**Introduction**

**Comfort and Discomfort...Revisited!**

We opened by considering the importance of ***taking responsibility for your own comfort. You are also responsible for your own discomfort.*** If we take '*responsible' here* to mean: "*able to respond*" then we must ***firs***t sense and experience in order to***know*** comfort and discomfort. The invitation to move closer in to experience is continually extended in Mindfulness-in-Action work. It is a process of ***‘kinning’*** yourself or knowing yourself. ***Everything depends on the unconditional nature of this ‘kinnedness’ or kindness***. In its genuine, untainted form it must be unconditional. This means that the invitation is not in any way conditional on any reciprocal gesture or action. This unconditional nature is made powerfully clear in the contemplative wisdom traditions: ***compassion, kindness or love is pure and without the attachment of conditions.***

You are responsible for yourself and you make a choice to attend and be present for this invitation or not.
There are times this can be tough! In my experience of teaching Mindfulness- in-Action so far, here are some of the reasons I have been given as to why I have made participants feel very uncomfortable:

 ***too much action/not enough action.***

 ***Asking individuals to sing/asking participants not to sing.***

 ***Too much talk and guidance/not enough talk and guidance.***

 ***Requesting people to introduce their names/not asking people to introduce themselves.***

 ***And many more...***

... I draw a simple conclusion from this***:***

***concerned as I am about participants comfort, I cannot know what it is that might cause you discomfort or what it is that you like and expect and what it is that you do not like and do not expect. My essential role is simply to make that invitation that may draw your attention deeper and more closely to the experience of both comfort and discomfort. This is our beginning.***

 I am sometimes asked to change the way that these classes are presented so they conform more to what an individual expects and feels more comfortable with. This is simply ***not*** the way to find real strength and integrity. On the other hand the invitation to attend in a kind and caring way in order to observe these experiences, particularly with regard to discomfort is a true way to discover real strength and integrity. This in way implies an unpreparedness to change. It is simply a matter of establishing a first priority.

***Comfort* as giving in to weakness** ?

It is perhaps significant that the word "***comfort***" has undergone a meaning shift such that it has almost come to mean the exact opposite of the mediaeval meaning and usage as "*with strength".* These days comfort seems to have come to mean an expectation that the world, and others around us in the world, must be redesigned to accommodate to our neediness and weakness. A deeper reflection on this reveals that this draws upon a lower human quality. This manipulative and ultimately selfish nature seems to be the main fuel that drives the engine of a consumer and ego-driven society. It simply doesn't seem to make us happy – only weak and needy.

It is important to be clear about expectations of a Mindfulness-in-action meditation class:

 ***Is it about getting more of what we like and expect?***

***Is it a form of pleasant escape from the clutter and busyness of a typical modern life?***

 The process of coming home to oneself, of knowing oneself in a kind and caring way is tough work and it involves an unwavering and uncompromising effort to attend to and to observe and to know ('ken') human experience. This extends to all experience- the ones that we like and attract that us and also those that we don't like and repel us.

***Mindfulness is not a state of mind but a way into action based on the integrity of experiences in the present moment .*** This is a key thing that Mindfulness-in-Action groups have revealed. I guess this could well mean that we might meet together as a group and that we could sit, stand, sing, walk, talk dance, touch, be silent, engage in a joint activity. All experience is in itself a source of knowing oneself and is not conditional upon any particular conditions or setting: a temple, a shrine,special mantras or mandalas, a particular cross-legged sitting posture etc . This is the way of meditation that the Ramana Marharishi recently taught and is even more simply stated in the Buddha's challenge that we should:

"***Meditate in the market*** ***place!”***

 **Some reflections on** **The Dao -The Watercourse Way**

The departure of Yahling from the Monday group left me with a yen to revisit the Dao de Ching. This venerable Chinese teaching comes from an ancient contemplative tradition. A different culture can be a great mirror. Even the way these teachings are passed down in a pictographic script that is more contextual than ours, can be very revealing. The commentary that I dip into and respect comes from a Chinese Tai Chi Master who is taking a group through a calligraphy class. The commentary on the Dao is given by the Master Al Chung-liang Huang as the participants are guided through the actions of writing the Chinese script characters of the Dao de Ching.

