Starting a Retreat

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 55:18

So we can start the standing meditation. It takes about ten to fifteen minutes, and if that's too long for you, we'll just sit down. Standing, make sure you feel grounded, balanced, lifting up through the spine to the top of the head. Standing tall.

Spend a moment now relaxing the brow. Eyes looking downward, unfocused. The jaw. Is there any tension there? If so, just waggle it about a bit or clench the jaw and relax. Shoulders. Any tension there? If so, give them a good squeeze. Hands joined in front or by the side, whatever's comfortable. Just acknowledge the posture, energy running up the spine to the top of the head, everything else just hanging off, relaxed.

Draw your attention now to the soles of your feet. What can you feel down there? Can you isolate the sensations of pressure? Can you isolate the sensations of warmth or coolness? What about the more subtle sensations that tell you what you're standing on? The sponginess of carpets, the hardness of wood? Can you isolate areas of the soles where the sensations are neutral? Can you get in contact with those around the instep maybe? Becoming aware of how the sensations are continuously changing as the body rebalances itself. And just acknowledge that these sensations arise whether we want them to or not. They're not under our direct control.

So let's take our time. Let's come up the body, see what we can feel both on the surface and the inside of the body. And be aware of areas that seem to be devoid of feeling, just empty. When you get to the abdomen, can you feel the sensations caused by the breath there? The rise and fall? Is there any tension? Coming up into the stomach area, can you feel the breath there? Is it more prominent? Is there any tension there? Moving up into the chest. Can you feel the breath there? Is that more prominent? Do you have a shallow breath? Any tensions? Feel the heartbeat? Shoulders still relaxed. The jaw. The brow. When you get to the scalp, scan it like you did the soles of your feet. What can you feel up there?

Now, without moving your eyes, just become aware of the colours and shapes ahead of you. Any sounds? If you're in a quiet room, it might just be the sound of the electrical equipment or your body humming in your ears. What's the atmosphere of the room you're in like? Can you sense the presence of those around you or near you? So your attention is completely out there. Now at the same time, bring in the in here, the feet, the breath, sensations in the body, both inside and outside.

This is the bubble of our consciousness. This is the world we are actually experiencing moment after moment, being created by this complex organism. We can't get outside it, underneath it, above it. This is it. This is the world as we experience it. This is our universe. And we're always at the centre of it. So we may

as well relax. Relax into this present moment, wide awake. And just allow the attention to move to whatever draws it. Something you see, now something you hear, now something you feel. Just hang loose within that globe. Relaxing. Abiding in the present moment, wide awake.

In this mode, just being, we can let go of ideas of achieving something. That's doing. Doing something now for some future result. But here, in this mode, just being, this is the result. There's no reason for being. It just is. Relaxing. Dwelling in the present moment, wide awake.

In this mode, just being, there's only this ever-presenting moment. There's no past, there's no future. Just this moment, here and now. So there's no reason to plan, even looking forward to anything. It doesn't matter. We're not going anywhere. In this mode, we're always arriving. Relaxing. Inhabiting the present moment, wide awake.

In this mode, we're sitting back within ourselves. We're not reacting, not responding. Just watching, feeling, experiencing. And the world is just arising and passing away. Because we're not engaged, we don't have to present somebody, be a person, a personality. We can be anonymous. Relaxing, abiding in the present moment, wide awake, achieving nothing, going nowhere, being nobody.

In this mode, we're developing five of the seven factors that lead to liberation. There's the awareness, of course, and there is that steadiness of attention, a phrase I prefer to concentration, which I think makes us feel tight. It's just the effort needed to maintain steadiness of attention. A sense of calmness in that steadiness, even if the body feels restless and the heart agitated, the watcher, the observer is calm. And then there's the quality of equanimity. The dictionary says this is a balanced mind, but it should be a balanced mind and heart. Just letting go of holding on to views and opinions, be completely open-minded. And the heart, to let go of its prejudices, its fears, its aversions, its preferences, open-hearted. Open-hearted and open-minded.

When these are established, we can bring in that curiosity, specifically around the three characteristics of existence. Impermanence, how we create suffering, and not self. So this is the base. You can always return to it in sitting and in daily life.

And in daily life, to maintain this poise stops us from being carried away by emotions. You've had a phone call, you've finished a piece of work, you've been out and about, and you feel anxious, irritated, overexcited. But if you can just stop after every action, after every piece of work, after every conversation, and let the heart empty itself, then in the clarity and calmness, you can see the next intention. We can decide whether it's wholesome or skillful or otherwise.

If it is unwholesome and unskillful, we just stay still with that energy until it dies away, or at least begins to die away. And so it doesn't have such a hold on us. If it's skillful, of course, we empower it. Just in this very simple way, we can better our habits and improve our personalities. But it takes this degree of attention.

Our next intention is to sit. So let us now begin to practise in the way the Mahāsi Sayadaw would have us by slowing everything down and becoming aware of the tiniest movements. We can begin to use noting words to keep the attention tethered to the object and stop it wandering off into fantasies. Moving, stretching, lifting, placing, lowering. Taking our time, aware of all the movements it takes to get this body into a sitting posture, intending to sit.

Make sure the posture is the expression of the awakened one, like a good statue. Lift up from the lower abdomen, the muscles in the lower back. When you do this, you will feel the breath in the abdomen much more clearly. And then lift up the spine to the top of the head. Spend the initial moments relaxing the brow. Eyes gently closed, the jaw, shoulders, and hands on your lap, whatever feels comfortable. Acknowledging the posture, energised up the spine, everything else relaxed.

