Morning Instructions - Choiceless Attention

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 52:49

In the instructions this morning, I want to introduce one other approach that we've talked around, but I want to make more explicit. It's a style that I'll call choiceless attention.

In our meditation so far, we've relied a lot on our primary anchor, which is the breath for most of you, and treated it with a preferential attitude. It becomes our home base—we start there, we stay there. If anything strong takes our attention, we'll go away, but then generally we'll come back and focus again on the breath. That's a very good approach for developing stability of attention in the middle of changing experience.

In choiceless attention, we let go of our preference for the breath and simply focus on whatever's presenting itself in this new moment. It's like every moment, the mindfulness has to be really fresh and awake, and you're answering the question, "What am I noticing now?" And then a moment goes by. "What am I noticing now? What am I noticing now?"

You'll find as you do that, what you notice keeps changing. In one moment it might be a sound, in the next moment it might be a body sensation, then you might feel a thought, then there might be an in-breath and an out-breath, then you might notice a mood, then another body sensation. If you look closely, the attention keeps moving between these different experiences all the time. In choiceless attention, we're not choosing where to place the attention, but we're letting it do its natural thing of roaming. We just want to be there to be mindful of wherever it's landing.

This is a very open kind of approach to meditation. It can feel very natural and even effortless if there's enough stability to support it. But because of this openness, sometimes it's easy for the thoughts to slip away, and it's easy to become distracted. So if that starts to happen as you're practicing the choiceless style, come back again to your primary anchor—the breath—recollect the mind there, and once you feel steady, then you can try opening up again.

This choiceless attention builds on all the meditation instructions that we've done so far. I'll mention them briefly as we go into it, but the instructions for sounds, breath, sensations, emotions, and thoughts are all necessary so that you know how to relate to those phenomena before we move into this more open or choiceless approach.

We'll play with that during this period. And if you find it suitable, you can bring it into your meditations for the rest of the day as well.

Beginning again, sitting comfortably, being relaxed in your body and yet also upright, so you feel alert,

awake, but at ease. Letting the eyes gently close.

You can open the attention to sounds if that helps you bring in a sense of receptivity and effortless awareness. As you rest with this attention that's fairly wide, open to all the sounds that arise, notice that everything else is also held in this open space of awareness. The sounds come and go. The breath rises and falls. Sensations in the body are pulsing or vibrating or twinkling. Thoughts can enter and pass. And the mood or emotion is there too as a background.

These are all just the natural functioning of our six senses. And in choiceless attention, we can be aware of any part of that which presents itself.

Out of that whole range of appearances that we meet, bring the attention first to breathing. Feel the breath through the whole body or in the area where it's clearest to you—it could be in the abdomen, the chest, or at the tip of the nose.

Notice any other sensations that are apparent throughout the body. Just feel their bare physical actuality of tingling or pulsing, pressure or warmth or coolness, ache or bliss. Let that sensation be directly known with mindfulness. Bring the attention close to it, feeling it just the way it is. Mindfulness is equally able to be with an unpleasant sensation as with a pleasant sensation.

Notice the mood or emotion that's present. It could be one of the hindrance energies—wanting or aversion, sleepiness, restlessness, doubt. It could be one of the beautiful qualities of mind—concentration, peace, metta, compassion—not needing to make that state of mind go away or last any longer than its nature is to last. Just be present to feel it just the way it is, to know it.

These moods aren't you or yours. They're just like clouds, systems of weather coming into this space of awareness. They arrive, they last for a while, and they pass too, due to their own causes and conditions.

Notice any thoughts that are appearing, persisting, and then passing away. When mindfulness is strong, you can see thoughts as another present moment phenomenon without getting lost in their content. You'll still know the content, but it won't throw you off your present moment seat of staying anchored in the present, letting the thought arise and pass.

Anything now that arises in our field of experience as we sit can be the subject for our mindfulness. We can pay clear attention and know it just as it is.

So now allowing the attention to become choiceless, not directed in any particular way—not necessarily to breath or body or sounds, just open. Open in a way that you have a real interest and a freshness of looking. What am I noticing now? And then let the mindfulness connect with that.

Not needing to become fixed on it. Let the mindfulness simply rest there if that's its choice, if that's the choice of attention. But open in the next moment to the next arising, the next thing that presents itself. What am I noticing now?

