Choiceless Attention

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:01:42

Good morning, everyone. Nice to see your faces.

We are basically two weeks into the retreat today, and we have almost finished the instructions. A lot of mornings from now on we'll be sitting in silence. There will be a couple more days of instructions, but we're almost done. I don't know if any of us ever imagined that instructions would go on for two whole weeks, but here they are. We've really tried to examine the whole scope of activities you may run into. We've stopped short of telling you how to trim your toenails, but I think everything else we've covered.

This morning, what we're going to do in the instructions is put it all together. This is a style of practice that we call choiceless attention.

So far we've been learning how to be mindful of any experience that arises as we're meditating, whether we're sitting or walking or standing or eating, lying down or whatever. Now we want to join all those together in what I see as the logical outcome of the Mahasi Sayadaw instructions. Basically, when he presented his instructions, he would give all this on day one. I think it's good that it's been parceled out a little bit. We get a little more familiar with each area, but now we have the possibility of putting it all together.

Before I give the instructions, I want to give a little background on this approach. I want to start by talking about how we relate with our anchor. We've talked about using three possible anchors: breath, body posture, sounds. For purposes of simplicity, I'm just going to talk about breath. But when I say breath, if you're using body or sounds, you just substitute your anchor for that. Those are all fine.

I want to talk about three possible relationships to the anchor—let's say breath. One is we take an exclusive focus on it, meaning no matter what else is happening, the world could be exploding next door, atomic bombs could be going off outside or inside our system, we don't move our attention from our chosen object. This is the approach favored when you're doing samatha practice. When I went to practice with Pauk Sayadaw, he gave me the instruction to be with the breath at my upper lip all the time, all day long—sitting, walking, standing, eating, whatever. This was the only point I was allowed to be at. This is very powerful for developing the factor of concentration. It also is tough to try to ignore everything else or leave it in the background.

The second approach to breath is that the anchor, let's say the breath, is the preferred focus for mindfulness, but it's not exclusive. This is kind of the way I think we've been presenting it so far. We encourage you to make a good connection with your anchor, but if anything else comes up that is

predominant and naturally draws the attention, easily let go of the anchor and connect with that new experience with mindfulness. All the other experiences can be an equally good focus for mindfulness. But if there's nothing strong going on, then we tend to prefer being with the breath. This is the second way—it's not exclusive, but there's a preference.

In the third approach, which is what we're going to do this morning, there's no preference for the anchor at all. You deliberately let go of the anchor or breath or whatever. That sometimes requires kind of a conscious unhooking because over time the anchor becomes quite a gravitational pull. You don't even have to make a firm intention, but you sit down and you're naturally drawn there. So in some cases it may mean a little bit of conscious unhooking from your anchor.

Then we let the attention be with whatever calls it. It can be anything—sounds, other sensations, thoughts, emotions, feeling tone, intention. All these things may draw the attention from time to time and we let it go there. When we unhook the attention from the anchor, we let the attention flow freely. This is why it's called choiceless attention.

Now, through years of habit, it's often been described as choiceless awareness. But I think that's a little misleading because actually what we're not choosing is where to direct the attention. So the appropriate term is choiceless attention.

I want to do a little exercise first. When we use attention in the way that the Buddha used it, it is the faculty of mind that highlights one—let's call it an object—one aspect of our experience from the whole field. As you know, as you've noticed, there are a lot of things going on in any given moment. There are a bunch of different sensations through the body. Sounds may be arising. There's a mood.

There may be thoughts going through. The breath is still coming and going. Feeling tone is there all over the place. So there are many places you could put your attention, many places you could spotlight.

In this exercise of choiceless attention, you don't direct it. You're not choosing where to place it.

I want to ask you to do a little exercise first. This can be with eyes open or with eyes closed. Sit quietly. Don't do anything. And start to notice where your attention goes. Can you sense that left to its own, it does skip around a little bit? It might be with this sensation or that sensation, or with seeing or with hearing or with a thought or with the mood or with an in-breath. Left to itself, the attention will move.

