Morning Instructions

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 54:46

Yesterday in the question period following Philip's instructions, one of you mentioned that sometimes awareness was easier to feel in a broad way, like a broad field of awareness, rather than the specific awareness of an individual object, like a body sensation or breath.

In the instructions this morning, I want to give encouragement to connect with that broad field of awareness, if that's helpful for you. And then also a suggestion to come back and re-look at the awareness in relationship to individual experiences—breath, body, and sounds. Perhaps, as I mentioned at the ten o'clock sit yesterday, choose an anchor from among those three that will be the focus that you return to again and again.

Because we will spend a little bit of time on sounds this morning, and the hall is so quiet, I may add a little additional sound. You'll know the sitting has ended when there are three bells from the big bell. Don't stop before then—keep meditating.

Please settle comfortably into your sitting posture, grounding the attention in the body, letting the body relax and letting the mind relax. Things are okay the way they are and we don't need to get anywhere else. Just settle into the present moment, feeling its sufficiency, letting the body be as it is, letting the mood be the way it is, and letting thoughts come and go as they will. Not chasing after them, but not pushing them away. Just letting thoughts come and go, but we don't have to be led around by them.

Find your connection to the earth through the sitting base that you can relax into, and the uprightness of the torso and head, letting the spine rise toward the sky. This whole living body filled with awareness from head to toe in every corner.

Now let your awareness become expansive and wide, open to all the sounds that are appearing and disappearing. If no sounds are apparent in any moment, just become aware of the extent of the silence, the vastness of silence. You might have the sense that your awareness is like a big clear sky stretching out without any limits, or like empty space in which all the sounds inside and outside arise and pass away—a space big enough to hold near sounds and distant sounds.

In giving attention to sounds, to hearing, let the attention be very receptive, not needing to send the mind out toward the sounds, but just resting in the center of all the sounds and letting them come to you. We don't need to do anything for sounds to be heard. As we rest, they're known effortlessly, spontaneously. So we just stay relaxed and present and the sounds are known.

Now become aware of sensations throughout the body. Sensations are arising, changing, fading. Also in

this big empty space of the broad awareness—we might say this broad field of awareness—it's like space. Feel the sensations. And also recognize the awareness that lets them be known, this field of consciousness in which they come and go.

Among the sensations in the body, we meet again the experience of breathing, letting the breath just come naturally in its own rhythm, but feeling in the body the effect of breathing in, the effect of breathing out. You may notice a whole breath—the way the air enters through the nostrils, causes the chest to rise, causes the belly to expand on the in-breath and on the out-breath, how the abdomen falls, the chest falls and the air exits the nostrils. Or you might like to bring your focus of attention to one part of the body where the breath is clearer—at the tip of the nose, in the area of the abdomen, or in the chest. Then be quite continuous in the awareness of the in-breath and the out-breath.

It can be helpful to have an anchor that you come back to again and again in your meditation. Something that becomes very familiar and a home base for you. It could be sounds, could be the body posture as you sit, could be feeling the breathing. See where your attention falls easily, where you can connect easily. Then give your attention today to establishing a relationship with that experience. And as you do, tune from time to time into the quality of awareness that's revealing the experience. Right where the experience is, that's where the knowing is also—in sounds, in body, in breath.

If you find it helpful, you can reconnect with this broad sense of awareness being like a big clear sky or like empty space in which all the sounds and all the sensations arise and pass away. So you can be in touch with this sky-like nature of awareness. You can be in touch with the individual experiences. You can be in touch with the knowing of the individual experience. All of these are fine approaches in our meditation today.

If you're ever uncertain of where to give your attention, that's when it's helpful to have the anchor. Just a simple object—sound, body, breath—that you can come back and connect to with mindfulness again and again, allowing all facets of the experience just to be the way they are, just revealed through this impartial awareness that's open to all phenomena.

Stay connected with your anchor, clearly mindful moment by moment—sounds being known, sensations being known, breath being known. Can you tune into the knowing? Can you feel that knowing of the individual experience as it happens? Just let your intuition operate as you get close with your attention to that direct experience of the phenomenon. Intuit the knowing as it happens.

And then again, simply connecting with the appearance, sound, body, or breath. And just before the bell sounds, you might connect again with this broad sense of awareness, with its nature of being like a big clear sky, like empty space in which all the sounds just appear and disappear.

Do you have any questions this morning about your practice, about the instructions or the talks?

"I'm not sure if I have a good anchor because I'm trying to correct the body posture and it lasts about three

seconds. It seems like maybe there's a feeling that the anchor needs to be the only thing that's in my consciousness and mindfulness. When some other object comes in alongside the anchor, there's a sense of disappointment and incorrectness. Then I've tried to become mindful of that..."

Great question. He finds that he can be with an anchor for a couple of seconds, and then something else arises. His attention gets drawn there, and he feels disappointment when attention moves away from the anchor. Then it becomes confusing as to where he should be.

This happens to all of us. As the instructions develop, we'll make this more of a choiceless paying of attention so that whatever arises can become a wonderful focus for mindfulness. Even at this stage, you can start working with that.

