Morning Instructions: Choiceless Attention

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:00:26

This morning, for the instructions, I'd like to invoke the spirit of Mahasi Sayadaw. He was a great Burmese meditation teacher, possibly the greatest meditation teacher of the 20th century. The instructions that we've been giving are really descended from his instructions.

We've been unfolding experience gradually, starting with breath, sounds, sensations, in eating meditation, tastes and smells, emotions, thoughts, feeling tone, intentions. At this point, we hope we have covered essentially everything that will arise in your sitting meditation experience. I can't remember if we've done formal instructions for seeing, but I know that it's been mentioned.

Up to this point, we've given instructions how to be mindful with anything that arises within your experience. Today, with the blessing of Mahasi Sayadaw, we're going to combine all that in a new technique that's the logical outcome of where we've been going, called choiceless attention. I think this was his genius, and I love to reflect on his offering to the world. He founded many meditation centers in Asia, and our instructions are a direct descent from him. I'd like to invoke his spirit, but because he was an Arahant and he's now dead, there may not be any spirit to invoke. Nonetheless, it's a great blessing to have his transmission.

The instructions today are going to shift our relationship to the anchor a bit. So far, in the beginning, you'll remember we asked you to choose an anchor. Let's just take the breath as an example. For some it was body, for some it was sounds. Let's just take the breath. We gave the instruction, stay with the anchor. Anytime thoughts carry you away, return to the anchor. So here we have almost an exclusive focus on the breath as the basis for mindfulness.

Then we started to open up the instructions to include sensations, sounds, emotions, thoughts, et cetera. There we said, stay with your anchor as your home, your meditative home. But if anything came along that drew your attention away from that, go to that new experience, make that the focus for mindfulness. When that passes, you can come back to your anchor of the breath. You'll notice in this, there's not an exclusive focus on the breath, but there's still a preferred focus on the breath. It's where you go when nothing else is predominant.

Today, we're going to take away even that preference. In choiceless attention we take the breath just like any other object and we don't have any particular fondness for it over anything else that's happening. In choiceless attention we really unhook the attention from the anchor and let it go.

To explain this practice, I want to first say what attention means when we talk about attention. Attention

is a formal term in our tradition. It's the translation of a term that's central in the Buddha's teachings in the Pali Canon. That Pali term is *manasikara*. We translate it by attention. I think it's a good translation.

In the context of meditation and life, attention is the faculty of mind that singles out one element from all your present moment experience and settles on that, however briefly. For instance, in this moment, there are a lot of things going on. There are sensations in your body, there's your breathing going in and out, there's the sound of my voice, there's the temperature of the air, there's the visual field if your eyes are open, sounds coming and going, thoughts coming and going, and some mood is present. Out of all those things, what are you noticing in this moment?

The interesting thing about attention is that it can be directed. If I tell you, direct your attention to the touch of your hands and keep it there, you can do that, at least for a few moments. But what if I say, don't direct your attention at all? Let the attention be undirected. Where does it go?

If you take a look, you'll probably notice that it's rotating among the different objects in your experience. Sometimes with sensations, sometimes with a thought, sometimes with a mood, sometimes with a breath. If you just let your attention go, it will go. It's always on something until you fall asleep. But as long as you're awake, it's always on something. There's some contact at one of the six sense doors where attention is landing.

In the practice of choiceless attention, we're going to un-anchor the attention from the breath, body, sounds. We're just going to let it go. We are not going to consciously direct it. We're just going to sit in an open and relaxed way and notice in each new moment where it lands. It'll land on some part of your experience and in that moment make that experience the focus for mindfulness. You've learned how to be mindful of anything that arises. We're now asking you to do that in real time.

We could call this the predominant experience in this moment, or simply say where attention is naturally drawn in this new moment. Sometimes it will land on your anchor, but you're not placing it there. You're letting the attention roam freely, but your job is to notice where it lands and be mindful there.

This takes a really fresh, awake quality of mind to keep up with this. Because we're open to anything and we don't have an anchor, it's quite easy for the attention to drift into thoughts and we don't know that it's drifted into thoughts. You know how when you use an anchor like the breath, it's really clear when you're with it and when you're not. In choiceless attention it's not so clear.

