Morning Instructions: Choiceless Attention

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 47:42

The meditation instructions I'm offering this morning represent, in many ways, the culmination of the sequence of instructions we've been unfolding. In my opinion, they truly reveal the genius of Mahasi Sayadaw, the Burmese monk who founded this lineage of meditation upon which our three-month course instructions are based.

We've said many times that anything you experience can be a good focus for mindfulness. It was really Mahasi Sayadaw's instructions that pointed this out so clearly and explicitly. You do not find this in all lineages of Vipassana, but in this lineage it's very clear, and today's instructions will make that apparent.

Before I get into the instructions, I want to offer a preface. The approach I'm going to share today is what I call choiceless attention. First, let me explain this word "attention." There was a question yesterday in the hall about attention, and it's something really important in mindfulness practice.

Attention is the faculty of mind that selects one aspect of our present moment experience to focus on and highlight from all the things that are going on. To give the biggest context of what's happening for you right now, take a look at all the things that are in your present moment experience. There's the sense of the body and sitting. There are sensations within the body. There are sounds. There's a certain mood or emotion for you. There may be sight. And there are thoughts passing through. This is basically the field of our experience in most sitting meditations. The senses of smell and taste are not usually very active when we're sitting in the hall, but the other senses are active and constantly revealing experiences.

Attention is the faculty of mind that highlights one of those aspects and settles on it momentarily. Attention, if left to its own devices, keeps moving around. We sometimes do an exercise called Vipassana out loud, where we simply ask the meditator to keep stating what they're noticing now. You'll see that it keeps changing: "Now I'm aware of a sensation in my knee. Now I'm aware of the sound of a voice. Now I'm aware of an in-breath. Now I'm aware of a mood of calm." Attention keeps flitting between all these different facets of our experience, if left to its own devices.

As we've started the meditation instruction, if you remember, in the beginning we asked you to focus on an anchor. This means picking out some aspect of your experience—body posture, breath, or sounds—and deliberately directing your attention to that part of your experience, coming back to it again and again. We were deliberately cultivating a focus on one part of our experience.

Once you pick an anchor like the breath, there are basically three ways you can relate to it with your attention. I'm going to use the breath as an example here, but you could substitute your anchor for breath.

The first way is to make this the exclusive focus of your directed attention. You keep noticing the breath. If anything else pulls your attention, you don't let it rest there—you bring it back immediately to the breath. This is the kind of approach used in developing concentration practice. If you want to direct your practice primarily toward samatha or tranquility, you pick this exclusive focus on the breath. A few of you are doing this, but not many.

The second way involves a preference for the breath. This says, "I'll be with the breath as a focus of directed attention, but if anything comes along that's stronger and naturally draws my attention, I'll let go of the breath as a focus and let my attention relate to this new phenomenon." In other words, you make the attempt to connect and sustain—vitaka and vicara—the attention to the new arising, whether it's a sensation, thought, mood, emotion, or sound. This way, you start to open up to the whole range of experiences you're having. But if nothing else is strong or predominant, you redirect the attention to the breath. It becomes your default, a preferred focus of attention. This is a very nice way to meditate because coming back to the breath helps establish some of that tranquility and focus development in practice. This is a very good way to practice Vipassana.

In the approach we're discussing today, there is no preference for the breath or your other anchor. You start by connecting to the anchor, but then deliberately unhook the attention and let it go where it will. That's why this approach is called choiceless attention.

And then your job is to sit back and notice where the attention is landing in each new moment. So you're not trying to control it or direct it, but that means you have to be really fresh and alert and awake to see where it is landing because it's not going to be predictable.

So this is what we'll explore today. Can we let go of an anchor, open the attention up, and still stay present enough to see where it's landing moment after moment after moment? This is the basic outline of the instructions that Mahasi Sayadaw invented. And I think it's a really beautiful way to practice because it makes clear anything that arises can be a focus for mindfulness. Mindfulness doesn't need to get lost in the face of any experience that you're having.

That's one way to describe this practice. The other way to describe it, equally valid, is the practice of "what's happening now." So in each new moment, you're answering the question, what's happening now? And what's happening is where your attention is landing. Attention keeps alighting on something. It will illuminate that aspect of experience—sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thought, emotion. And your job is to be with what's happening now. These are just two different ways to describe this practice of choiceless attention.

