Morning Instructions Day 12

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 45:19

This morning in the instructions, we're going to introduce a technique that is the logical conclusion of all the instructions we've been giving so far. We've given instructions on how to be with the breath, the body, sounds, emotions, and thoughts. This makes up the majority of your experience as you're sitting in silent meditation.

This morning, I'm going to introduce a technique that I'll call choiceless attention. It highlights this one particular factor of mind, which is attention. I want to talk about that a little before I give the meditation instructions.

What is attention? In our experience, there are many things going on all the time at the six sense doors. But if you'll notice, one of them is always being highlighted. It's like you focus on one thing at a time and relate to that. That focusing property is the activity of attention.

In Buddhist terminology, this is *manasikāra*. It's a factor of mind that selects one element from all our different sense experience and brings our awareness to that in particular. This is happening all the time and it's changing. Attention is a common mental factor that is in every moment of experience.

Just take a look right now at what your attention is doing. It generally doesn't stay in one place for very long. It will attend to the sound of my voice. Then you'll notice a sensation in your body, perhaps a pressure. Then you'll notice an image of someone in the room. Then you'll notice the temperature of the air on your hand or your face. Then you'll come back to the sound of my voice and so on.

The attention, if left alone, is always moving and shifting, picking out, highlighting, focusing on different aspects of our experience, moment after moment. This movement of attention is one of the symptoms of restlessness in the mind. Part of the meditative training is being able to direct attention by our conscious choice. So we say, "I'm going to place my attention on the breath, in the belly, and leave it there," and not have it roam so much.

As we know, this is a very challenging task because attention doesn't naturally stay in one place. But by training, we can get better at that skill of directing the attention and have it stay somewhere. So in the early part of the retreat, we were directing the attention often to an anchor. We encouraged you to find an anchor in the breath, the body, or sounds, and be there if nothing else was strongly calling you. But from time to time, other things would. And then you'd go be with a sensation or a thought or an emotion, then come back to the anchor.

In the meditation this morning, we're going to unhook from the anchor altogether. There's going to be no

preference for breath or body or sounds. We're going to let attention go wherever it will. That's why this technique is called choiceless attention. We're not choosing where to direct it. We're letting it go. But we want to notice where it lands.

Our task is to see where the attention is falling in each new moment and be mindful there. Anything that we notice can be the subject for mindfulness. This approach to meditation is so natural, one hundred percent organic, it hardly even feels like meditation. All we're doing is letting the attention be natural and noticing where it is.

You may find that you'll notice an in-breath, and a moment later you'll notice a sound, and a moment later you'll notice a sensation, and then you'll notice an out-breath, and then you'll notice a thought. In fact, this practice, this technique can be supported by the habit of mental noting or labeling so that in each new moment you might note where the attention is landing with very simple words like "in," "pressure," "planning," "calm," "hearing," "out," and so on.

There are basically two ways to think about this practice. It's the same practice, but I'm going to explain them both because some people resonate with one and some with the other. One is, this practice is just answering the question, "What am I aware of now?" In each new moment, what am I aware of? And then you let yourself become mindful of that. The other way to explain it is you're following the attention, seeing where it lands, and noticing that. Same practice, two different descriptions.

The noting is optional. You might play with it during this period because if it's helpful for you, it can really be useful in getting us to stay in the present moment. It cuts down on the tendency to be lost. Because if the notes aren't happening, it's because we're lost in thought. So the steady nature of the note reminds us, "I'm staying connected to the present moment."

What we're aware of is not so critical. The fact that we're aware or mindful is the key thing.

So in approaching this meditation, I'll suggest that you begin by paying attention, bringing attention to the anchor. Stabilize a little bit there, and then I'll invite you to open up and let go of the anchor and try this new technique of choiceless attention. Because there are so many different objects in choiceless attention, sometimes it gets confusing. What should I pay attention to? Am I thinking too much? Should I go to this or that? If that happens, make it simple again. Just come back to the anchor.

Beginning the meditation, find in your posture both ease and alertness. Relax any obvious areas of holding in the body. And then connect with your anchor. It could be the breath, could be the body posture, could be the field of sounds. Choose to direct your attention to your primary subject and let it remain there as steadily as possible while the attention stabilizes a little.

Now let your attention release from the anchor and be open. First take a few moments just to be aware of the vastness of the field of our experience. This can include sounds both near and far away. It includes all the sensations within the body, including breath, any thought that arises and passes, any mood or emotion

or state of mind, all within this current field of awareness.

With the attention unhooked from the anchor and just free to go where it will, notice in each new moment where the attention has fallen, what experience is being highlighted, which of the six sense objects is being known. Then establish mindfulness, however briefly, with that experience in this new moment. Don't cling to that new experience, so the attention again is just free. Then notice in this new moment: where is it landing? Be mindful of that just for a moment.

You may find that by habit the awareness or the attention naturally lands on your anchor. That's fine. It's not a problem. It may be there for several moments in a row. We just don't make the effort to direct it there. If it lands there, no problem. But it's always free to move on and our mind stays fresh, alert, interested to see where it will go next.

This approach to meditation almost takes the effort out because the movement of attention is so natural. But at the same time we have to be very awake to notice what's happening. Let that interest really be present. What am I knowing now? What's being revealed in this new moment? Being mindful of that.

If you'd like, you can experiment with the noting practice. Just keep a steady naming of what you're noticing in each new moment. Maybe the timing is such that you make a new note every couple of seconds. When you make the note, make it in a very soft voice, like a whisper, so it doesn't become too intrusive. Your noting might be something like: in, out, hearing, pressure, memory, image, in, cool. See if it helps the attention stay connected to the present moment and avoid the tendency to be drifting off in a chain of thinking.

Sometimes you might find that the very openness of this kind of practice makes it hard for mindfulness to stay steady, to stay continuous. If you find yourself drifting into more thinking, then come back again to the anchor. Spend some time just being mindful of that simple focus. If it feels like the attention steadies a bit there and you like, then you can open up again to the choiceless attention, to all passing phenomena.

We have these two differing styles of practice now that we've introduced. One where you take a fairly narrow focus on your anchor, direct the attention there, stay with it in an ongoing way. The other instructions have been moving to this more open style, concluding today with this total openness, which brings in a quality of naturalness, ease, relaxation, receptivity, where the attention can just go to whatever is drawing it in a given moment.

Generally, we recommend that vipassana meditators develop both of these styles in their sitting practice. The narrow focus really helps for stabilizing the attention, bringing some steadiness of mind. Once you have that as a foundation, then the open attention brings in this greater sense of ease and non-doing.

And you can just feel in the spaciousness how there's a kind of easy way to relax in that big space. The big space holds everything.

Meditation generally goes best by alternating between these two approaches. Spend some time with your anchor, bring some stability in, get the mind a little steady. When it is, open up to the bigger space. But what happens is the bigger space tends eventually to lead to spacing out. And when you find you're spacing out and getting lost in thought, come back and reestablish the mindfulness in the narrower focus of your anchor.

This dance between focused attention and open awareness becomes a natural rhythm in practice. The concentrated focus gives us the stability we need, like establishing a strong foundation. From that foundation, we can then safely explore the vast openness of awareness itself. But awareness without some grounding can become diffuse and unfocused, so we return again to our anchor when needed.

This interplay between samatha and vipassana, between concentration and insight, between doing and non-doing, reflects the very heart of Buddhist meditation practice. Both qualities support and enhance each other, creating the conditions for wisdom and understanding to naturally arise.

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