It can be helpful to combine choiceless attention with soft mental noting. This is an option, not a requirement. The main thing is, in each new moment, you're noticing where the attention has landed and connecting with mindfulness. But to support that, it can be really helpful to keep up steady, soft mental noting that just names where the attention is and what you're mindful of.

As an example, as I'm sitting here, I might notice: in, touching, hearing, calm, out, thinking, pressure, sound.

So if you'd like to play with this noting, I'd say try to keep it steady and don't force yourself to make a note very rapidly. Every couple seconds, every two or three seconds, notice where the attention is now. If there's a strong experience, the attention might stay there for a while. If there's a pain in the knee, you might be noticing painful, painful, painful for a while. And that's okay. But you're not trying to keep it there. Sometimes attention will stay there on its own.

So you're not making an effort to direct it, but you are making the effort to stay mindful in the present moment of whatever your experience is.

The first way to describe this choiceless attention is you're unhooking the attention and you're noticing where it's landed. You might say that's the kind of technical description. In this, we're not choosing the focus for attention, so it's called choiceless attention. Some people call this practice choiceless awareness, but that term was coined by Krishnamurti, and he really uses it to point to a mind that's free of greed, aversion, delusion. So I think the more accurate term is choiceless attention. We're not choosing a focus for attention. So that's what we will call it here.

The informal description is you take a look and you ask, "What's happening now?" Oh, I'm feeling sensation at a touch point. There's hearing. There's thinking. There's an in-breath. So the other way to describe this practice is it answers the question, "What's happening now?" And you keep answering it in each new moment.

This is the outline, the background to the instructions. It's a very powerful practice because we're not directing. We don't have an outcome in mind, but we're open to everything. So in this approach, there can be a good deal of relaxation and a very open mind. You might even get a sense of the width of your experience in this moment. How wide are sounds? How wide is the silence? How big is your body? So you can let your overall awareness be big enough to accommodate all that and notice where the attention is going.

So that's the background and let's move into formal meditation now.

Please sit comfortably. Feeling uprightness in your posture and also a sense of ease, of relaxing, dropping into your sitting base. Let the awareness settle throughout the body.

Get in touch with your anchor—body, breath, sounds. And settle there for a few moments. Here you're choosing to direct your attention. Very helpful for stabilizing.

And now deliberately take your attention off the anchor and let it move freely. And notice where it lands in each new moment.

Sitting.

Pressure.

Breathing out, hearing, interest, breathing in.

If you find it helpful, try making a soft mental note every few seconds about where the attention is landing now, covering the whole range: breath, sound, sensations, emotions, thoughts, feeling tone, intention. See if by making a soft mental note every two or three seconds, this becomes a support for you to stay connected to the present moment.

If you're using the mental noting, keep it very soft, like a whisper in the mind. Keep about ninety percent of your focus on the experience itself, and just ten percent on the soft note. To do that, you may need to find the volume knob on the noting and turn it down.

Any time you lose touch with the present and you realize you've been lost in thought for a while, that's fine—of course it will happen. Just notice that the thinking is present, appreciate the spontaneous return to the moment, and begin again the noticing of the present moment experience, whatever it is. Use the notes if you find them helpful.

Remember that the key thing is the noticing, the clear noticing in each moment. The note just serves as a support for that. What's happening now? What experience is your attention with in this new moment? At any of the sense doors? Can you be mindful of that?

So this is the introduction to the practice of choiceless attention. Feel free to bring it in as an approach whenever you feel like it at this point in the retreat.

Sometimes when one starts to appreciate the power of this approach—and it's kind of the last instruction we give after giving a bunch of instructions leading up—there's a tendency to think, "Wow, that's the best meditation. It's so elegant, right? Just be mindful of whatever arises." And yet there's a rigor to it. In every moment. Don't space out. In every moment be mindful of whatever arises. So it's elegant, it's cool, it's profound, and all of that. It doesn't mean it's a superior practice. It doesn't mean it's the best practice.

What's the best practice changes for you depending on the state of mind and body. The best practice may be changing throughout the day. Sometimes it may be choiceless attention. Sometimes it may be returning to your anchor. Sometimes it may be staying with an emotion as it's expressing through the body for an extended period of time—for a sitting, a walking, half a day. The best practice is what keeps you best in touch with the present moment in the most harmonious and suitable way possible. The best practice for you at any given time is what's going to increase the wholesome states of mind the most.