Having used up most of our instruction time, we'll move into the formal meditation instruction. So please sit comfortably, finding in your posture that balance of relaxation and ease with the sense of uprightness and alertness. What you find in your posture will be reflected in your mind's relationship to the moment—a balance of firmness and relaxation.

Please begin by connecting with your anchor. It could be the experiencing of the in-breath and out-breath. It could be connecting with the overall feeling of your body as you sit, the body posture. It could be an openness to sounds as they arise all around you—in front, behind, right and left. Whatever helps you stabilize your attention in the present moment. Here we're deliberately directing our attention to one aspect of our experience: breath, body, or sounds.

Now let go of any effort to direct your attention to your anchor and simply open in a very wide and receptive way to the whole field of conscious experience in this moment. Notice that within this whole field, there are sensations and mood or emotion, the breathing, sounds, and thoughts coming and going. Notice that these are the usual elements of our experience. This is the inventory of our sitting meditation experience.

In the instructions up to this point, we've gone into detail about how to relate with mindfulness to each of these facets of experience. So you know how to practice giving mindful attention to each of the aspects of your present moment experience.

Now, allowing the attention to stay very open and undirected, just begin to notice moment after moment where the attention is moving to. If you'd like, it can be helpful to make a soft mental note or label of where the attention is landing. It can be a support for staying present while the attention is not anchored to any particular facet.

You might just make a soft mental note every few seconds where you notice the attention alighting. The notes might sound something like: "in," "hearing," "sensing," "out," "thinking," "sensing," "sound," and so on. The note is optional. You might experiment to see if it helps you stay present.

If you'd like to use the mental noting, keep it soft like a whisper and keep the main emphasis on the direct experience of that sense contact. We'd say keep the attention 90% with the sense contact and just have the note be a soft whisper in the background. But the note's not required. If you can pay attention to the present moment arising without it, that's fine.

Pay mindful attention moment after moment to whatever attention is highlighting. Sometimes if one experience is predominant, attention may stay there for a while. That's fine. You're letting it do whatever it chooses. Just be there to notice: oh, attention has landed and is staying here. But then also notice—is the attention continuously there? Or does it land there and still dart off to notice other things happening? Just stay alert to all the subtle movements of attention.

Sometimes letting go of the anchor can bring up a little insecurity or confusion, not quite being certain how to practice. So if that happens, notice the insecurity or confusion as the new aspect of experience.

If it continues and it's difficult to find mindfulness happening, just return to your anchor again. You have a reliable refuge there. Steady the attention in the present moment again. And when you feel ready, open up to the approach of choiceless attention. What's happening now? Keeping alive this alert interest in

where attention is landing and being mindful of that aspect of sense contact.

I'd like to mention again these three styles of practice. One is exclusive focus on the anchor. For most of you, that doesn't really apply—that's a samatha kind of instruction. So those of you who are doing vipassana have types two and three to work with.

Two: there's a preferred emphasis on the anchor, but an openness to other predominant experiences. Number three: no preference for the anchor, just an openness to anything that's happening in the present moment.

Number two provides the advantage of giving an ongoing focus that will help steady the attention in the present moment, so it has a little bit of that concentration flavor to it. Number three, because it's taking out an additional area of will or effort—bringing back the attention to the same focus again and again—can give a greater sense of relaxation.

Number three, I think, has this quality—it's almost what I call organic meditation. It's the meditation God intended us to do, because it's just so natural. Be aware of what's happening now. That's really its beauty.

But there's a risk to this kind of meditation. Because it's so open, the mindfulness can start to slip away. There's not a clear chosen focus. The mindfulness can start to diminish and you don't quite notice it. Then you find more and more time is spent with thinking, but you're not really mindful of each thought. This is what leads to the condition that Joseph Goldstein describes as "kind of mindful."

This open attention can lead into a little bit of driftiness. You're kind of mindful, still connecting to the present, but you're not really noticing the times when you're not connecting to the present.

What I encourage for most of you is to develop both two and three. As the retreat goes on, your learning can be: How do you balance the strengths of each one? When do you need to come back and refocus on the anchor to generate more steadiness in the present moment? And once you have that steadiness and stability, when can you open up to all the changing objects and retain the stability and the clear mindfulness in doing it?

Knowing when to move back and forth between number two and number three can happen in the space of one sitting—you might move from one to the other. It can happen several times over the course of a day in your sittings.

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