Day 11: Morning Instructional Sit - Choiceless Attention

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 43:15

In our meditation practice here, there are three ways to relate to the anchor.

One way—and I'll use breath as an example, but understand it could also be body posture or sounds—is to use the anchor as a focus for developing primarily concentration. In this approach, you fix the attention on the anchor, let's say the breath, and you do not take notice of anything else that comes. So a sound comes, you don't move your attention voluntarily. A different body sensation arises, you don't move your attention. A hindrance arises, a storm of thinking and feeling, you don't move your attention. This is the instruction from U Ba Khin Sayadaw: just keep the attention right here on the upper lip. This is a concentration style of practice specifically designed to develop samatha, tranquility. A few people are doing this practice now in this retreat.

Most of you are not. Most of you are doing a vipassana practice. In vipassana practice, the way we've been unfolding the instructions, we've had a preferential attitude toward the anchor, toward the breath. That is, if nothing special is going on, come back to your home base and allow the attention to rest there, experience the breath, and that will help develop the concentration. But when something naturally calls the attention, you go there. Connect with sounds, with sensations, with thoughts, with emotions, intention, feeling, and so forth. Then when nothing is drawing the attention, come back to the breath. This is a great way to practice, could be for the duration of your retreat. It's a wonderful style that balances concentration and openness. But there's still in that approach a preference for the breath. We make a choice. We're choosing the focus.

We're going to open up today to a kind of meditation called choiceless attention, where there's no preference for the anchor. There's no preference for the breath. Instead, you unhook from your anchor and you just notice where the attention goes. Everywhere it lands, that becomes the focus for mindfulness. If it lands on the anchor, that's fine, but we're not choosing it. If it lands somewhere else, that's fine. If it stays with a body sensation for sixty minutes, that's fine. We let the attention go loose.

Notice what happens when you let the attention go loose. It wanders. It'll go first here, then there, then thought, then a mood, then a sight, then a sound, then a breath, then a sensation. That's what attention does when we're not trying to control it. So that's fine. That is not a problem. The challenge in choiceless attention is being with each new thing it lands on.

This is really the practice that we'll be introducing today. Let the attention go and notice where it's landing

in each new moment because it will tend to move. This is a beautiful way to practice because it's so uncontrived and uncontrolled. You just let the attention do what it's going to do. Your job is just to notice: Where is it landing now and what is that thing? Connect with that new experience.

This is the foundation of Mahasi Sayadaw's meditation instructions. He was probably the best known and most influential vipassana teacher of the twentieth century, and our instructions basically derive from him. You can see how we've been building up from body posture, breath, sounds, emotions, thoughts, feeling, and intention, to come to the point where everything that happens in your sitting, you now know how to relate to mindfully. So in a way, the instructions today are putting that all together in this choiceless approach.

There are two ways you can think of it. One is you notice where the attention lands in each new moment. The mind, you'll see, has to be very fresh and alert to do that. In some ways, it's simpler to just say, "Okay, I'm just going to notice the breath. I'm there, I know the object, in, out, in, out." Fairly simple. When the attention is moving around quite freely and somewhat randomly, you really have to be alert to stay with it. Every moment is something different.

You don't know what to expect. But it brings an alertness and a freshness and a real receptivity to the meditation.

So that's one way to describe it. Where does the attention land? The other way to describe it is something that we've said a number of times. You just ask the question, "What's happening now?" And the answer to that question is whatever's predominant. That's what we call it. Whatever's standing out from the whole field of experience as the single thing that's drawing your attention, that's what's happening now, and you go there. Lots of other things, of course, are happening, but the attention can only land on one thing at a time. So that's what's happening now in terms of what we notice.

So you can think of it either of these two ways. They come to the same thing, and this is the technique of choiceless attention. This is the technique we're going to introduce this morning, and it can be a wonderful practice for you to start to work with.

So we'll now go into meditation, and I'll give the instruction as we go. First settling into an awareness of the body, relaxing the mind, relaxing the body, just resting easily. That move to relaxation reminds us we're not trying to produce anything. We're not trying to get anywhere else. We're just trying to get here. We don't have to change here. We don't have to fix here. We just have to arrive here. So we do that by relaxing.

And as we land with the attention, with the awareness in the body, we also notice the mood. How are you feeling right now? Making space and allowing that. And then is there any train of thought that you're bringing in from the period before? Just making space for the thoughts to come, not needing to pick them up, and then they'll go.

So as you land in the present moment with your body, your mood, and your thoughts, connecting first to your anchor, feeling the breath in the body, aware of the wide space for sounds, or simply feeling the body posture as you sit. Let the attention settle into your familiar anchor.

And now consciously let go of your anchor and let the attention just take in the breadth of your moment's experience. The body is there manifesting its life. Sounds come and go in the big space all around you. Thoughts and moods come. Not so locatable, but they're there. And in that big space of awareness encompassing all the senses, what are you noticing right now? And now.

And now, notice how in this broad space, the attention, if left to itself, roams around, picking up different experiences moment after moment, allowing the attention to wander as it will. It tends to settle momentarily on something that seems predominant, a stronger experience that draws it. But it may not stay long and then gets drawn somewhere else. So each time the attention notices something new, you're there with that noticing. You're mindful of the new experience.

Sometimes it can be helpful in this style of practice, especially to use the soft mental noting can help keep us directly connected to our experience in the moment. So you might every two seconds, three seconds, make a soft mental note that labels where the attention has gone. And as you do, feel that thing. So your noticing might be something like: in-breath, sensation, out-breath, sound, sensation, aversion, contraction, unpleasant, relaxing, ease, in-breath. Just in a very relaxed way, knowing in each moment what your experience is. Naming it if you find that helpful to stay connected to the moment. Be very open, very relaxed, and quite choiceless as to where the attention goes. The mindfulness will develop moment after moment in this approach.

If in this choiceless open space you ever feel lost or confused by there being too many places to pay attention, just come back to your anchor. Drop the open choiceless approach. Refocus the attention where you're comfortable. And then when you feel stable again, try letting go of the anchor and again opening up to the wide space of appearances.

Noticing in each moment what attention is highlighting.

This practice of choiceless awareness invites us into a profound intimacy with the present moment. Rather than directing our attention with willful effort, we learn to receive whatever arises in the field of consciousness with gentle recognition. Each moment becomes a teacher, each sensation a doorway into deeper understanding.

The beauty of this approach lies in its simplicity and naturalness. We are not forcing the mind into any particular state, but rather creating the conditions for awareness to reveal its own inherent clarity. Like a clear mountain lake that reflects whatever passes overhead—clouds, birds, the changing sky—our awareness can learn to mirror the flow of experience without disturbance.

As you continue this practice, remember that there is no perfect way to do it. Some moments the attention

will feel scattered, other times deeply focused. Some sessions will feel spacious and easeful, others restless or unclear. All of this is the natural rhythm of practice. What matters is the gentle returning, the patient cultivation of this open, receptive awareness.

Trust in the process. Trust in your own innate capacity for wisdom and clarity. Each time you settle into this choiceless awareness, you are strengthening the very foundation of mindfulness itself—the ability to be present with what is, exactly as it is, without the need to change or fix or improve anything at all.

May this practice serve you well on your path of awakening.

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