In this meditation, we're letting it do that. No attempt to control it. The challenge is letting mindfulness land where the attention lands. And this can be anywhere.

We've gotten familiar probably with our anchor, and the attention finds its way back there again and again. Now when we open up, we're going to let the attention go anywhere, and as you've just seen, it will. It'll go anywhere.

This requires a very fresh and alert presence in the moment. Anything can pop up as the focus of

attention, and when it does, that's where we want to establish mindfulness—just for that moment of that experience.

This is where the terms vitakka and vicara come in handy. When the attention lands on a new object, take enough time with it to connect and sustain briefly so that you really feel into that experience. If there's a sensation, you connect to it and you feel into it enough to know what kind of sensation this is. Is this a pulsing or a tingling or a pressure or a heat or a coolness or an itch? Sustain just long enough that you could, if requested, put a label on it. It's this kind of sensation.

Once you've connected to that extent, you don't need to stay there any longer. But that connecting and sustaining—vitakka-vicara—is an important piece for establishing the mindfulness with changing objects.

One of the beautiful things about this practice is it's very natural. There's no forcing in it. It's really hard to build up striving when the attention is allowed to move so naturally. We're just sitting back. Whatever arises is fine. Whatever comes into our field of view is fine. There's no pursuing anything or trying to land for a long time on anything—just the moment-to-moment receiving of where the attention has landed.

This can lead to a lot of ease and relaxation. In contrast to a samatha practice where we're really making a strong effort to be with a single object, this is very open, very easy, very natural, very relaxed. Please take the time to appreciate that aspect of ease and openness in this meditation.

Are we abandoning the development of concentration? No, because the mindfulness can still be steady moment after moment. This is the sense of kanika samadhi, momentary concentration. As the mindfulness connects with each new arising, we are still putting together, moment after moment, these experiences of mindfulness. That's what strengthens concentration.

This approach can lead to very strong concentration, but it's not narrow, single-pointed, and doesn't have to involve any kind of striving. It's very natural, relaxed, easy.

This is one way to describe this practice in terms of where the attention goes—being there for where it lands. The other way is it answers the question: what's happening now?

If I just popped into your mind in meditation and asked, "What's happening now?" you'd know. Oh, there's an in-breath. Oh, there's hearing.

Oh, there's pressure. So really simple—what's happening now? And that's the focus for mindfulness.

So either way you like to think of it—letting the attention move and keeping up with it, or just moment after moment asking what's happening now—both approaches describe this practice.

Because we're open to such a wide range of experience and there's no anchor, it's fairly easy for the attention to drift off and get lost in thought. Getting lost in thought obviously interrupts the moments of mindfulness. So it can be helpful to keep the attention in the present moment by adding noting to where

the attention is landing.

For instance, as I'm sitting in my experience right now, I might note: seeing, pressure, in-breath, metta, thinking. Just like every two or three seconds, make a note that reflects where the attention has landed—whatever degree of detail you can see in body sensations, thoughts, moods, and emotions. And then be ready for the next landing of attention.

If you ever get lost because there are a lot of things going on—sometimes you go, "Should I be with that one? Is this one calling? My breath? Which is predominant? My breath is coming up again. Am I getting lost with my breath?"—if that ever happens, just go back to a simple experience. For some of you, it could be the breath, it could be sounds, it could be the body posture. Pick one simple thing, be with that until the mind calms a little bit, and then try opening again to the wideness of everything.

Let's try the meditation. I'll give instructions as we go.

Again, feeling in your posture this balance of energy and relaxation, alertness and calm, feeling the body in sitting. And from that connection with the sitting base, just noticing how many things are going on in your experience—sensations throughout the body, sounds coming and going, experience of breathing, a certain mood or state of mind, thoughts passing through, all with feeling tone.

