# The Mahāsī Method

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 22:50

Now what I want to do this evening is just explain the theory behind the practice you're doing so that you feel a bit more confident about it.

The Mahāsi Sayadaw was a monk living in the north of Burma who must have got himself a good name for teaching meditation because it was people in Rangoon, which is in the south, well, in the middle of Burma, who went looking for a teacher after the war. Generals, actually. A couple of them were. And they asked him to come down and begin teaching. And I think to everybody's surprise, it took off.

Up until he began teaching, although there'd been a small resurgence of *vipassanā* meditation in the early century, by the time he began, it really wasn't something that lay people did. I don't think it was what monks did either. Monks tended to practice a form of meditation known as *samatha*, which is basically just being peaceful, being calm, using the breath just to be calm but not for purposes of trying to understand or trying to have insight.

So it was really quite a new venture and as I say it really took off. So much so that by the mid-fifties he was actually traveling and he went to Sri Lanka, set up centers there and it was at one of those centers that I spent so many years. And then he eventually came to Britain, did a tour of Britain, used to be a centre over in Oxford. And that's where I first contacted this particular form through one of his protégés, Sayadaw Ujanaka, who's still living and has a centre in Rangoon, and later his other protégé, Upandita. And some of you may know, for instance, people like Joseph Goldstein, he's pretty famous. So he teaches this particular system.

So it's taught around the world, really, and we're pretty lucky in Britain now because they're opening a center in Manchester, the monks who come from Upandita's line. So there'll be a fundamentalist center in Manchester.

So what he did was present a system of investigation supported by techniques so that there wasn't a moment in the day when you were let off, when you could relax into a dozy, peaceful state. You had to make a real effort to develop this quality of just watching with a sharp or an attentive curiosity, a wanting to know. Remember, it's this wanting to know which is specific to the Gnostic path. Gnostic here meaning the path that leads to a spiritual awakening by way of investigation, rather than, shall we say, a path that might lead there through developing love, a more devotional path, a bhakti path.

So all these techniques that we're doing are really there just to awaken this pure intelligence within us, this intuitive intelligence that can directly experience things before words and concepts interfere, before

emotions distort what we're actually looking at, prejudice.

So, first of all, in the sitting posture, there's this noting technique. So one thing this intelligence has to do is go beyond the word. So the question is, why do we use a word anyway? So obviously the technique, what it does when you present one word, is at least it stops the mind from wandering. At least it stops the mind thinking about something. So we're going right back to that slightly pre-verbal stage when, for instance, a child might see something and just shout, "Car, car." But the word car has very little meaning. It doesn't have a desire to have a car. It doesn't have all the experiences that we get going around in a car. It's just a car. It's just an object. And it's that clarity of just noting that we want to get down to. And the clarity comes because the noting word is restricting the thinking mind. So, okay, there's a concept there, but at least it's a simple concept. Just a word. Rising. Falling.

Now I say in this particular tape, I mean to change it for my next edition, that you go rising, falling, and in the break between the out-breath and the in-breath, you see the whole feeling body. And I give this image of a bird in a tree, and then you see the whole tree because the bird's not moving. You don't have to specifically look at the bird. But as soon as the bird moves, your eye catches it.

So some people find this a little bit difficult. So the other thing you can do is simply go to a touch point. So rising, falling, and then if you feel, for instance, your ankles on the floor or your knees or your hands, so you just go to that point. The reason for that is just to keep the thinking mind occupied. If you don't occupy it, it'll occupy itself and off it'll go somewhere. Acapulco. Who wants to go to Acapulco in the middle of London?

So by maintaining that word, you're actually containing the thinking mind and constantly aiming it at the object. Now some people in their meditation don't get this break after the out-breath. In which case, forget it. Just go rising, falling, rising, falling. Don't create a break if there's not one there. Usually it's because of tension. A person who doesn't have that break actually is slightly hyperventilating. This is the truth. So, it'll come as you relax. Because the breath just stops and then there's the relaxation. Then the in-breath comes. So, that's the noting as it comes to the breath.

When it comes to sensations in the body, keep it very simple. Heat, itching, pain. Don't start looking for the word like a poet might. You've lost the plot. All we're doing is just if the word doesn't come up then just use the word feeling because the attention should be riveted on just the sensation, just sensation. Why just sensation? Because sensation happens only now. You can't have a sensation yesterday. You can't have it last minute. You can't have it tomorrow. You're going to have a sensation right here and now.

So the more that we're aware of sensation as a basic premise for our meditation, the more we're driving that intelligence into this present moment. And the more it locks into the present moment, the less it can think. Because thought is always an afterthought. You see something, you feel it, and then you say something. So to get that purity of intelligence, we need more and more to just bring that attention into the present moment, relaxing into the present moment but yet remaining alert.

