Morning Instructions: Choiceless Attention

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 46:42

This morning we're going to extend the meditation instructions a little more to take in the practice or technique that I would call choiceless attention. Some people commonly refer to this as choiceless awareness. I prefer the term choiceless attention, because Krishnamurti coined the term choiceless awareness and used it to refer to quite a refined state of mind in which greed and aversion were not operating. Choiceless attention highlights the fact that it's the attention that is the pivotal factor we're letting go of control of.

Our meditation instructions have been adapted from the classical instructions that were given by Mahasi Sayadaw. They're clearly outlined in a little book, which I think is available online, called Practical Insight Meditation. He called his method Satipatthana Vipassana. When you would come into a retreat in his style, he would give all the instructions on the first day. What we have done is take his basic set of instructions and expand them over thirteen days of instruction. We've taken out the pieces that he had assembled and we're giving them out in a longer time sequence with a little more detail on each one.

But the main practice that he was pointing to is this choiceless attention that I'm going to describe this morning. It's made up of all the parts that we've talked about: body sensations, breath, sounds, sights, tastes and smells, moods, emotions, intentions, and feeling tones. You now have all the foundational instructions to practice this style of choiceless attention.

When we take an anchor—and I'll use the breath as an example, but remember we've talked about anchor as body posture, as sounds, or as breath—we can approach it in one of three ways.

The first is we can use it as the exclusive focus in a concentration practice, often called a samatha practice, which is designed to strengthen the factor of tranquility and the accompanying concentration. When you make a commitment to an anchor for a samatha practice, you don't take any other objects. If you wanted to take the breath as a concentration or samatha practice, you basically don't attend to anything else. There are a few people here who are doing the practice in this way. So sound comes up, you do not become mindful of it. Another sensation comes in the body, you do not consciously pay attention to it. The style of practice taught by Paok Sayadaw, for instance, which begins with anapanasati at the upper lip, emphasizes this technique of not taking any other object. This is one approach to your anchor.

The second approach, and this is what I think a lot of you have been doing, is to use the anchor as a kind of home in meditation that you stay with if nothing else particular is drawing your attention. If nothing else strong is happening, you have a place to rest the attention. You become more and more familiar with it, you establish a good connection with it, and it's an easy place to come back to in meditation. This is the

use of the anchor as a chosen object, such as the breath. When nothing else particular is drawing the attention, you have a place to rest.

But it's not exclusive. If another phenomenon arises that draws the attention—strong sound, strong sensation, an emotion—you easily let go of the anchor. The attention moves to the new phenomenon, you connect the attention there, you sustain it long enough to get a feel for its nature. It's sometimes called rubbing—you sustain the attention long enough. Then you can either let go of that and return to the anchor, you can stay with that new phenomenon for longer, or you can let go of that new phenomenon and go to where the attention is drawn to another new phenomenon. This is the predominant experience, but with the anchor as a home that you come back to. That's the second way to relate to the anchor.

But the third way is what we're going to explore today. You have no preference at all for your anchor. This is when the attention becomes truly choiceless. Notice that the key factor that we're talking about here is attention. What phenomenon are you singling out from the overall field in which things are arising and passing? What phenomenon are you singling out to focus on and give attention to? In Pali, the term for this is manasikara. It's an important factor to know in meditation because most meditation techniques are about where the attention is going.

In choiceless attention, we unhook the attention from our anchor and we let it go wherever it will. This is something interesting to notice as you just sit here. Where is your attention landing moment after moment? It's probably not fixed in just one place. You might notice the sound of my voice. You might pay attention to the meaning of the words. You might feel the pressure of your seat on the cushion. You might notice the air temperature. There might be a mood of interest. There might be a mood of confusion. You come back to the sound of my voice.

Left on its own devices, attention moves around. A lot. In choiceless attention, we don't try to interrupt or control this moving around. We let the attention go where it will, and we make that new landing spot the focus for mindfulness.

However long the attention stays there, that remains the focus for mindfulness. As soon as it moves away to some new phenomenon, we make that the new focus for mindfulness in this new moment.

The quality of concentration is still developing in what we call a moment-to-moment way in choiceless attention. It's not developing off a single chosen object, but it's developing off the mindfulness that grows moment after moment with changing objects. So it's important to understand that concentration still develops from changing objects. It's not a problem.