So in this way, the meditation becomes very fluid, very natural and unforced. Just resting in the present moment, noticing what's appearing. Again, if you find yourself carried away with a train of thought, just notice when you return from that, appreciate that moment of being back. And then just asking again, what's happening now? What do I notice now?

If you ever become confused or uncertain what to pay attention to, just go back to your home base. Return to the breath, your anchor. Reestablish that connection. Collect the mind a little more. It's always there for us, this anchor that we've developed the relationship with. Going back, settling in, and when you feel collected again, if you like, you can open up again to this completely open attention in a choiceless style. Just noticing what's happening now, moment after moment.

So a couple of announcements before we take comments and questions. You may have noticed this is the last full day of the retreat. If you haven't noticed that, you get the gold award for present moment attention. So that's really good.

In context, this is the last full day. And on this retreat, we'd like to allow time for you all to get together with each other for some discussion. And we'll do some of that this afternoon and some of that tomorrow morning. So there will actually be two opportunities for you to meet in smaller groups and to talk about the impact, perhaps, of mindfulness in your life and your work.

So we'll begin some integration this afternoon at the 2:15 sit. We'd like to ask everyone to please come to the sit at 2:15. We'll start with a gentle return to mindful speaking with one another, and then that will be the prelude to dividing into smaller groups and having some discussion among yourselves. Then we'll come back into the large group and we'll hear from the smaller groups so we'll get a sense of the creative juices at work in the whole group when we come back together.

Tea time will be a little later today. We'll go back into silence at tea time and then in silence for the rest of the evening and through breakfast tomorrow morning. Tomorrow morning, again, at closing, we'll have more opportunity for talking about taking the practice home and into the world, and also for you to discuss with each other. So that's the general flow of the rest of today and tomorrow. We'll end about 11 tomorrow morning.

So in the meantime, we are still in the momentum of the retreat. You all have worked very hard to get to this point. A lot of moments of mindfulness have built up and the noble silence has supported it. So please take care with this retreat container. Right through the morning, through lunchtime today, the break after lunch, and then coming into the 2:15 sit, please keep the support of that silence as we go through this last morning of silent practice together, and then we'll start to open it up at 2:15.

Okay, so that's the outline of the day. Any comments on your practice or questions? Yes, seated at the back.

"I found that liberating. I feel like when I have to follow my breath, I feel constricted. But my question is, can you follow more than one sense simultaneously? Or are you just time slicing it and catching them

both?"

Good question. He said he found it freeing—that when he was with the breath, it felt a little constricting. When he could open it up, it felt a lot freer for him. And the question is, can you follow two things at once? Or is that apparent following of two things at once really just rapid time slicing?

I'm going to leave this as an open question and not answer it because I think it's more useful for you to investigate it yourself and come to your own understanding. It's a really interesting thing to explore.

Here's the way I would put the question: Can attention be with more than one thing in the same moment? Or does attention only focus on one element, one phenomenon of our whole experience in each new moment?

I'll leave that as an open question for everyone to explore. Often with these questions, the investigation is the fun part, and the conclusion isn't even as important as what you learn by doing it.

There was another question. Yes?

The questioner said he found himself naming everything his attention went to, and asked if there's a difference—is it possible to notice without naming?

It is possible to notice without naming, and the naming is actually fine too. Remember, we've talked about the noting practice where with the breath we might note "rising, falling" or "in, out." We can do that with all the phenomena that our attention lands on and give just a short label for each one.

That can be very helpful, as it is with the breath, in maintaining a real continuity of noticing. The mental note or label is optional, but if you find it helpful, if it comes easily and you don't find that it interferes, it can be really good support.

We could be sitting and we might notice: rising, thinking, hearing, touching, hearing, touching—just like that. In each case, we want the majority of our attention to be with the direct experience and have the note be really soft, kind of in the background, so the verbal doesn't overwhelm the direct experience. But it can be a very helpful way to keep reminding ourselves to keep paying attention.

He mentioned needing to give his attention a little direction not to move so quickly. How did you give it that direction not to move so rapidly?

"I found myself becoming restless as my attention was jumping all over the place, so I sort of followed it while directing it. I'm not sure how to explain it."

His comment was that when he let his attention go, it started moving really quickly. Anybody else have that experience? Sometimes that happens. You'll just see ten things in a second for a while. Obviously you can't keep up noting with that rapidity, even though something's being known in each of those moments.

