Chanting And Morning Instructions: Mindfulness of Breathing

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 45:25

We want to chant the Refuges and Precepts somewhat regularly, so let's begin with that this morning. If you have your hymnals...

I want to make a couple of comments about intonations and the melody before we start. There's kind of a West Coast accent and an East Coast accent on some of these. Because we're on the East Coast, I feel a little obligation to follow the East Coast accent.

This pops up in the refuges section when it comes to Budaṃ Saraṇaṃ Gacchāmi—all the Gacchāmis. On the West Coast, we do it like this: Budaṃ Saraṇaṃ Gacchāmi. But on the East Coast, we do it: Budaṃ Saraṇaṃ Gacchāmi. Dhammaṃ Saraṇaṃ Gacchāmi. So I think we should honor the East Coast pronunciation here, even though many of you are from the West Coast and incline that way. We'll do the flat on the Gacchāmi today.

Then in the fifth precept, there are different ways of intonation on the second phrase, which is Majjapamādatthānā. The way that Sally and I say it is Majjapamādatthānā. Normally in Pali, if there's a long A or a long accent over a vowel, that's the syllable that gets the emphasis. But it's also the case that when there's a double consonant, like the D-A-T-T, that's also an inclination to emphasis. So some people go da-ta-na, but Sally and I are used to da-ta-na, accenting the last one.

And then on the Magaphalajñānasā, I've heard different melodies for this. We do it sing-song: Magaphalajñānasā. So it's low, high, low, high.

Maybe just for today, we'll do those bits call and response, just so we kind of get the same melody. Because this is the Forest Refuge Tabernacle Choir, and we want it to really sound good.

Let's begin. I think we can do it all in unison until we come to the fifth precept.

Namo tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā Sambuddhassa
Namo tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā Sambuddhassa
Namo tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā Sambuddhassa

Budaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi

Dutiyampi Budaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
Dutiyampi Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
Dutiyampi Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi

Tatiyampi Budaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
Tatiyampi Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
Tatiyampi Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi

Pāṇātipātā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi
Adinnādānā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi
Abrahmacariyā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi
Musāvādā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi

Call and response: Surāmeraya majjapamādaṭṭhānā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi
Uccāsayana mahāsayana veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi
Visukadasana mālāgandha vilepana dhāraṇa maṇḍana vibhūsanaṭṭhānā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi

Call and response: Idaṃ me sīlaṃ magaphalajñānasā paccayo hotu

We've really given the core instructions for mindfulness of breathing that we wanted to share.

Continuing with this gentle exploration of mindfulness of breathing, let me offer a brief review of the fundamental principles we've been cultivating together.

Begin by finding a comfortable seated position, allowing your body to settle into a natural state of ease. Feel into any areas where you might be holding unnecessary tension—perhaps in the forehead, around the eyes, or through the shoulders—and simply let these places soften. There's something particularly supportive about allowing the eyes to rest in a gentle downward gaze, as if you're looking toward the floor a few feet ahead. This subtle adjustment often deepens the sense of inward settling.

Let your jaw unclench, your shoulders drop away from your ears, and your belly remain soft and natural. Allow your hands to rest wherever feels comfortable, free from any grasping or holding. This is about settling into your body's natural posture with a quality of relaxed alertness.

As you establish this physical foundation, extend the same quality of relaxation to your mind. There's no need to strive toward any particular destination or outcome. One of the profound truths of meditation practice is that all wholesome development emerges from a place of acceptance—simply being present with whatever is arising right now, exactly as it is.

Open your awareness to include the soundscape around you. Sometimes this receptivity to sound creates that spacious quality we've been exploring, where everything can be held within a larger field of awareness. Within this openness, allow thoughts to arise and pass away naturally. When we resist the

emergence of thoughts, we strengthen aversion. When we chase after them and elaborate on their content, we strengthen attachment. The middle way is found in allowing thoughts to come and allowing them to go, without resistance or pursuit.

Similarly, let whatever mood is present be accommodated within this open space of awareness, without judgment or the need to change anything.

Now, reconnect with the felt sense of your body in sitting. Imagine your awareness filling your entire body, present wherever you choose to place your attention. If at any point the focus on breath begins to create striving or tension, you can always return to this simple foundation—resting your awareness within the body as the body rests in stillness.

From this grounded place, begin to notice the natural impact of breathing. What do you feel on an inhalation? What shifts with each exhalation? You might choose to feel the breath moving through your entire body, or you might prefer to focus on a smaller area—perhaps the nostrils, the upper lip, the chest, or the belly. All of these approaches are skillful; choose whatever helps you remain most present.

As you attend to this natural rhythm of inhalation and exhalation, notice how the breath itself can become a gateway to calm. You might orient gently in this direction, letting yourself attend to the breathing rhythm specifically to cultivate tranquility in both body and mind.

Feel free to employ any of the supportive techniques we've explored together—noting, counting, the body scan, attending to the beginning, middle, and end of each breath, or the four-point breathing method that includes the eyes, chest, belly, and sitting bones. Through all of these approaches, the central thread remains simple: the breath coming in, the breath going out, with as much continuity of mindfulness as possible.

I notice how beautifully quiet you all are, and I almost hesitate to interrupt this natural settling with words. But there's an important point worth addressing briefly.

As you work with these breathing practices, you might find yourself viewing certain techniques—like noting or counting—as somehow elementary, thinking you should have progressed beyond the need for such supports. This represents a fundamental misunderstanding of how these tools function in our practice.

I spent years in my early practice using noting, carefully attending to "rising, falling" at the abdomen. Later, during an intensive two-and-half-month retreat with Pawk Sayadaw, I found myself counting in virtually every sitting period, not because I was struggling, but because I discovered that this support actually enhanced my ability to remain present.

These techniques aren't stepping stones to be abandoned; they're skillful means that can serve us throughout the entire journey of practice. Find your own authentic relationship with these tools, but

please don't dismiss them as remedial. They represent profound wisdom about how attention can be cultivated and sustained, and they remain valuable allies at every stage of our development.

But the main thing is what works best for you, what keeps the body relaxed and the attention present.

So we have a few minutes this morning if there are any questions.

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