So, this noting word is part of the training of stopping a person living in thought, living in the mind. Now, some people find this very difficult because when they start noting, all they can be aware of is this word, rising, falling. They can't contact the breath. Just rising, it dominates the whole mind. Now, when that happens to somebody, what it's showing to that person is that they're living up here. They're living above the chin. They don't contact the body at all. People will say things like, "Yeah, I suffer anger, but I don't feel it. It's just in my head as an angry thought, an angry dream."

We lift ourselves up into this space, into this fantasy world, this virtual reality, and we've actually left the physical feelings, the actual feelings in the body, which are motivating all this stuff. So we have to reverse that process, we have to stop living in a fantasy world. So even though the word is, for some people, flooding the whole of consciousness, that's all you can be aware of, this word, rising, falling, keep guiding your attention to the sensation, and eventually it'll drop. As it drops and the word recedes, that's a sign to the meditator that they're coming off this never-never land. It's a very powerful technique.

Now, at first, probably the whole weekend there is just this effort to come back into the present moment. The mind wanders, you know where it is, you come back. The mind wanders, you know where it is, you come back. Now that's the practice. That's part of the course. You can't speed the course up. All that shows us is how restless we are. The Buddha compares it to a monkey. The monkey mind, jumping from branch to branch.

So the first part of the practice is to use the noting technique to just bring us slowly to the object, more and more into the present moment, just being aware of sensation, feeling sensation. There comes a point, hopefully by tomorrow noon, where the mind begins to settle on the object. And it's not wandering off. It's actually staying still, at least, for a second or so. It's actually staying still on the sensation.

Now, at this point, the meditator can say to themselves, "Ah, I've got it, this is it, concentration, I'm *samadh i*, I'm stuck right now, wonderful, I've collapsed into the present moment, it's marvelous," and they stop noting. And of course, in their desperation, they find the mind immediately shoots off and goes all over the place.

So, although we've matured the noting to a point where the mind is beginning to feel more still on the object, you have to keep going with it until it matures. And there's a real feeling that it's as though you can't take the mind off the object. It's really stuck there. Now that's the second stage. That's the second stage of the noting. One continues with that, and for those of you who are mature in your meditation, you can find a point where you can drop it. But the normal thing is to keep noting because at some point the concentration and the effort will so support that sense of knowing, that sense of intelligence, that *sati*, that awareness, that the noting will simply stop. And you'll just be there with the object.

So that's the growth of *samadhi*, that's the growth of concentration, supporting moment-to-moment awareness. And that's the purpose of using a noting, of using a word, just to bring us to that.

Now, once we've got this moment-to-moment concentration on the breath, mainly we do it on the breath, but of course, whenever something draws the attention, which may be a sensation in the body, a feeling of discomfort, a pain in the knee, whatever it is, or something coming from the emotional base, some feelings of heaviness, some depression, burning from anger, whatever, then that same consciousness, now more like a laser beam, can move on to these objects, doesn't get caught up in them, doesn't allow them to slip up into this higher mentation and create fantasy. And in so doing, we directly experience an emotion as a physical mental feeling, not as a dream, not as a fantasy. In so doing, we become very intimate with it.

And we're observing its qualities. The fact that it's just a process. The fact that it isn't an object or something substantial. It's like a blowing cloud just passing through the mind. And in so doing, we're not engaging it. When an emotion comes up, pleasant or unpleasant, we immediately form a relationship with it. Either we want to indulge it, and thereby we create a greater state of that emotion. So if you want to get into revenge, before you know it, you've blown it up into a war. If you want to get into thinking about how you're going to get rich before you know it, it blows up into a book.

If you don't want to have something of course, if you don't want to feel the boredom, if you don't want to feel the depression, if you don't want to feel these things, then you push it down, you push it away, you turn your attention elsewhere, you don't want to see it. But all these actions of pushing away are simply more energy into that bad system, into that bad turbulence.

But here in our meditation we take a very radical stance. It's a stance which doesn't occur to the self or the ego. The ego can only engage in the world. It can either indulge or suppress, push away. But here we find a consciousness which does neither and yet experiences things directly. That's a paradox.

So, by finding that position of the objective observer, we're just allowing these turbulences to arise and expend themselves. We're not pushing them away and therefore creating more bad energy, and we're not developing them. So what can they do? Because they need our will, they need our empowerment to grow. So, finding that position of the objective observer just allows the psychotherapy to continue. But like I say on the tape, if you make that the object of your meditation then you're missing the point. What we really want to see is how we relate to these things.

So that's the sitting.

Now, to take that moment to moment awareness throughout the day, what the Mahāsi asked people to do was to go very slow. Now, the slower you go, the more you see. If you see a film, for instance, these nature films, a frog's tongue or something, catching a fly, and it's slowed down, so many thousands per second, then you can actually see the whole thing happen.