First, to bring in the sense of openness, let go of any connection to your anchor, if it's breath or body, and open to the experience of hearing. Let the attention become very wide, spacious, extending in front and in back, to left and to right, above. If there are no clear sounds, you can just be in touch with the vastness of the silence.

Now, with that same open and receptive attitude, we can begin the practice of choiceless attention. Start to notice where the attention is drawn. It will keep landing moment after moment. It may stay somewhere for a while naturally—that's fine. It may sometimes go back to your anchor because it's so familiar—that's fine. But we're not trying to place it anywhere. We're just trying to be fresh and alert in the moment to notice what's being highlighted by attention.

The main thing is just to notice what's being highlighted. And hopefully it's an experience you've become familiar with through all the earlier instructions. You know how to relate mindfully. And the key thing is the noticing.

If you like, you can pair the noticing with a soft mental note, just naming where the attention has landed: out-breath, tingling, pressure, thinking, hearing.

See how it feels to be with this wide open attention that's allowed to go anywhere, to any sense appearance, and still be present moment after moment.

Sometimes you might find that the attention moves so fast that it's noticing like three things in a second. If that happens, then you don't need to try to connect and sustain to each one. Just the noticing is enough,

and you don't have to try to note them. Just let that noticing happen if the attention is moving quickly.

Sometimes in this openness, having let go of our anchor, we might feel a little insecure, a little exposed or unprotected in that wide open space. If that happens, notice that mind state. Oh, insecurity, anxiety. And see if you can hold that connection with the feeling for a bit. Notice it's another emotion. And then at some point, if it feels like enough or too much, just come back to the anchor. Settle again in the present. And if you feel inclined to open again, then try again. This way we can approach the openness of this technique little by little.

What's happening now? Where is the attention in this new moment?

Can there be mindfulness with it? Without fixing on anything, we allow the attention to be free again, to go where it will.

If you connected with this meditation, this can be a really skillful approach for you for a long time in practice—certainly for the rest of this retreat. Its benefits are the openness, the ease, the relaxation, the lack of pressure and striving. You're not looking for any particular result, just being with what's appearing.

In comparison to being with the anchor, this practice can more easily lead to spacing out, getting lost in thought, because there's not that firm commitment to one point, one place you keep coming back to again and again. So part of the learning, I think, for most of you at this stage in the retreat, is going to be how do you combine this wide open attention to changing objects—with all the benefits that it has—with what you've already learned of the benefits of being with your anchor, such as the breath.

What I suggest, and your teachers can help you refine this or find your own way with it, is to do some kind of alternation between the two. That second approach to the anchor that I mentioned this morning—where the attention's not exclusive, but it's preferred. There's a preferred connection to one simple experience: breath, body, sounds. But in that, if something is strong and draws the attention, whether it's an emotion or a sensation or a thought, easily go to that new thing. If nothing particularly is drawing the attention, just stay with the anchor and you'll get all the benefits of the deepening concentration from that.

And then from time to time, venture forth. Let's open up and see what's out there. It might be scary. It might be beautiful. But I'm going to open up and check it out and see if the continuity with the present moment can still occur in that wide open field of changing experience.

If you have developed both of these meditation approaches to a degree of skill, you'll always find a suitable home. Feeling a little tight, a little over-efforting? Open up. Just let it be natural and relaxed. Feeling a little drifty? Tensions getting lost in thought more easily? Ah, come back. Collect a little more around your anchor.

Learning how to combine the two, how to alternate, when it's right to bring in one, when it's right to bring in the other—that can be your direction for a long time in practice.

A couple of questions. One I'm going to ask myself because this has come up in conversations over the last couple of days: "I really liked your talk on concentration, but when I tried to put it into effect, I got into a lot of striving. What should I do?"

Well, you already know the answer to that, right, from Sayadaw U Pandita? Don't do that. So you already know. How do you not do that? That's kind of the question.