So sometimes it could be returning to your anchor. For instance, one of the downsides in choiceless attention, especially if you're not using noting, is it's quite easy to go off into thought and not really notice that you're going off into thought. Attention's so open, whatever happens is fine. Zip. Gone. Gone.

So if you find yourself in choiceless attention with a lot of thinking coming up that's not being noticed—a tendency to drift off a lot—then the best practice at that point would be to come back and anchor again in

the present moment in something simpler. It could be breath, could be body, could be sounds, but something where you have a clearly defined relationship and then you know when you're away.

At other times, if you feel really settled and the mind's balanced and you feel open and fairly settled in the present moment, that's a good time to try opening up to this choiceless field—letting the attention go where it will, knowing what's happening. If there's some meditative stability underneath it, then the conditions are good for practicing choiceless attention.

So it's not that any one practice is the best. The best changes—see what suits you at any given point in time.

In practicing choiceless attention, one of the other things that people run into is it's so open. And there are so many possible places to develop mindfulness. Sometimes the openness of it gets overwhelming, and confusion comes up and uncertainty and doubt: "What should I be attending to?" If that starts to happen, just come back to your anchor. That's the beauty of having developed this meditative home.

So it's always available when we feel we need some stability. If you're feeling any kind of confusion or uncertainty, just come back and stabilize with the anchor. When you feel settled again, you can try opening up once more.

We had quite a few questions today—actually, a lot of questions. The talks must have been interesting the last few nights. We only have time for a couple.

Here's one that comes up often around the topic of emotions: "If I'm not experiencing any strong emotions, does it necessarily mean I'm suppressing something or avoiding a feeling?"

Not at all. Each of us will go through cycles in regard to emotions. There will be times when emotions are really up and expressing and very vocal. There will be other times when emotions naturally are quiet and even silent. This doesn't mean there's any suppression going on. Emotions have a natural flow—they arise and they pass away, even strong ones. So don't worry about that.

The other thing is there are really different personalities among us as meditators. Some personalities tend toward the emotional. I've been in cultures that tended toward the emotional. I've been in cultures that tended toward not being very emotional. We're all representative of our cultural background. So sometimes there's not a lot going on emotionally, and the Buddha actually said some fairly positive things about the experience of peace. That's considered a good development in meditation.

If peace, calm, balance, or equanimity are the mood of the moment, for instance, you're in line with some of the Buddha's teachings. So notice that. Don't think that states of mind have to be loud or dramatic. Some of the greatest meditative states of mind are subtle and peaceful.

Sometimes you go, "Oh, there's nothing going on in the emotions. Nothing's happening. I don't have any state of mind." Check and see if there's calm. Calm is one of the factors of awakening, so it's a very

wholesome state.

Another question related to emotions: "Does the Buddha mention guilt? I haven't heard that described yet."

Yes and no. The word the Buddha used, translated into English in this direction, is remorse. Remorse is considered basically a wholesome emotion.

What happens in long retreat, as we're sitting in the quiet and there's not much happening, is things that have been percolating underneath maybe for years have the space to come up and be felt—to be seen through thoughts and to be felt through emotions. Especially on long retreats, there's time for a lot of unprocessed old experience to come up and be noticed.

When I first did a long retreat, my mind just called up all these memories where I had caused harm to people and to creatures. They weighed on me a lot because at that point I'd understood the precepts. Nobody told me about the precepts when I was growing up. I mean, there were the commandments, but they were a different tone. So nobody really told me the value of the precepts.

Through my childhood and teen years, I did unskillful things. These memories came up—like something mean that I did to a fellow student in second grade, going hunting with my father. Fortunately, I was a bad shot, so I let most of those animals off the hook, but I was trying, you know? They were very burdensome to me, and I had to live with the pain of that regret quite a few days as I was coming to terms with these things. So that often happens.

The other thing that can happen is we remember ways we've been hurt.

But the remorse and guilt are around things that we've done personally.

