Morning Instructions Day 5

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 17:12

You may have gathered that our basic instruction for the whole of the month is going to be: sit down and notice what's happening in your experience. But if we said that at the very beginning, it would be hard to do that without a little bit more foundation. And so what we tend to do is break the instruction up into smaller pieces and deliver them a little bit at a time over the first ten days to two weeks of the course.

Typically we begin by encouraging you to pick a home base or an anchor in your practice that you can come back to again and again to help stabilize the attention. As you return to a similar focus, it will help the attention collect. And when you notice you're not with that focus, you're reminded to come back and steady the attention. So we've recommended breath, we've recommended body posture, we've recommended sounds as those kinds of anchor possibilities. I leave it up to you to choose.

Yesterday Andrea opened us up to the whole field of body sensations. We can look at those through the four elements as she introduced. We can look at them just in their bare physical nature. And then Andrea also introduced the hindrances in the Dharma talk as things to pay attention to.

What I'd like to do today is sum all that up in the instructions where we've gotten to today. And then as the retreat goes on, more instructions will clarify other pieces, other sense doors to pay attention to.

Please begin by sitting comfortably, so you can put the relax in "relax, observe, allow." As you bring your awareness into your body as you're sitting, have a sense that the awareness can pervade the whole body, is pervading the whole body. As you notice the experience of the body as you sit, just take a moment to let go of any unnecessary tension or holding.

Let the eyes be soft, relaxed, a little bit downcast. Allow the jaw to drop. Let the shoulders relax. Let the hands not be clenched. Let the belly be soft. There may be other areas of tension that you're not able to release—that's fine. The muscles need to have some tautness just to hold the body up in sitting. We don't relax completely, but we relax what we can.

Again, feel that unification of the awareness with the body posture, recognizing that the posture itself can become our anchor focus. In using the body posture as a focus, what you want to do is take in the whole body with one glance, as much as possible. Sometimes you can't quite get to every joint of every toe, but with one look, feel the whole length of the body as you sit.

We don't want to construct a sense of an observer that's standing behind the experience, watching it. You want to feel yourself in sitting. Feel the body sitting. It's just one experience. There's no observer outside it. We're just it.

Then you might open your attention in a wide way to take in all the sounds that are coming and going: the sound of my voice, sounds of the building, the systems, the sounds of one another. Let your awareness become wide, limitless, just allowing all the sounds to appear and disappear in the big empty space of awareness. If at times you're not noticing any sounds, then just be aware of the extent of the silence, the vastness of the silence.

Notice how with hearing you don't have to make any special effort to hear. You just sit in a relaxed way with a receptive attitude, letting sounds come, and they're all known spontaneously.

Then bring the attention back into the body and see if you can have that same kind of receptive quality in receiving the experience of the body. Sitting quietly, doing nothing, the body is felt. Again, have the sense of the awareness being able to reach every corner of the body from the top of the head to the tips of the fingers and toes. Everywhere the attention looks, awareness is there with the body, in the body.

As the awareness rests within the body, you'll start to notice the changes in the feeling of the body due to breathing. You'll notice how when an in-breath comes, the energy of the body shifts, feels different. How far throughout the body do you feel the impact of an in-breath? When an out-breath happens, the feeling in the body shifts. There's an impact. How far throughout the body do you feel the impact of breathing out?

Just allow yourself to rest the awareness within the whole body and feel what it feels like to breathe in and breathe out moment by moment, sitting quietly, doing nothing. The receptive attention reveals the sensations of breath.

These are our three recommendations for anchors: the whole body posture, sounds, or breath. If breath is your comfortable focus, you can feel it either in the whole body or in a smaller part—at the belly, the chest, or the nose. All of those are fine.

While you're attending to your anchor, other experiences will come from time to time and naturally draw your attention. We're not fixed on the anchor. Our mind stays open to any other experience that comes.

So other sensations arise in the body: a pressure in the knee, a warmth in the chest, a tingling on the top of the head. When you notice one of these arisings, let that become the new focus for your mindfulness. Easily let go of your anchor. Let the attention go to the new sensation. Connect with it directly and feel it just in its bare physical nature.

If you like, you can notice it as one of the four elements. Or you can just feel it, just being in touch with its physical characteristic—pressure, ache, tingling or pulsing, vibration, warmth, coolness.

If that sensation fades and the attention is no longer drawn, you can return the attention to your anchor. Or perhaps another sensation will call the attention. That's fine.

From time to time you'll notice the arising of different states of mind, different emotions, different moods.

At this point, pay particular attention to the arising of any of the hindrances that Andrea discussed the other night—the movements of sense desire, ill will, sleepiness, restlessness or doubt.

Bring mindfulness to the direct experience of the hindrance energy, not judging it, not trying to make it go away, just paying attention so we become familiar with it, open to it, allowing it. "Oh, anger is like this. Restlessness feels like this."

If that energy is strong, it will express itself through the body. So find and investigate: Where am I feeling wanting in the body? Where do I feel impatience in the body? Where is this dullness to be found in the body?

If you can locate it, let your attention go to that part of the body. Feel the sensations connected with the hindrance energy. By staying in touch with that part of the body, you'll also be in touch with the hindrance—using the body to ground the attention in order to stay in touch with the emotional realm. Again, not judging the emotion, not judging yourself. Mindfulness simply observes and allows. Knowing what's there with clear seeing—that's the basis for wisdom.

Begin to get this fluidity of attention that can be with your anchor if nothing special is going on, but can easily move to one of these experiences—other body sensations, sounds or breath, moods and emotions—when they arise and you notice them. Make each new arising the direct focus for your mindfulness in this new moment.

Everything that arises is a proper focus for mindfulness because it's the mindfulness that's the key and not the object. So sustain the continuity of your careful attention, moment by moment by moment.

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