The first thing is, when I gave a list of different ways that you could strengthen samadhi during the retreat, it came at the end of the talk and I didn't really take the time to put a frame of reference around all those suggestions. So a couple of key things about if you want to play with those suggestions: don't do them all at once. Phase them in gradually, play with the ones that appeal to you, and try a little bit at a time.

The second thing is, if you've settled into a way of practice that seems harmonious for you—body's not too tight in terms of striving, mind is present a lot more than it was when you began two weeks ago—that's good. You've already got a good meditation developing. So these things can be regarded as fine tunings. You're just getting a tune-up on your engine to make it run a little more smoothly or efficiently. You don't have to change anything. But if you want to, play with them one by one. And do it with a balanced mind.

This is a really important instruction in any meditation retreat: try to keep your mind in balance. If you find it's getting out of balance with over-efforting, then find a way to back off a little bit. Bring the mind back into balance.

When we talk about the level of effort, Vance used this beautiful image of holding a bird in the hand. If you hold it too tightly, you'll crush it. If you don't hold it tightly enough, it will fly away. It's just like our attention.

Another image the Buddha used was tuning a lute. If you make the strings too tight, it's going to make a really loud, unpleasant sound. If you make the strings too loose, they're just going to flop around and you don't get a pleasing sound from it. So you want to find the place where the strings are just right. That means a balance of effort that's not too harsh and not too loose. In other words, somewhere in the middle.

How do you know where the middle is until you've gone to one end or the other? Or preferably both. So I regard it as not misfortune to be caught up in striving for a while because you'll learn, "Oh, that was too much. I tightened the strings too much, and I need to come back with more relaxation." And then you might find yourself having gone too far in relaxation. The mind's drifting off a lot. That's not a bad thing either. Because once you know where the ends of that spectrum are, you'll have better luck at finding the middle.

Now the other interesting thing is that the middle is not a fixed point. The middle keeps changing on us. When the mind is calm, it doesn't take much effort at all to be present. So you can go way to the end of relaxation. When the mind is turbulent, it takes more effort to be present to find that middle point. So play with it. Look at the mind being in balance as a really important factor as you tune.

And then on the question particularly with sleep, I recommend moderation in sleep. And this is already happening for a number of people. I've heard this in the interviews. People will say, "You know, nine-thirty comes along, I've just done the chanting, but I'm not really sleepy yet." So don't go to bed if you're not sleepy. If you still have energy, you could do another walk, come back for another sit, and in that way the hours extend naturally.

Other people have said, "Yeah, I'm pretty much doing the schedule, but then I wake up at four. And I feel alert." Oh, good time to get up. It's starting to happen naturally. So you don't have to press too much on sleep, but listen to what your body is telling you. If energy's there, you don't have to go to sleep. If you wake up early, energy's there, you can get up.

You could try, if you want to experiment and not make a big commitment, just sit up in bed. Sit up on your pillow. Lean against the wall or the headboard and see what it feels like. Then you might be encouraged. "Oh, I'm alert. I'll get dressed, go to the hall, meditate." Let it unfold in a natural way.

Another question: Can there be too much samadhi? How to know and how to balance it? The answer to that is no. There cannot be too much samadhi because Dipa Ma, she took it to levels that I haven't even dreamed of yet. If you read her life story, which is a very inspiring biography—I think it's just called *Dipa Ma*—she was an amazing practitioner due to the depth of her concentration, which went beyond being bitten by a dog and not knowing it. That's not actually a real onward-leading aspect of meditation experience. But she developed her concentration so strongly that she explored all the jhanas and formless attainments, and on the basis of that was able to develop psychic powers that were documented by a university researcher in Calcutta. She's just a very inspiring yogi.

So there can't be too much samadhi, per se. But you do want to refine your attention to it. As you go into samadhi, you can get wrapped up. And it becomes a little bit dull because it can become so cozy. Like that image of the yogi wrapped up in a shawl. It can get very cozy in samadhi. And what happens is the light of mindfulness cannot be present.