**Chapter 1 of** **The Dao De Ching**

Master Al Chung points out that the opening statement features three times in succession the Chinese character for the Dao, It states:

"***The Dao that can be Dao'ed is not the Dao ".***

This could be translated as:

 ***There is no way to know your deep nature that can be expressed in statements and words****.*

The first "Dao" means ***"the Way"***; the second "Dao" means "***a statement in words***";The third "Dao" means ***"deep Nature".***

**Chapter 2: The Dao De Ching**

A little further we find the following two utterly contradictory statements:

***"No-name is the beginning of heaven and earth."***

Juxtaposed with this comes:

 ***"Name is the mother of all beginnings***."

Paradoxically both statement sit together just like the left brain and the right brain sit inside one skull and can never know and understand each other!

It seems to me to imply that words are vital to form our human self-reflective consciousness. However the maps that we make of the territory of our experience with words, can never be those experiences themselves. Words fix experiences that are in the nature of things fluxing flowing and ever-changing. We need however to have the anchorages that words provide. They form crucial fixed points in a frighteningly ever-changing space. In particular we label experiences as good or bad (judgement) and this blocks the process of a deeper connection to our essential nature. Here the Dao is very clear concerning the Non-doing process of unblocking the 'watercourses' so that they can again begin to flow whenever the interferences, blocks, accretions and attachments are released and eased.

Ch 2 ends with a very concise bit of wisdom to take into the marketplace!:

 ***"Do not cling to the achievements of your actions and you will never worry about losing them!”***

It says a lot about freeing oneself and attachments!!

***Chapter 3***: **The Dao De Ching**

Chapter 3 goes into what I call ‘***kinning***’: the process of moving more intimately close to present moment experience. It is described as the skill of attention to non-action and describes the process as: "a descent into the mystery of being". The Chinese character for "mystery" is very beautiful: it' depicts a woman cradling a baby in her arms. The process of the descent is poetically referred to as "an adventure in dark silk". Chapter 3 ends with a description of how a Mindfulness teacher might help :

 ***"the sage helps others by softening their ambition while strengthening their bones".***

I cannot think of a more wonderful and apt expression of the real meaning of comfort!

If you are sitting comfortably, lets begin...

 **MEDITATION 1 :**

**Arriving and Attending**

In this meditation your attention is invited to touch lightly on a wide spectrum of present moment sensations. The discipline here is to treat your attention a little bit like a wayward child that needs firmly but gently bringing back to the task at hand. A child of course, is very fully in the present moment. We however require a disciplined effort of attention, one that is curious, kind and caring. Perhaps in much the same way as you might care for and *mind* a young child Our task is to mind-fully embody the present moment, to inhabit the body-fully in the way that comes so naturally to a child and to the child within us.

 We move through a number of checking-in possibilities with regard to present moment sensations.

It is humbling that in any given moment there is a raging torrent, a flowing and mighty river of sensations. We can only ever sample of tiny droplet at any given moment in time. The skill comes in sampling or attending to whatever may engender and encourage integrity. Integrity and comfort are just two sides of the same coin. Perhaps we can think of this as being true to life, because life is a gift that we have only in the moment and it is always working to maintain and even improve integrity. That's how we got here, that's how we evolved!

Right now consider what sensations are most vivid and draw your attention. Let that also include thoughts. If there is pain then let this intensity draw your attention. This will usually qualify as the most vivid! For the moment let whatever sensation grabs you most to softly engage your attention...
…Allow your attention to spread now to the surface area of your skin. Once again endeavour to establish which regions of the skin are most vivid for you right now. There might be a background niggle: an ache in the knee or a pain in the neck. The most vivid sensation might be around the region that is directly in contact with the floor or chair: sensations of hardness or softness pressure texture or warmth. Allow your attention to lightly touch the sensations in such a way that it is neither drawn in to them or equally, pulling away from those sensations The sensations are simply what they are and are accepted as such - just as they are! They are the starting point or entry into the present moment. Sometimes this is expressed as ***Acceptance (without judgement)*** Sometimes this may be referred to as ***Beginners Mind.***

Allow your attention to take in the support of the floor or the chair. Encourage a sense of easing and opening into that support. This allows your attention to take-in the ever present force of gravity. Somehow, mysteriously the presence of gravity creates within you it's opposite*: levity.* As we did last week we explore this in terms of ***settling down and calming-u .*** This may create a comfortable sense of the back and front of yourself and how they relate. Think of your back as settling down into the base of your support in your seat bones and feet. Think of the front as opening up and creating a sense of ease and lightness, one that transmits via a sense of lightness of poise all the way up to the carriage of your head on top of the spine. The free and unhampered movement of gravity and levity through the support structure lends a sense of natural dignity, a length and poise in the backbone.

