

Challenge Check-In (5 of 5) Agency Through Checking In

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Good morning, everyone. This week I am talking about challenges. This is going to be the general theme for a while. Challenges can be very challenging – they are difficulties that we are having trouble figuring out how to be with, where it's not clear what to do. Sometimes we have to figure something out; it can be overwhelming. So there is a wide range of what might be called a challenge.

This week I offered what I call a “challenge check-in” – the mindfulness check-in. It has many functions. One is to take a step away from business as usual with a challenge, when we're really caught in, oppressed by, and preoccupied with it, and we're focused on the clear idea that *this* is the problem. To step away, to not be caught in anything, and to take a sacred pause to check in. To have a framework and perspective through which to look at our experience that is different from the perspective we might have been using that provides the idea that “I have a challenge.”

We can check in with how we are physically. We might discover that we're tense or that our posture is out of balance. We can relax the body; we can bring balance to the body. We might exercise in order to get some pleasant feelings flowing in our body, rather than feeling all congested.

We check in with the feeling tones – the sense of whether things are pleasant or unpleasant. When we feel challenged, there is generally something that feels unpleasant. This can be generated by being preoccupied, afraid, angry, or upset. It is a generous act to feel how our contribution sits in us, because feeling this allows something to make space and to dissolve, to open up, and become clearer.

Attention to feeling tones also gives us a chance to realize there is much more here – there is also pleasure; there are some good feelings. We realize we have been preoccupied or fixated on the unpleasant, or we see the world through the unpleasant. But since there's more here, what happens if we include what feels right and good?

We check the mind state – the emotion or attitude with which we are operating. To see it as just that: “Oh, that's an attitude. That's an emotion. That's a mind state that I have – a mood. And I'm with it. I'm not it. I don't have to see through it. I don't have to have those glasses – those lenses – on. There's another way.”

We check the mental processes. “Am I involved in processes that are keeping me tight, contracted, and grasping? Or am I touching into a practice, a mind state, or a way of being that clearly recognizes the challenge but is freeing in the midst of it?”

Going through this check-in has many functions. One is that, because some of the challenges we have are really big, and some of the ways we can be with a challenge (even a small one) are not productive, by giving ourselves a check-in, we might see that. We might see: “Oh, I need to do something here. I need to somehow break the trance – break out of this funk. I need to clear out so I can start fresh.”

So we do something that refreshes us or resets us. This could be a wide range of things. Different people have different things that they do. But the idea of having agency is invaluable – to shift how we are and put ourselves in a more productive, useful mode, rather than being stuck in the challenge. When we're stuck in it, what often happens is we tend to ruminate and repeat the same thing. This just strengthens the challenge and makes it get worse.

You can do something as simple as going for a walk or having a hot drink. If you know how, to nap for 10 minutes. Meditate for 10 minutes; take a shower; listen to music. Call up a friend and have a human conversation with someone. Or go someplace where you can lose your preoccupation because it's so nice to be there. You might volunteer at an animal shelter and spend some time with kittens, and that can pull you out of your caught-ness.

By doing the check-in, you find out, "Oh, I'm really caught." For example, if you can't do the check-in because you're so caught up, that's a clear indication an intervention is needed. Not an intervention where you escape forever, but maybe you escape for a little while sometimes, so you can come back refreshed in a good way.

The other thing the check-in does is provide a lot of information about how you are. Then you can figure out, "Okay, knowing this about me, now I have a better sense of what I can do." Both of those – doing an intervention for yourself, and doing something different to better understand what's happening so you can be with yourself or adjust – both involve agency.

In our Buddhist scene, there is a lot of emphasis on: "Don't control – you shouldn't be controlling your meditation" – which has some truth to it. But we also don't want to dismiss agency. Sometimes we dismiss agency because of the strong emphasis on not-self, and agency is where the self operates. But agency can exist without the kind of self that we get caught in. We want to begin feeling and engaging in our capacity to choose and have agency with what we do. With extreme challenges, we can tend to freeze and become overwhelmed, and then we don't use our capacity for agency. So going away and escaping the challenge for a while is an act of agency. Checking in with yourself is also an act of agency.

By using that agency, we slowly start discovering how to use it in a helpful way. We don't pile on self and self-identity, shoulds and shouldn'ts, or: "I'm supposed to be able to manage here." This agency is almost the same as the agency we use for attention. We learn to do it in a soft way, in a gentle way, in a kind way. We learn a kind of agency that we enjoy.

I want to suggest that with challenges it is invaluable to discover some pleasure, some goodness, some rightness – something that feels right and good. If we can, we do that by how we accompany the challenge – how we show up for it and are attentive to it – so that we have confidence in our agency (not necessarily that we know what to do). But confidence that we can always have agency: the agency to do the mindfulness check-in; the agency to pause, not do anything, and just look at the situation; the agency to ask for help; the agency to recognize: "Wow. I don't know what to do here. This is overwhelming." We do this in a clear conscious way – not burdened by it, but just recognizing: "Wow. I'm overwhelmed."

We start discovering that this sense of doing can be freeing and relaxing, and can give us a different place – a source within – from which to act. When we're engaging in a challenge, sometimes we're coming from a place of being a victim, or feeling inadequate, confused, angry, or just scattered, which will often make the challenge harder. But if we can recognize we are that way by doing the check-in, we can begin to find agency, and we begin to find another way that feels good.

So the mindfulness check-in has a lot of functions. There are probably many more than I've said, and maybe you're discovering some too. But take some time to experiment with this simple checklist: body, feeling tones, mind states, and the processes of the mind – how the mind is behaving, the operating principles. Is it behaving in a way that is deleterious or beneficial – a way that's getting you caught, or one that helps you have more space and freedom?

My plan is to continue this series on challenges for the next few months, with the idea that we are slowly building and laying a foundation here. In that regard, I'd encourage you to look for manageable, maybe minor, challenges, and start to bring to them some of this exploration of being with challenges that we've been laying out for these last few weeks. You will be creating your own foundation for what we do as we go along, so that one day you might have a new, wise capacity for being with some of your major challenges. Thank you.