So what you want is, if you're going into samadhi, you want to keep it balanced with the brightness of mindfulness. What's happening now? What's happening now? What's happening now? If you're going into the development of jhanas, then that doesn't apply. But right now, what we're all doing is vipassana. And so as the concentration deepens, you really want to keep this brightness of mindfulness happening moment after moment after moment.

Another question that came in the bowl, and I think this is an interesting one.

What's the difference in feeling with piti and sukha?

So I think I mentioned that there are five jhanic factors: vitakka, vicara, piti, sukha, ekaggata. What's the difference between these two middle ones?

Piti is more or less the first one to develop. These factors are somewhat sequential. Piti is the first one to develop. It's usually translated as rapture, but I don't think that's a very good translation because it just aims very high. This is like being swept away. It puts too high a bar on the quality. Bhikkhu Analayo translates it as joy, and I think that's a nicer translation. It's also maybe a little too high in my estimation. I like to think of it as enjoyment.

When you start finding that you're enjoying meditation in the moment, to me, that's the first sign of piti. "Oh, this being in the present is kind of nice. This opening to sounds is really spacious, relaxes me. That's kind of nice." That's the start of piti. As it builds, as the enjoyment builds, it does get into joy. It can get into bliss. It can get to very strong physical expressions. Sometimes so strong, the energy is uncomfortable. That's okay, because who we have waiting in the wings is sukha.

Sukha is usually translated as pleasure. That's a good translation. Vance was describing the tones of vedana. They're described as sukha, dukkha, or neither sukha nor dukkha. So pleasure is a good translation. And it comes with an emotional sweetness that I like to think of. Sukha sounds kind of like sucrose or sugar. When sukha arises, there's a pervasive sweetness in the body and the mind. So it has this warm flavor that brings a deep contentment. And then there's the feeling that, oh, it's so good. The mind can just settle into itself because it's so inviting and there's so much contentment. One teacher translates it as happy comfort of body and mind.

So piti, there's enjoyment. There can be some bodily energy, but with sukha, there's a real wave of sweetness. Very satisfying.

A couple of announcements. This morning there will be a guided loving-kindness this afternoon at 3:30, so the second in the sequence, and Sally will be leading that. Vance's schedule for practice meetings went up a little before the sit, so if you think you might be meeting with Vance today, please check that after this sit. There's plenty of time.

There's a long history in meditation centers of what we call the window wars, where different meditators have different views on whether windows should be open or closed. And there have been occasions when the temperature of coolness or heat actually brought yogis to blows in the meditation hall. Not here, not here, but elsewhere. So we don't want that to escalate.

At some points in the past, we've assigned a service meditation to a yogi to monitor the windows. But if you think striving for samadhi puts pressure on yourself, being responsible for the windows in this hall is like unimaginable responsibility. So we don't want to put that burden on any of you. It's really too much.

So we've consulted with the staff and we've made a decision. We're going to leave windows open in the front and at the back all day long, all night long. If the temperature dramatically changes, we may revise that, but a staff person will do it. And the rest of the windows will be closed. So we ask you all to take what's given with the window situation. Some of you will be too warm.

C'est la vie. Some of you will be too cold. C'est aussi la vie. So please accept what's offered in the way of windows and know that the staff will manage it. There is ventilation going on all the time. There's an air circulation system that IMS has installed that is always on and will be circulating air. It's not going to get stuffy. So windows are open. Air will be moving through. And if the window setting is not suitable for you, you might want to move to a window that has been preordained to be open or closed and find your balance that way.

I hope you really have a wonderful day playing with this choiceless attention. It can be really opening. And if at first you feel a little lost, go back to your anchor and try again. It's really a wonderful long-term way to be in the present moment.

Have a choiceless day.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.