Allow your attention to take in in a sense of a spread of awareness of the skin from your head to your toes.

Select any point on the skin surface and extend your attention outwards and draw it back like a telescope…

… Now select that particular area on the surface of the skin where the breath begins. At a key point the diffuse air around us becomes the current of the breath as it enters through the nostrils. Once again check out the most intense and vivid sensations this time concerning the breath. Is it that tingle of sensation as the breath enters the nostrils? Perhaps it is the rise and fall of the chest or belly or an expansion of the ribs?

An individual in the group is currently dealing with the imminent death of an individual, somebody they know well. We pause here to consider the two *one-off* breaths that bracket each of our lives: the first in-breath, and the last out-breath.

There follows a long and intimate silence. It ends the first meditation.

**Meditation 2**

**Breath as a received gift**

Life is an infinitely precious gift. We receive the gift only in the present moment. This is the only place that life exists. Life is not in the past or in the future but right now. In an important way the breath (of which there is a first), celebrates the life that at some point finally ends (with the final out-breath). Each in- breath is a kind of renaissance, a celebration of birth, of life hope and possibility.

We begin this session with a sense of gratitude for life and breath as it renews itself in the cycle and the rise and fall of the rhythm of the breath.

The invitation now is to move more intimate and close to the breath. We may merge with the breath, we may even ***"become the breathing body".*** This feels very different from the expression: ***"I take a breath".*** Perhaps the difference between these two descriptions: " ***I become my breathing body"*** and ***"I take a breath",*** may offer an insight into the process of mentioned in the Dao De Ching ***"Softening your ambition in order to strengthen your bones".*** Bear in mind the extraordinary journey that the current of breath makes in order to arrive and nourish the marrow at the centre of your bones!

***Do we take a breath (doing) or do we receive it (Non-doing)?***

There is a rise and fall rhythm to the breath in which the out-breath comes to an end and completes its cycle and then there is a brief moment of suspension as the out breath transitions into the in-breath. In a more skilled way to use our attention we have an extraordinary capacity to create space! So right now allow your attention to take in the space that is just before the transition, and the space just after the transition and as the out-breath becomes the in-breath.

The difficulty we will often encounter is the wayward nature of the attention. Despite our best efforts the attention wanders away from this recurring moment of transition as the out breath becomes the in breath. Attention will disappear off into the past or future. *When this happens simply notice it.* Welcome it as an opportunity to further practice a return to celebrating the life that we have here now. At some point there will be the one stand-alone out-breath that is ***not*** followed by an in-breath. This forms a natural and inevitable end to life. The sacred nature of the breath reveals itself when there is no more air to breathe! A grim old saying from the Orient goes:

***"To the drowning man God is one cubic centimetre of air***"!

The quality of attention that we bring is caring and welcoming to the life that comes on the wave of the next in-breath. We do not not snatch at the gift nor take the next breath for granted. It is warm and welcoming in that transition moment. Perhaps you could think of the next upcoming breath as like a dear old friend on your door-step. The friend rings your doorbell to come in. In that moment of transition and suspension you open the door and you greet your long lost friend.

We use a tiny gesture to help to anchor the return of attention to a celebration and warm greeting for the in-breath. Towards the end of the out-breath and beginning of the in-breath, touch your thumb and one finger together lightly. In this way you link a key moment of the breath cycle together with a small muscle gesture in order to mark a key point in the rhythm and rise and fall of the breath.

If you are comfortable with this we may spend our remaining time together in the session silently and without any further guidance.

That session ends by touching-in lightly again to some of the richness of the river of sensations flowing around and about us : from the skin; from the sounds and sights and from the presence of others.

 We close with a sense of celebration and gratitude for taking this hour of time to nourish comfort and integrity.

We departed after a lively appreciation and discussion of the poetry of the Dao-De-Ching and the wonderful description of meditation as a descent into the mystery of being: “***an adventure into the dark silk”.***

***John Woodward 25th May 2015***