Morning Instructions: Day 14

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 13:09

Carol did a review of the instructions yesterday, and there's really not much more that we need to say. But I wanted to go over, once again from a slightly different angle, this practice that we sometimes refer to as open awareness or choiceless attention, and give a little more detail on how to practice it.

We often present it as the open alternative to focused attention on the breath. I'd like to explain a little about how these relate.

There are a few styles of meditation that one can practice, all of which are helpful, and it's important to know how to move between them. In the beginning of the retreat, we encourage everyone to find an anchor—a focus that you come back to again and again. Having that provides a way for the mind to settle. You always know that if anything is confusing, if you feel a little lost or not sure where to go, you have a place like a home base that you can come back to and land on. The returning again and again to that anchor helps to steady the attention, developing this quality of samadhi, concentration.

We offered three specific anchors: breath, body posture, or sounds as suggested ones to work with.

In the beginning, you could take the instruction, "I'm going to be with that anchor no matter what happens. If anything else comes in—a different sound, a different sensation, a thought or an emotion—I'm just going to notice it but not pay any attention to it and come right back to the anchor." This is what I'd call the intention of having an exclusive focus just on the anchor.

We did not give that instruction. I hope everybody is aware that was not the instruction at the beginning of the retreat. That would be a good instruction if you were doing a strict concentration practice, but we've been doing insight practice all along.

Instead, the instruction that we gave was something like: be with your anchor, and then when something else arises, let your attention go there and notice it. If it's strong, naturally drawing the attention, let that new arising be the focus for your meditation, the focus for mindfulness. Then if nothing else is up, come back to your anchor and let the attention connect there.

In this formulation, there's a preference for the anchor, but it's not exclusive. We're being with the anchor while also being open to anything else that naturally draws the attention, letting the attention connect and know all the different experiences that arise at the sense doors. This is a very good way to practice. It includes the steadying, calming, concentrating focus that the anchor offers, but it's not exclusive. There's a sense that we're always open to whatever is there.

As the days went on and we covered the instructions for body sensations and sounds and emotions and thoughts and vedana and intention, we could then move into this practice that we call choiceless attention, where we don't even have a preference for the anchor. Instead, we just notice what's happening now, what's happening now, what's happening now.

This is the technique I want to describe in a little more detail. This technique of choiceless attention is basically noticing what's happening now. There are two ways that it can be explained. These two ways are the same technique; they're just described differently.

The first explanation is simply: notice what's happening now. Whether that's an in-breath, a sound, an out-breath, an emotion, a thought, a pressure sensation—just notice what's happening now. That's where mindfulness locates itself.

The other way to describe choiceless attention starts to highlight a factor of mind that's a really important factor in Dharma practice, but one we haven't talked about a great deal: the quality of attention. The Pali word is *manasikaro*. Attention is the faculty in the mind that singles out from our broad range of sense experience and different contacts at the six sense doors, that singles out one of those events to focus on at any given moment.

What we find when we start to meditate is that attention is a very volatile factor. It's drawn now here, now there, now there, now there. When we try to bring the attention in a sustained way to an anchor like breath or body or sounds, we might be—especially in the beginning of the retreat—with two breaths and then the attention is somewhere else.

A big part of the discipline of the practice is training this factor of attention so it can be at our disposal. If we want it to stay in the present moment, that becomes more our choice. If we want it to stay with one object, that becomes more our choice. We're training this factor of attention, and finding an anchor and returning to it is one way that we do that.

When we move to the practice of choiceless attention, though, what we do is deliberately unhook the attention from the anchor. We basically say, "No preference for the anchor. Take it off of that where it may be attached by habit. Unhook it from there. Let it go wherever it wants, but notice clearly where it lands."

That's what's so interesting about this practice of choiceless attention. We're not directing the attention, but we have to stay very awake and alert to its movements, and it will continue to move. It's a very changeable factor. In each new moment, the attention could land somewhere else. Our job as meditators is to be really mindful of where attention is landing and to know that experience in each new object that it lands on.

So this is why the noting practice can be such a strong support as we track the free movement of attention. We may notice: in-breath, sound, pressure, thinking, calm, pleasant, out-breath—like that.

It's a beautiful meditation practice because there's no forcing behind it, but it requires a real alertness. You know, with the breath, you can kind of get in a groove. With sounds, you can space out in a really lovely way. But this requires the attention to be very fluid, very flexible, and yet really alert, because the picture is changing all the time. So you can relax with this kind of practice because you're not trying to make the attention go anywhere, but you have to be very awake with it.

What I just described as an example of the noting is optional. But in doing choiceless attention, you should be noticing with that kind of crispness. You should be alert to where the attention is landing and making that connection to that experience, even if it's just for a moment. That's fine, and then the attention may go off somewhere else.

That it moves is not a problem. Where it lands is not your problem. Our only job is to notice where it lands and make that connection of mindfulness for that moment. Sometimes it will land somewhere and stay a while—like a pain in the body may linger for some time. Sometimes it might come back to an anchor, staying there for a while. That's fine as long as there's no forcing with it. But you want to learn this faculty of letting the attention move freely and still being very alert and aware in each moment of what it's doing.

So then the skill becomes: when do you come to the anchor and when do you open up with choiceless attention? Or when do you spend some time with an emotion like fear?

If there's not much happening that's particularly strong in terms of physical pain or emotional difficulty, the general advice is to go to your anchor if the mind feels kind of distractible or a little unsettled, and collect the attention. When the attention is collected, open up in this choiceless way and see if the stability is there to really be with the parade of changing objects that the attention illuminates.

Please begin in a relaxed and comfortable way, perhaps just beginning the meditation period by coming to your anchor—breath or body or sounds—so that you feel you've made a connection to the present moment. Allow yourself to land for a bit in the present.

And then deliberately let the attention go free from its focus on the anchor. Open up to the expanse of phenomena that are our present moment experience. Then just notice where the attention lands in each new moment, making a direct mindful connection with that new appearance.

You might try in the beginning using notes—simple notes to describe the object: sound, a sensation, a thought, a mood, a breath. Or if that seems like too much activity, just be with the clear noticing of each new object that's being highlighted by the attention in this moment.

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