So this is the basic approach to choiceless attention. Unfix the attention from your anchor. Sometimes it's not so comfortable to unfix that attention because you become very habituated in the relationship to the anchor. Sometimes unhooking it brings some uneasiness, a little nervousness. How am I going to be steady in my attention if it's not locked on to my chosen object? So this is an experiment. This is an interesting

learning.

But the beauty is that the meditation takes on an unforced quality. You're not trying to steer the attention anywhere at all. You're just remaining alert to where it lands and then becoming mindful there. So there's no resistance, for instance, to a thought arising. Thoughts aren't seen as a distraction because the thought can be a focus for mindfulness. There's no resistance to a sensation, whether pleasant or unpleasant, because it can be the focus for mindfulness.

This is the practice of choiceless attention.

There's one other way I want to describe it which is equivalent. This is kind of the technical explanation based on this factor of manasikāra, or attention. But there's another way you can approach this. Choiceless attention simply answers the question, "What's happening now?"

If you ask yourself in any moment the question, "What's happening now?" normally what you'll notice is what we call the predominant sense experience in that moment. There are a lot of sense experiences going on in every moment at the six sense doors. But generally in a moment, one of them will stand out and become, let's say, foreground.

So anytime you ask yourself the question, "What's happening now?" the answer to that becomes the new focus for mindfulness. This is just another way to describe choiceless attention.

So in whichever of those descriptions appeals to you, this kind of practice is a very natural way to be mindful. We're not trying to direct the practice in a particular direction, except to be mindful.

So I'll encourage you to, in the instructions in a minute, I'll encourage you to begin with the relationship with your anchor and then at a certain point to unhook the attention and just let it go where it will. You'll see that there's a kind of ease that comes when you let go of this choice. You're not trying to steer the factor of attention, but you have to be careful to maintain the moment-to-moment mindfulness. It's not forcing to do that, but you have to be mindful.

The risk in letting go of a chosen object like an anchor is that it's a little easier to space out sometimes. So notice if that begins to happen.

Okay, so please sit comfortably, finding in your posture that ease and alertness. And please connect first with your chosen anchor. Could be body posture, could be sounds, could be breath. I'm just settling in this comfortable relationship to stabilize the attention.

And now letting go, deliberately letting go of your connection to the anchor. And just looking with a kind of fresh and interested curiosity, where is the attention going to land next? Noticing where it lands in terms of the categories we've been working with: sensation, sound, mood, emotion, thought, feeling tone, intention. And then the next new moment, where is the attention landing? Being mindful of that.

You're not forcing anything or any direction in the meditation, but just a sense of resting with an openness to all the sense appearances. You've learned to work with each type over the sequence of instructions over days. And this is in a way putting them all together in this open, choiceless way of being mindful.

You might find it helpful to sustain the moment-to-moment noticing by using the noting technique. Just using a short word to identify where the attention is landing in each new moment. Might sound something like: "In. Hearing. Thinking. Sitting. Touching. Out. Hearing." Maybe make a note every two to three seconds just to remind yourself what the experience is.

Remember that from time to time what may be apparent is the mood or state of mind.

So noting that as well. Wanting. Calm. Sadness.

If you ever start to feel lost or confused about what to pay attention to, then just return the attention to the anchor for a while. Let it stabilize again with that familiar experience. And when you feel steady again, let go of the anchor and open again to choiceless attention. What's happening now? Keeping the attention open with interest to the whole range of experience.

I think this particular approach to meditation, this choiceless approach, is kind of the genius of Mahasi Sayadaw because it makes so clear that everything in our experience can be the subject for mindfulness. Nothing can be an obstruction because everything that happens we can relate to as a new focus for our attention and for mindfulness.

Just one word about continuing this practice. If you find it helpful, no one is obliged to practice in this way. Some people have a good relationship with an anchor and want to keep that as a preference or focus. But if you'd like to practice in this open way, what I'd recommend is recognizing that part of the art is learning when to open up and be in this easy, unforced way with everything. The lack of single focus sometimes leads more easily to spacing out, however. If you notice you're spacing out, then it's a good time to come back to the anchor, recollect the attention, and when you feel you've stabilized again, then open up once more.

So the art is moving between when it's skillful to have a more settled focus and when to open to the choiceless field. This fluid movement becomes part of the practice itself—developing the wisdom to know when to gather and when to release, when to focus and when to open.

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