So it's a natural part of meditation that some of these memories may come for you. And in another couple of weeks we're going to be talking explicitly about how to work with them with the quality of forgiveness. Because forgiveness needs to be extended to ourselves as much as to anyone. So we'll talk about that in a couple more weeks.

But right now I want to distinguish between the way I understand the words guilt and remorse.

In guilt, we think about something unskillful that we've done. We see the harm that it's had on other people, other creatures, and we feel genuine regret for that. But we can take it a step further and then really blame ourselves for those actions. We can get into a lot of negative self-judgment around that: "Gosh, I'm such a bad person. I have a really mean streak in my character continuing to today. I'm never going to be able to live harmoniously with people." All that extra conceptual thought is unnecessary, and that's really a lot of the pain in bringing these memories to light. We don't need to do that. The judging thoughts are extra and not necessary.

What needs to be felt is that heartfelt regret, and that's what I would call remorse. We really feel the unskillfulness of the action, and we really have this sincere regret that we did those things. That's healing. When we can hold the remorse with mindfulness, like any other emotion, it has its way of coming up, being accepted, being deeply felt, and then it has its way of passing on.

So when I think back to those earlier incidents—second grade, hunting—I still feel regret about it. But I don't beat myself up, and it's not a place of suffering for me anymore. I acknowledge it, wish it hadn't happened. I'm a different person now. Wouldn't do those things now. I've borne the responsibility and come to terms with it. So that's the value of remorse.

When you can reach that kind of equanimity with things, then meditation opens up. And the Buddha said a number of times that the purpose and benefit of good conduct is lack of remorse—or I would say lack of guilt, lack of regret. The purpose of lack of remorse is gladness. Gladness means the mind can settle happily into the present moment. So we pay attention to the precepts, we act skillfully, and then we don't trouble ourselves in meditation about things that we've done wrong, and that lets the mind settle more and more. So these are really connected: the conduct, lack of remorse, gladness, and settling in meditation. This is our path.

Here's another question. Part of right effort is to maintain wholesome states that have arisen. So there are actually four right efforts. One is to guard against the arising of unwholesome states. The next is once unwholesome states have arisen, to abandon them if possible—it means don't dwell on them, let them go. And then to bring about the arising of wholesome states, and once wholesome states have arisen, to sustain them, let them be maintained.

This question is about the maintaining of a wholesome state that has arisen. The question is, how does that differ from clinging?

This is a really interesting point, and it also ties into the notion of pleasure. The difference is that we strive to maintain wholesome states of mind out of wisdom. Wisdom understands the meditation practice deepens best, heads toward insight, heads toward loving kindness, heads toward liberation, when wholesome states are in the mind. So we sustain them not because they're enjoyable or pleasurable—which they are, and that could be a motivation, but that would be clinging based on craving. We sustain them out of understanding. This is how the meditation deepens. This is the path to liberation. This is the path of benefit to myself and to other sentient beings.

So we make that choice as far as possible: keep wholesome states present, out of understanding. Sometimes craving will come in. Sometimes clinging will come in. If that happens, we see that. That happens with a contraction.

That happens with suffering when they change. If the development and maintenance of wholesome states is brought about by wisdom, there will also be wisdom when they go. And there won't be suffering when

they go. There will be understanding.

"Oh, what's happening now? Let me find wisdom in this new moment. Let me relate to what's up now."

So start to look. Is there craving for wholesome states? Is there clinging? That can happen. But deepen the understanding that this is for the benefit of myself and all beings. This development of the wholesome will encourage kindness, it will encourage relaxation, and it will lead to deepening meditation, insight, and liberation.

Now, two announcements for today. Today is a day for mindful movement, so Sabra will be meeting with those who wish to join her downstairs at 2:45. She said that more blankets have arrived, so you don't need to take any props down with you. She'll have a new shipment of blankets for you to use.

The second announcement is that Annie has had to change a couple of her meeting times. So if you're on Annie's list for today, please check the notice board one more time because a couple of the times have shifted.

As you stand up, see if you can do it choicelessly. Maintain the continuity from here in a choiceless way to walking, and then be with the walking really continuously. I hope you will use this practice as a way to foster continuity of mindfulness, whatever experiences are arising for you.

Have a lovely day.

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