So what we want to do is we want to really see what this psychophysical organism is doing. This is what I've been calling me all these years. And of course, the underlying reason is to find out why we're suffering. When the Buddha set off, when the Bodhisattva, as he was then, set off on his spiritual journey,

the question wasn't, "How can I get rich? Or how can I be famous? Or how can I get blissful?" It was, "What is the end of suffering? Is this it? Is human life about suffering? Full stop. Is it just carrying on and then you get sick and then you get old and you die? Or is there something else?"

So that's his search and that must be our search or else we're not actually doing his practice. We're doing something else. So our purpose is to really find out why suffering arises. What maintains it? So that investigation has to carry on all day. It has to carry on as a background theme to the whole thing that we're trying to do. Trying to understand why we're suffering, why we're not in a state of satisfaction, why we can't get satisfaction in a sensual world, even though we may occasionally be happy with it. Why we can't do it as a constant thing.

So going slow, like this walking meditation. In this walking meditation, that's extremely slow. We don't have to go that slow all the time, but we need to go slow. Just take your time. So when we break from here, don't leap up the stairs. Stop. Find yourself, take a breath, relax. And then start to climb. Lifting, placing, use the noting word just to stay with it.

When you brush your teeth, don't go mad. Take your time, stop. Note, intending to brush the teeth. Do it mindfully. You don't have to get dead slow, you'll never finish. But slow enough to actually be with what you're doing.

When you open the door to your room, just stop. Intending to open the door. Reaching. When you hold the handle, feel it. Feel it. Feel what steel, what metal feels like. You get in contact with those feelings. Pressing. Turning. You communicate with the spring. Don't attack it. Wow, bang, open the door. Crack. Can you feel it? Open the door. Close the door in the same way.

So there's a constant effort just to be with what's actually happening at its base. Don't try and get beyond it. Don't try and find out what is beyond consciousness. You're just trying to be with what's happening right here, right there and then. And you're trying to see your relationship to it.

So you might close the door and somebody up the corridor, somebody next door, might bang the door. So then you notice irritation. Anger, anger. They die away.

So take the slowness with you wherever you go. And every time you find yourself rushing, which you will do... And this is something that I shall urge you to take into your daily life. It's a very powerful technique just to stop all that agitation, all that accumulation throughout the day of all this emotional stuff. So you just stop, intend, and then do it. And when you come to the end of that action, be aware of it. That's been done, that's finished. Stop. Just bring yourself into the moment. Intention.

So, those basically are your two techniques. Going slow, taking your time, relaxing, into the present moment, staying awake of course, and just keep the noting going. All the time.

There's not supposed to be a time of the day when you stop noting. So that's the effort to keep that

thinking mind steady on the object, not to let it move off it. Now this isn't a strenuous physical thing. This is not something that will exhaust you. This is something which actually contains our energy, so that by the end of the day you feel that you've really not wasted energy and that there's a lot of it around because it's not frazzled.

So the effort that we make is to be aware as much as possible. Now we know that the mind is going to slip off, but we just keep bringing it back. We keep bringing it back, bringing it back. Over and over and over again. The mind slips off, we bring it back. The mind slips off, we bring it back. That's the practice. It's really that simple.

Now you might think, "Well, this sounds quite easy." But actually, when you come to do it, you'll find that the mind has tremendous momentum to go off into its habitual patterns. And so you need quite a lot of patient persistence to keep bringing it back, bringing it back, bringing it back. But this is what develops the concentration, the awareness, the mindfulness. This is what purifies the mind.

The beautiful thing about this method is that it's so complete. Every moment of experience is included. There's nothing that's excluded. Whatever arises in consciousness becomes the object of meditation. If you're walking and you hear a sound, you note "hearing." If you're sitting and you feel an itch, you note "itching." If you're lying down and you're thinking about tomorrow, you note "thinking." Everything is included. Nothing is rejected. Nothing is suppressed.

This is very different from methods where you try to push things away or where you concentrate on just one thing and try to exclude everything else. Here we're developing what we call choiceless awareness, where we're aware of whatever is arising naturally, spontaneously, in the flow of experience.

And because of this, it becomes a very natural way of living. You're not trying to create artificial states. You're not trying to manufacture special experiences. You're simply becoming more and more aware of what's actually happening, moment by moment. And this leads to tremendous insights into the nature of reality, into the nature of mind, into the nature of suffering and the end of suffering.

So the practice becomes a way of life rather than something you do for half an hour in the morning and then forget about for the rest of the day. It permeates everything. When you're eating, you're noting. When you're walking, you're noting. When you're talking, you're aware of talking. When you're listening, you're aware of listening. The whole day becomes meditation.

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