In the Abhidhamma, which is the classical Buddhist text on psychology, they analyze these movements of attention in very fine detail. They say basically there are many mind moments in every second. I don't know what that number is—I've heard seventeen trillion tossed out, but I frankly don't believe that. But if you measure how quickly we can perceive, I think it could be twenty to forty things per second. Perception might be on the order of a twentieth or fortieth of a second.

Sometimes in meditation, we can actually see things move maybe not quite that fast, but more than we can keep track of. At that point, if it feels restless, it's fine to slow it down a little bit. One of the metrics I use is to emphasize a noting about every two seconds—the pace I was demonstrating a couple of minutes ago. That's the pace I would note at, at least in the beginning, though it can get a little quicker too.

There might be little movements in between that you don't pay so much attention to, but maybe every couple of seconds you notice something fairly major and note that if you like. That will help slow down that rapidity of movement.

But if the mind is steady with it, there's no problem with that rapidity. If it leads to restlessness, it's fine to slow it down. Sometimes it's just interesting to let the attention go as quick as it wants to and see what happens. Maybe it will continue like that. Maybe it will play itself out and settle down on its own. Either way would be fine.

We'll take one last question before moving on.

"This sounds like the rebellious adolescent in me, because when you gave me permission not to focus on my breath, then I went right back to my breath."

"Did you do that?"

"Yes. How was that?"

"Oh, wonderful. All you have to do is tell me not to do it."

Her comment was that the rebellious adolescent came through—when I gave permission to go away from the breath, she went right back to the breath, and that was wonderful. Before anyone had given you permission to move away from the breath, had you been wandering wide open?

"Yes."

So if we say wide, you go narrow. If we say narrow, you go wide. Perfect. Go both ways.

One more question from our honorable questioner.

"It's an observation and an invitation for comments if you think it would be helpful. I find it difficult to not try to produce a note. For instance, if I don't notice an emotion for a while, there's this little 'oh no, I'll never have an emotion again' sort of tendency to check my emotions rather than just wait for them to

present themselves."

So taking a look to see if there's something there?

"Yeah, almost. I wouldn't say trying to produce something there, but checking in. Having practiced with the breath so much, not trusting it will ever go somewhere else."

His comment was about turning to the open instruction—he felt almost an obligation to produce something. He's so familiar with the breath that it's very easy to go there. In particular with emotions, there's a need to almost check to see if something's happening because he doesn't want to miss it, since emotions aren't noticed very often. It could be with any of the sense doors because he's so accustomed to being with the breath.

This is one of the adjustments one makes when moving from a practice that's really strongly focused around an anchor like the breath and then opening it out. You have to find your way in that open space, and there are a lot of confusing currents that can come in. Sometimes people report feeling lost or overwhelmed in the spaciousness. It's kind of like the breath has been so small and cozy—like sitting with your best friend—and then you're thrown into the New York subway at rush hour. So it takes a while to get adjusted to the bigger frame of reference.

I would say the thing that can be helpful is if the breath still stands out, let yourself notice that. Don't feel like you have to not notice the breath. Sometimes that's what will happen out of habit when nothing else much is going on. Trust the method. Trust it.

The other thing is really coming to this meditation with a sense of receptivity. You know how we've talked about when you open to sounds—you can just be sitting still in the middle of a concert hall and just let sounds come to you. You don't have to go out to find them. Similarly, when you open up in this way, think about just being in a really receptive place. You don't have to conduct the symphony. You're just there to listen to it.

The symphony is happening at the six sense doors. There are six instruments playing this symphony. So you just settle back. Now it's the ear. Now it's the body. Now it's thought, and you're just there to receive them all. Strengthen the receptivity and just let things come. They'll come.

If you like, play with this balance between focus on your anchor and this open, choiceless attention. If you feel a little scattered, come back to your anchor and collect.

When you feel a little collected, try this venturing into the wider space, which can bring in a sense of ease and effortless meditation. You can play with that balance through your sittings today.

So please have a mindful day. Notice that your thoughts may go to the future this morning, and continue to notice that as thinking.

The practice invites us to discover this natural rhythm between gathering and opening, between the focused attention that stabilizes the mind and the spacious awareness that receives whatever arises. In this dance between concentration and mindfulness, we find a meditation that is both grounded and free, both purposeful and effortless.

As you move through your day, carry this same quality of aware presence. When the mind gets caught up in planning or projecting, simply notice this as the activity of thinking. Return again and again to this moment, to what is actually here. This is the continuous practice—not just on the cushion, but in every moment of our lives.

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