An important part of this renewal and beginning is simply ***to cease to ignore the life that passes through us now***. Then we can move on to attend to it in ever more skilled ways. Perhaps in this way, through the process, we can become more true to life.

As we settle down in the body and calm-up in the mind we can begin the process of undoing whatever is hampering a process of bringing us into a better state of poise and balance. This has an important and significant focus in the poise and balance of your backbone. You simply can't do this. You can't make it happen. The trick is to be able to use your intention to focus on whatever it is that is hampering it. This is a skilled way of beginning to use the Body Sense. This important sense has been recently upgraded by neuro-science as the **Interoceptive Sense**. Intelligently using this sense modality is an important and learnable skill.

It is possible right now to expand your awareness from an attention to the site-specific areas that receive support from the ground. Consider now the whole head-to-toe length and the entire surface area formed by your skin. Your skin is not a sack-like container for your body. It is really a sense organ, in fact it is your brain turned inside out! It is the way that your brain finds out and explores the world that is around it. Right now there is a huge and cosmically great torrent of information flowing from your skin-organ alone. Over huge aeons of evolutionary time certain areas of the skin-organ have evolved to become specially sensitised to certain 'touches': your eyes have become sensitised to the touch of light waves; your ears to air molecules as they touch the tympanic membrane and, taste and smell sensors have become sensitive to the touch of certain molecular shapes that unlock for us the sense of taste and smell. Allow your awareness to expand to the exquisite surface of the skin. Reflect on the fact that this sense organ that connects us to the world, is really the mammy and daddy of all those other more specialised 'touch -senses' that reach out and touch the world around at a distance from our bodies.

Opening and expanding your awareness to your skin as the interface between you and the world around is an important way to appreciate the all important boundaries that actually form the fabric of the Sense of Self. How do we create a sense of a precise boundary between what is me and not me? At some level that boundary may dissolve and disappear and be seen as a highly useful fiction.

We are finishing this mediation session with an appreciation of how the body sense is working to create a rich sense right now of where you are in space. This is **presence** and can expand further into the space around and can take in that there are others who also occupy the space around you.

We finish this particular meditation with sense of appreciation and gratitude that we share a sense of the same ground of support and in a similar way that we share the air that is around us. True we are all different. We need the boundaries of separation that create a separate Self but as those frontiers dissolve we can appreciate that we share so much that is the same. It connects us. We are all at the quantum level interconnected and swimming in the same quantum soup. We **are** the quantum soup!

In this session we have been easing into and sensing the base of support in order to open up a lightness that moves through a poised, still and balanced spine. If we fail to awaken to these connections then things become leaden and heavy. Life is never like that! It becomes clear that in an important sense, the opposite of enlightenment is 'enheaviment'. Enheaviment ensuses whenever we lose the poised balance between gravity and levity, enlightenment ensues when we attain that poise.

**Meditation 2: The Position Sense**

Sit comfortably upright without any stiffness or rigidity. Your backbone is poised and easy.

Imagine you have a huge, saucer-shaped bowl sitting on your lap. It is full of tiny pinpoints of multi- coloured lights. There are 53 trillion of them! Plunge your left hand down the side of the bowl and then wiggle your left-hand fingers. Sense how the different coloured lights flow and dance through your fingers and hand. How the lights undulate and dance as you gently lift them with your fingers. Then agitate them a bit more by bringing in a little wrist action. The little lights jump and dance a bit higher now. Bring a little bit more action from the elbow and toss the lights around high enough to reach your shoulders. Now plunge in your arm from the shoulder and them high enough to flow down your face and the top of your head. Then throw them even higher to float down the whole length of the left side of your head and back. In the end you have covered the entire left side and it is now all aglow with millions of pin points of light.

Take your left hand out of the bowl and replace it with your right hand. For a moment just let your hand sit there and then wiggle your fingers and watch the lights undulate as they dance and lift and fall. Bring in the wrist and then the elbow, getting the little lights to dance in front of you. Bring in the upper arm and shoulder and you can lift the lights so high they pour down covering the right shoulder and then down the entire length of the right side of your back and seat-bones.

Now the entire right side has joined the left side in being covered and aglow with trillions of pinpoints of twinkling coloured light.

Settle into your base of support and take in the front and back of yourself. Let the tiny coloured points of light add to a strong sense of the back as well as the front of you as well as the top and the bottom.

We are about to move attention around using those pinpoints of light that now cover the entire surface of your body. We will use these pinpoints of glowing light as triangulation points to draw your attention back whenever it wanders somewhere else perhaps into the past, perhaps into the future. You do have complete control over how your attention moves around in space and time. For the present purposes we wish to explore how your attention can extend out from the dancing points of light. In this way your attention can work a little bit like a telescope. It pulls out and extends and then pulls in and retracts.

