Day 7 Morning Instructional Sit

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 44:09

We've given a lot of instructions already, starting with the body, breath, sounds, emotions, thoughts, and attitudes. It may all have gone by in a bit of a blur. So this morning, before we add anything else—and we do have a few more things to add—I just want to review where we've been so far so that it starts to feel like it might be a coherent set of guidance.

Please sit comfortably. Find in your posture that expression of upright firmness and alertness, and also relaxed softness and receptivity. The mind and the body both are balanced between these two qualities.

Bring attention first into the body, just feeling yourself sitting here and now. Have a sense that your full awareness in the present can fill your whole body. There's no corner in the body that isn't pervaded by this conscious knowing. Remember that this alert knowing is the key thing we're cultivating in mindfulness practice. Whatever it's directed to, of the many aspects of our experience, what we're most interested in is this alert, aware attention.

I want to offer a really simple definition of mindfulness that you can take with you and keep checking as you go through the retreat. All the miracle and power of this practice comes from this simple activity, and it is knowing what your experience is in the present moment. That's all we're asking you to do. What's happening now?

We offer these different objects so that everything that comes in the range of your experience can be a comfortable object for you to know thoroughly. We break it up in the instructions, but really the experience is unified and you might be noticing any of these at any time.

We begin just being comfortable in the body. The body as it sits, the body posture, can be an excellent anchor in meditation. This can be the one thing that you come back to again and again to stabilize your attention. It can be your home base.

In practicing with the body posture as the main focus, what you do is take the whole thing in at a glance, as far as you can. Obviously there are different parts, different sensations—you might not quite get it all. But see about seeing the whole body sitting in one glance. That can be where you rest your attention.

Then if you like, you can let your attention open in a panoramic way, just aware of all the sounds that are coming and going. It could be sounds in the room of each other, sound of your own breathing, sounds from outside or the sound of my voice. Use sounds to give a breadth of attention that can give a sense of ease and relaxation.

Also notice as you pay attention to sounds, you don't have to do anything to hear. If your attention is open, the sound will be heard. It's like sitting in a concert hall, listening to a symphony. You just rest in the middle of all the sounds and they're known effortlessly and spontaneously. You don't have to send the attention out. The sound comes to you. Sounds are the second possible anchor for your practice.

Then return the attention to the body and just again let it rest within the whole body. As it rests there, you'll feel the impact of breathing. The body will change as you breathe in. It will change as you breathe out. What does that feel like breathing in? What does it feel like breathing out?

Again, let the attention be really receptive. You're not trying to control the breath and not doing pranayama breathing. We're letting it come and go on its own and we're just there to feel it. You might like to keep feeling it throughout the whole body, or there might be one area where it's clearer for you. It might be clear in the belly or at the nose or in the chest. If it is, it's fine to let the attention settle in that part of the body.

Have the attention just rest there. As it rests, let it effortlessly receive the sensations of breathing, just as you received sounds. There's no struggle, just resting and feeling. Breathing in, breathing out. This is the third possible anchor for practice.

So make your home in one of these anchors, but then be open to anything that comes and naturally draws the attention away from the anchor.

As you sit in touch with body posture, sounds, or breath, notice when something else arises that naturally calls the attention. It could be a sensation in the body. Let the attention move to that new sensation. Make a connection to it with your attention and feel its bare physical nature. Is it tingling or pulsing, vibrating, twitching? Is there pressure or heaviness? Lightness? Is it warm or cool? Is it aching or stabbing? Just know clearly what the sensation is as you feel it directly. This is mindfulness of sensations.

If the sensation is painful, notice if there's a mental reaction—fear or anger, judgment, frustration. Be mindful of the mental reaction. Just allow it to be there. As far as possible, soften the mind to allow the discomfort in the body.

The attention may be drawn to a mood or emotion. You might notice one of the hindrances: sense desire, aversion, sleepiness, restlessness, doubt. You might notice other emotions: joy, loneliness, embarrassment, contentment, anger, happiness.

When you notice a mood or emotion, let that become the new focus for mindfulness. This means just letting yourself feel it without judging it, without trying to hold on or push it away. All the emotions are part of our human nature. They come and go like clouds. Like the weather, they're impermanent and changing. We don't have to make a big fuss when a cloud covers the sun. We don't have to make a big fuss when an emotion comes and displays for a while. It's just what it is. We know it. We feel it. We recognize it. We allow it.

Let the attention become close to really feel the experience of the emotion. You might notice three aspects of it.

How does it feel in the body? Where do you feel it? With happiness there might be a bubbly, uplifting sensation in the chest. With fear there might be a contraction in the belly. With anger, there might be a burning around the neck and throat. Just feel the sensations and allow them as part of the emotion.

Second, notice the mood or mental tone, the flavor of that emotion. Sadness has a different tone than anger, than joy, than compassion. Notice and allow the mental tone.

And third, what kind of thoughts accompany the emotion? Fearful thoughts tend to accompany fear. Happy thoughts tend to accompany contentment. When you notice any thought, when attention is drawn to a thought, just notice its presence as thinking. Find that meditative relationship that can see the thought arise, persist, and pass away. We don't have to get so involved with its content. Let it come, let it go, be mindful of it.

So anything that's arising now in our experience can be food for mindfulness to grow from: body, sounds, breath, sensation, emotions, and thoughts. Resting the attention in the anchor is our home, but being open to being mindful with any of the other arisings that we find, knowing them clearly in their nature. And when they subside and pass away, just return the attention to be with the anchor, resting again in our meditative home.

One of the things you'll discover about our instructions is that they're wonderfully varied. This presents a challenge not only for you as practitioners, but for us as teachers, because there's a vast territory of practice to explore together.

It would certainly be simpler if we offered only one technique—like meditation on breathing, anapanasati. Some teachers make this their entire focus, and they teach it beautifully. But for us, breath awareness is just one object among many in the rich landscape of mindfulness practice. And we haven't even completed the full range of objects we're presenting to you.

This variety reflects the Buddha's skillful means—offering different doors into the same essential understanding. Some of you will find your home in breath awareness, others in body sensations, still others in the spacious awareness that holds all arising phenomena. The invitation is to explore with curiosity and patience, discovering which practices most naturally support your awakening.

Remember that this multiplicity of approaches isn't meant to overwhelm, but to honor the unique ways each of us connects with the dharma. Trust the process of exploration, and know that whatever arises in your practice—confusion, clarity, resistance, or ease—is exactly what you need to work with right now.

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