If in our sitting the body begins to slump, just make the intention: intending to lift, lifting, lifting. If the body becomes tense: intending to relax, relaxing, relaxing. Draw the attention now to the breath at the abdomen, or wherever you feel it most, using a noting word. Rising, rising, falling, falling. If you're established at the nostrils and don't want to move to the abdomen: in, in, out, out. Get in touch with the breath, the feel of it. Just relax the attention onto those feelings.

If the mind is wandering, when you wake up out of it, really recognise and acknowledge what it's doing. Worrying, worrying, planning, planning. And draw the attention away and bring it back to the breath and determine to stay there. Feeling sleepy or tired, just lift the spine, open the eyes just a little, and if the sleepiness is still there, you can open them wide, but keep the attention inward. Just relaxing the attention on the sensations caused by the breath, allowing those neutral sensations to bring silence to the mind, calmness to the heart, stillness to the body.

If the mind is wandering, when you wake up out of it, really recognise and acknowledge what it is doing. We're interested in the mood, emotion, mental state or attitude that is driving the fantasies. Let go of the story. We're only interested in what is actually motivating it. Irritation, irritation, excitement, excitement. Then draw the attention back to the breath and determine to stay there. Feeling sleepy or tired, keep making that effort, lifting up, opening the eyes. And don't forget, if the dullness and lethargy become overwhelming, you can stand up.

Allowing the attention to settle on the breath. As we feel more settled, draw yourself closer to see if you can catch the very beginning of the in-breath, stay with it to the very end, and the very beginning of the out-breath, and stay with it to the very end. If when you do this you find yourself getting tense, then sit back within yourself and have the impression of receiving the breath. Rising, rising, falling, falling.

From now on, when the mind wanders and you recognise and acknowledge what's driving it, instead of coming back to the breath, come back into the body. See if you can feel it. If it is excitement, come into the body and see if you can feel the agitation. Feel the restlessness and perhaps heat of worry. If it's romance, feel the warmth and happiness. Stay there till it all evaporates. And again, feeling dull-minded or lethargic

in the body. You can also get into the feel of these states, the sensations, the feelings. Keep energising the spine, and you can still open the eyes to let the light in.

When we get lost, we can always begin with the breath. The breath is our anchor and reference point. When we're confused, for instance, best to go back to the breath. Let's begin again with the breath. Rising, rising, falling, falling. And find the noting you need just to help keep the attention steady.

Becoming aware of how we are reacting to what we're experiencing. How when something is pleasant, we're drawn towards it, we want to maintain it, to develop it. Can you feel the force of that desire? When something is unpleasant, we first ignore it, but then we just want to get rid of it. If the posture is a little uncomfortable, we want to change it. Can you feel the strength of the desire? Can you feel these desires and not do anything? Just allow them to express themselves and exhaust themselves. This is the desire the Buddha points to as the psychological cause for our suffering and unsatisfactoriness. Is that true for you?

Becoming aware of how everything we are experiencing is arising and passing away. Everything is in a process. Nothing repeats itself. Even though each breath is similar, they're never the same. Everything is vanishing, disappearing. Nothing remains. Is there anything reliable?

Becoming more aware of how everything we're experiencing is an object. If we have discomfort in the knee, we're looking down from the position in the forehead as the observer. It's a sort of observation post. Can we make that separation, that distance between the observer, the feeler, the experiencer and the object more obvious to us? At times we can use a word like "there," so there's aching, there over there is an itch. If it's an emotion or mood in the body, there's irritation, there's excitement. When it is an image in the mind right in front of you, you can point to it, there's an image. You might even be able to do this with a thought. Are the observer and the observed, the feeler and the felt, the experiencer and the experienced, the same or distinct? Can the perceiver be the perceived?

Becoming more aware of how everything is happening of its own accord. In *vipassanā*, we've taken the objective position of the observer, the feeler, the experiencer. We've separated out from the psychophysical organism and allowed it to manifest as it wants. We find that the body offers us sensations and feelings, pleasant and unpleasant, whether we want it to or not. The heart, its moods and emotions, pleasant and unpleasant, whether we want it to or not, and the mind, its thoughts and images, wholesome and unwholesome, whether we want it to or not. We don't have direct control. If control is being exercised by the body, the heart and the mind, how can they be me?

Putting aside all instruction, have absolute confidence that this intuitive awareness is able to understand the way things really are, that it can have profound insight into the nature of things. We don't need to keep thinking about it, prompting it. No need to do anything. Don't try and change anything. Just absolute acceptance of this is the way it is. All we need to do is just observe, just feel, just experience whatever draws the attention within the field of awareness.

When we come to the end of a sitting, it's good to spend a little time reflecting on our experience. You can ask questions of yourself. How diligent was I in bringing myself back to the present moment? If I thought I was diligent, then I should congratulate myself. If I thought I could have been a little more committed, I should encourage myself. There's no need for self-criticism.

Was there some mental state or physical state that you had to work with? Some form of discomfort or agitation, perhaps? Some sleepiness? How did you deal with it? Just choose one of them. If you thought you were skillful, you can congratulate yourself. If you thought you could have been a little more committed, you could encourage yourself. Don't get into self-criticism.

In this sitting, what was most prominent for you? The role of desire in creating unsatisfactoriness? Or was it the impermanence of things? Or was it that everything you were experiencing was an object, not under your direct control?

And it's good to make a resolution. It can be quite specific. Next time I feel dozy, I'll immediately open my eyes. Or it can be a general commitment to affectionate mindfulness.

When we come out of a sitting, don't jump out of it. Open the eyes gently, and let the light in.

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