Morning Instructions

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 15:57

In the instructions for the meditation this morning, we're going to continue to unfold the instructions on the body, which Temple introduced yesterday. Just to give a little bit of a sense of the flow of the instructions, we're introducing them day by day so that eventually everything that comes into your experience while you're sitting will be a subject for the meditation, can be the focus of mindfulness.

So the meditation is not just about the breath or just about the body—it's about all our experiences as we're sitting, as we're walking, as we're moving around through the day. But we're introducing them a little bit at a time so that we can learn well how to work with each area that we're exploring.

In the first few days, as you're seeing, we focused on the breath, a little bit on sounds, and now on the body. We encourage you all to find what we call an anchor among these three subjects. An anchor in meditation is something that becomes a primary focus for you that you come back to again and again to ground your attention when nothing else particular is going on.

So you sit, nothing is striking in your field of experience. Oh, where do I put my attention? Ah, where's my anchor? So it's sort of like a home, a meditation home that you can always come back to. You develop a good, steady relationship with it. The attention learns how to settle on that subject and it's always available to you.

For many of you, the breath will be your anchor, your primary subject. But for some people, the breath isn't so comfortable. There may be a sense of tightness. It could be a history of breathing difficulties that get triggered by focusing on the breath. In that case, a different anchor would be helpful for you, something like sounds or the body.

The body is an excellent anchor—puts us in touch with something that's always available and connects well into the emotional life. So as you're meditating through today, over the next days, see what suits you as your meditation home, as an anchor in your practice, something you come back to again and again, hopefully among breath or body or sounds.

Begin the meditation by sitting comfortably, being as relaxed as you can, and still being upright. This balance of uprightness and ease is a pointer to the mental attitude that makes right effort. We want to be energetically with our experience without pressing too hard on it, without getting tight around experience.

If we relax too much, mindfulness will slip away from the present moment. If we push too hard, the body and mind will become tense. Finding in our posture the right balance that expresses this mental attitude

of right effort—a balanced effort.

Let go of any obvious areas of tension—the forehead. Let the eyes be soft. The jaw is relaxed. Shoulders are dropped. And the belly is soft.

Just let your awareness inhabit the body, fill the body. So that you simply sit and feel the body in sitting, know the body in sitting. We're not knowing the body as a separate observer from outside or behind or at a distance, but we're knowing the body by feeling it from inside, awareness integrated throughout the body.

So you can have a sense just of resting the awareness within the body. In this way, the body posture can itself be an anchor for your meditation. The posture itself can be the focus that you come back to again and again.

As you sit comfortably, then open your attention to the realm of sounds, letting your awareness become wide, expansive, opening to any sounds that arise from inside or outside. It could be the sounds of one another, sounds of the building, sound of my voice, sounds from outside. And if there are no sounds, you can just rest your attention in the wide extent of silence.

Notice how any sounds that arise are heard without any special effort. You don't have to go looking for them. Just as you rest, the sounds are known spontaneously. This can be a doorway to finding a very receptive kind of attention—just as though you were listening to a symphony in a concert hall. Just being still and everything is known.

Then bring the attention back into the body. As you feel the body, the same receptive attention can know the sensations of the breath, just resting easily. The in-breath is felt and the out-breath is felt. You can bring your attention to a particular part of the body if you like, where the breath is clear—the nose, the chest, or the abdomen. Or you can leave the attention spread throughout the whole body, feeling the impact of the breath through the whole body, each in-breath and out-breath.

As you're attending to the breath, from time to time another sensation will arise in a part of the body that is strong, naturally draws the attention to it. So if this happens, easily let go of the breath. Let the attention move where it's called to this new sensation.

and just feel that sensation in its bare physical nature—tingling or pulsing, vibration or pressure, heat or coolness, ache or pain or stabbing, blissful, bubbly. You can let the attention stay with that new sensation for as long as it's drawn there.

We notice how the attention will move from time to time to something that is predominant—to what you might say is the strongest feature in our field of experience. If you have an anchor, such as breath, sounds, or posture, then you'll find the attention will be drawn from time to time to other sensations in the body because they become predominant or strong or noticeable.

So we don't resist that draw of the attention. We allow the attention to move there naturally, and we establish our mindfulness in relationship to that new arising. Feel that new sensation as long as it's calling us, as long as it's predominant. It could just be a slight twinge that passes in a few seconds. It could be an ongoing ache that goes on the better part of an hour. So you could be with the sensation for a few seconds, or you could be with it for most of the meditation. Either way is fine.

If the sensation subsides and stops drawing the attention, then allow your attention to return to your anchor. And when another sensation comes, again allow the attention to go there and feel that new sensation in its bare nature.

Sometimes painful sensations will arise in parts of the body—the pressure on the cushion, the knees, or the shoulders. When a painful sensation comes, because it tends to be a compelling subject, it can be a good focus to keep the attention in the present moment. So allow your attention to go there, allow the awareness to go right into the painful sensation.

Have a sense that you can explore it with your awareness. You can pay attention to the details of the sensation. Explore how far it extends all around it. And then also notice the mind's reaction or relation to it. Is there a reaction of fear, anxiety, dislike, or worry? Resentment of the pain? If so, notice that and see if you can soften the attitude—soften the mind's relationship to one that accepts the pain, allows that sensation to be the way it is, and still feels it.

If the mind stays aversive, it tends to lead to more tension in the body. If the mind can soften and relax, then at least we give the body a chance to relax with the pain. So notice the pain, notice the mind's relation to it. Have your attitude be one of allowing, softening, acceptance.

And then if the pain becomes too strong, bringing about a lot of concern or worry or turmoil, feel free to shift your posture. You can move slowly, mindfully—lean forward or put the knees up. Take a little break. When you feel refreshed, you can go back into the sitting posture and continue, keeping the continuity of the mindfulness going.

And if you're ever unsure what to attend to, just return to your anchor—breath, body posture, or sounds. Some place you can always come back to and stay simple with.

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