It's perfectly fine to move attention away from the anchor. Whether you're with sounds or with tinnitus—which itself can be an excellent meditation focus—you can tune into that as one of the sounds in the space. Then other things will be noticed: sensations in the body, perhaps aches or pains or pressures or lightness. You can tune into those, connect with them, feel them, feel the knowing of them. When they're no longer so compelling, you can return to the anchor.

Begin to play with that sense of freely moving away from the anchor at times. If something else arises and draws attention, let mindfulness become established with the new experience. When it's no longer compelling, no longer naturally drawing the attention, the anchor is always there to return to.

It's like beginning to play. At this stage we're working with body sensations, sounds, and breath. As the retreat progresses, we'll also open up to include emotions—beautiful emotions, difficult emotions—and the activity of thoughts. We want to eventually move our attention easily to any of those. For now, this is a good time in the retreat to start opening up to your anchor and to these simple experiences beyond the anchor. Feel free to make that movement. Come back to the anchor when there's nothing else really drawing attention naturally.

"Could you speak a bit about the role of compassion as we work with different anchors and focal points of attention? I find that early in my practice I was able to bring a sort of lightness of compassion and then experiment more, but over the last few years I've gotten much heavier. I'm able to soften, but it still feels like there's a lot of friction as I move from one anchor to another focal point."

An important question about the role of compassion in relation to the attention we bring to meditation. He mentioned that earlier in his practice he could bring a sense of compassion or lightness into meditation. Now he's feeling more friction as he works with the anchor and moving away from it.

This is such an important part of meditation's development. Leela did a guided meditation on loving-kindness yesterday at the 3:30 sitting, and we often include this in retreats because the heart qualities of love and compassion are so needed for us to hold the experience of meditation and the difficulty of being a person. It's not easy being a human being, as has been said many times.

That sense of care and compassion needs to start with ourselves first. We recognize the struggles in daily life, struggles in meditation, and we want to bring a warm, caring, allowing attention to that. Wherever we feel conflict or heaviness or sadness or unhappiness, we want to take a moment, acknowledge that, and meet it with this sense of care. You could call it compassion. You could call it loving-kindness. Just acknowledge that this too is part of our human experience.

In this retreat, we're focusing on these less personal aspects of awareness—mindfulness, consciousness, attention—as a theme to develop because you're all experienced meditators. But we recognize that just because you're experienced meditators, suffering hasn't gone out of the picture yet. It's really important that you hold as a background the Four Noble Truths, the ubiquitous quality of dukkha that comes with being a person, and how to keep the heart open as we meet the suffering that will come on the cushion as it does in daily life.

So whether it's the suffering of the body and physical discomfort, whether it's the suffering of mind states that come—sadness or longing or frustration—whether it's suffering that comes specifically in relation to meditation—frustration that you don't feel you're getting it, that you're sliding away, that you can't touch awareness, that you're losing the anchor—all these big and little kinds of disappointment and conflicts that come, we really need to continue to bring an open heart, whether it's loving kindness or compassion for yourself, into this moment by moment.

If you find that the formal meditations are helpful, which Leela introduced yesterday and will do again in this retreat—whether it's metta or compassion—feel free to bring those in at any point during the day. It's not an anchor in this retreat, but it can be an anchor in other retreats, and it's a very helpful attitude to carry all the time. And if that attitude isn't quite naturally present, do a little of the formal meditation as Leela led yesterday and evoke it for yourself so that you're holding your experience with that kindness and caring. It's really an important quality.

I talked just a little bit last night about how awareness really in its pure nature is free from the influence of greed, of hatred, and of delusion. So we start to see as we tune into awareness that it has this naturally kind and compassionate quality. When desire and aversion are absent, the mind is in a pretty pure space, and then love and compassion can come out of that. So we're heading in that direction. Sometimes we'll talk about it formally and sometimes we may not, but it's really behind all the instructions and very helpful to bring in. So thank you for bringing that up this morning.

I'm going to stop here with the questions. We need to have a few announcements, and I want to stop a little early because we're starting the interview groups this morning.

Most of you have probably been in interview groups before and kind of know what they're for, but just to make it clear, it's just a chance for you to meet with one of us, talk about your experience in the meditation so far, what's going well, what's been difficult, and to check in about how the retreat's going for you. We'll meet over these two days with everyone in a small group of about six or seven people. We'd

like to hear from everyone in the course of the group. Then as we move through the first couple of days, we'll start to meet with you one-on-one.

These group meetings will start today, and we'll see half of you today. If your name wasn't on the list today, you'll be up tomorrow. Please check if it's not up tomorrow—it either means you're not really here, or we just don't have a sheet for you yet. The interview questionnaires, if there are any still outstanding, please give them back to Elizabeth. So we'll see everybody today or tomorrow.

This is not a grilling. This is not a quiz. This is not for us to evaluate you. This is just for you to ask some questions, and it actually helps to hear each other's questions in the small group. So it'll be a little more personal and you'll hear from other people as well.

Leela will be in the welcome room, which is the room where you registered, just across the hall.

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