To begin with, select any pinpoint anywhere on the surface of the dancing lights. Extend your attention out to the wall and then draw it back again. Select a pinpoint somewhere in the region of the bellybutton and extended out as far as the wall in front. As you draw it back again towards you, pause about a metre from your belly button before then returning it back to its pinpoint. As this builds up remember that there are trillions of these glowing dancing multi-coloured lights. So there is an endless choice of points to keep coming back to. As it develops the pinpoints of light become radiating multi-coloured lines moving out from the body surface.

Take a tiny pinpoint from the base of your tailbone and this time extend it a few thousand miles down to the centre of the earth and back. Then take a point on the top of your head and extend it through to the roof, then to the clouds and then to the stars and back.

As you continue the process of drawing out those radiating lines from the pinpoints, you will eventually build up a precise image or silhouette of how the volume of your body is exactly disposed in space.

Continue the process of drawing your attention back every time it wanders, to the pinpoints and the radiating lines.

Eventually if you have covered enough of the entire surface you can then pull back your attention and take in a sense of how these pinpoints and lines trace out the boundary between the inside and the outside of you. As this develops it brings with it a deep sense of exactly how your still, poised and sensing body is positioned in space.

At this point if you make even tinniest movement, say lift an eyebrow, the shape subtly changes and the pinpoints of light and lines shimmer and dance.

Bring your attention back to your exact position in space. Take in how it is in relation to others in the space around you. As this procedure comes to a close bring your attention playfully to that bowl in your lap and plunge your hands into the lights and toss them around the space so high that they now cover everybody in the room!

**Meditation 3: An ancient and modern mindfulness meditation:**

***"May I be safe and well.***

***May others around me be also safe and well."***

This mindfulness practice uses the ancient and royal road to present-centred and inwardly turned awareness by focusing on the continuous and rhythmic rise and fall of the breath. The breath becomes the ***secure and safe*** haven to anchor a watchful and caring attention. The Latin word for breath is ‘spiritus’ which forms the root for many words including ***‘inspiration’***.

Attention eventually focuses on the entry point of the breath. This is the point on the body surface around the nostrils and lips where the diffuse air in the space around the body becomes the focused flowing current of air that enters deep into the inside of the body. This becomes a useful symbol for crossing the line or interface between the port of entry inside and the outside of the body. Later these important boundaries are revealed as key features of how a sense of Self is first created and fashioned by the body sense.

The breath crosses a series of membranes as it travels deeper and deeper into the body. Eventually the breath will nourish every part of the interior of the Body/Self and this will include the brain, which draws upon approximately a quarter of the total metabolic cost of 'running' the body. We are currently now ‘surfiding’ the current of the breath as it moves around the body. Eventually this can take us deep into an ancient circuitry that is buried deep within your brain. The system of this complex circuitry system filters through a mind-boggling flow of information. It behaves a little like the national security monitoring centre at GCHQ at Cheltenham. Complex as the information is that our Inner Security System handles, basically this system asks a very simple question:

***Is this current situation/person/surroundings safe?***

If the outcome of the complex sifting process is: "***Yes. It is safe"***, then the body and in particular the social engagement circuitry in the brain clicks into place and we are ready and open to new possibilities.

If the answer that filters out is: ***“No, the situation is not safe”***, then the brain proceeds to go into a “lock down" and it then will shut down engagement with the world around and in particular with relationships with people around. It will do this in order to prioritise as it looks to protect the integrity of the body. Should this develop to a high state of alert then eventually it will engage the freeze, fight, flight, or collapse and "play dead" mode.

The aim of this particular Mindfulness practice is first and foremost to acknowledge and to express gratitude to this Inner Security System. We are here in our present incarnation because of the way that it functioned in our evolutionary past, even though and especially in our modern living conditions, it can often make some life ruining errors. Often these errors focus on the **False Negative**: when the security system regards something as a threat to your integrity that is perhaps not really a threat at all. However if we think about the way that evolution has shaped things, it is likely to err in this direction. This is because our ancestors were most likely the ones who successfully scarpered or took the appropriate or offensive action when there was occasionally, no real threat at all. The ancient individuals who ignored the danger warning signs and who made the **False Positive** error, are very likely ***not*** our ancestors!

***It is a key higher aim of reflective mindfulness practice to become aware of mental activity and to notice and to observe this activity***. In this way we get to know our Selves. In a sense we begin to ‘ken’ ourselves in this way and this is an intimate and intuitive process, a kind and accepting kind of knowingness that is not worldly in nature. It is in fact **Self-knowing.** This opening Mindfulness meditation is in fact a first step to create a real sense of choice in the face of the reactivity of our Inner Security System which can sometimes cause havoc and life ruining chaos in a modern life.

Our opening meditation moves toward the end with a high level wish or intention, one that acknowledges a deep gratitude for this ancient Inner Security System. Whatever trouble it causes it is nonetheless always working for our security and well-being. The kind and curious attention that watches over the operation of the system in the brain opens out at the end of the meditation to be an extended wish or intention to be safe:

***May I be safe and well***

***May others in the space around be safe and well.***

 ***We are interconnected such that:***

***If I bloom and blossom you bloom and blossom***

***If you bloom and blossom, I bloom and blossom.***

With kinship and kindness

John Woodward May 2105