Morning Instructions

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 59:46

Good morning, everyone.

I hope things are going along relatively smoothly for you, and I hope you're enjoying the spaciousness of a half-empty center. There's something quite nice about it. Maybe we should keep the retreats this size—though then we'd have a big budget deficit, and people wouldn't benefit.

You probably know that today is the opening day of the second retreat, so things will get busier later on. I'll talk about that more in the announcements. But we still have almost a full day to continue developing the stability you've been cultivating.

This morning in the instructions, we're going to continue opening up the field of mindfulness. Yesterday, Jaya spoke about extending from a small area of the breath to feeling breath in the whole body, and then allowing the attention to open wide to sounds. Unfortunately, that's when the fire alarm went off, so we hope that's not a curse for today.

Now we're going to extend into the whole field of what we call choiceless attention—a meditation technique that really allows us to be mindful of anything in our experience. This approach was developed by Mahasi Sayadaw, a great Burmese master of the last century. I think it's an outstanding approach to meditation because of its inclusiveness. Many other meditation techniques are more restricted in what they eventually allow us to pay attention to. Mahasi Sayadaw's instructions allow us to pay attention to anything in our experience and use that as a base for mindfulness.

This is so helpful for us as laypeople in carrying the practice back into our daily lives because nothing is outside the scope of our meditation.

Let me say a couple of words about choiceless attention. Some teachers call this choiceless awareness, but I think the proper term is choiceless attention because what we are going to do is unhook the attention from our anchor—which for many of you is the breath, or maybe body or sounds. We're going to unhook from whatever anchor that is and just open up to see what's here, then notice where the attention is drawn. We let wherever the attention lands become the new focus for meditation, the new focus for mindfulness.

I'm going to invite you right now—eyes open or closed, it doesn't really matter—to tune into this quality of attention in your immediate experience. Notice: with all the things present in this moment, does attention tend to stay with one thing all the time? Or by its natural inclination, is it moving from one to another to another?

I'll pause the speaking and let you examine the movement of attention in your experience.

Did anybody have an attention that didn't move? Even when we're being very close with the breath—when I'm being very close with the breath—I still notice my attention will make little darts off to body sensations or sounds, even in the middle of following two breaths.

This attention is a very active element that moves on its own for reasons that are conditioned, but not purely volitional. We're not choosing where the attention is drawn—it just goes there. This is why we call this choiceless. We're not directing the attention to an anchor or any part of the body or anything in particular. We're allowing it to go where it will go, and then making the mindfulness established there.

This is a beautiful practice. It brings in this sense of real openness and naturalness. It's also challenging because without an anchor that we come to again and again, it's easy to let thoughts come in and take us away. As you're practicing with choiceless attention, which we'll introduce in a few minutes, notice if it's leading to more distracting thoughts. That can be a helpful time to come back to your anchor. Restabilize the attention, and when you feel present again, allow the attention to open wider in this choiceless way.

You can probably see how this style of practice would lend itself to noting. As I was sitting in the quiet a few minutes ago, I would notice where my attention was landing: it went to seeing, then to body sensation, then to in-breath, then to sound, then to noticing a mood. All these elements of our experience can get touched on.

In Mahasi Sayadaw's instruction style, he would suggest putting a soft mental label that names where the attention is landing. It can be really simple—we don't want to get into a lot of thinking. Just as I went through: you could notice a sensation, notice a sound, notice an in-breath, notice calm, notice agitation, notice a thought. Whatever the experience is in the moment, we connect with that, become mindful of it, and if you find it helpful, you can name it. This isn't a noting retreat, so we're not emphasizing this, but you're encouraged to play with it if it might be of use.

This is one step along the way to the awareness practice that will unfold a little later. This opening and allowing all the sensations and phenomena to come in is on the way to the complete opening we'll be doing.

Let's begin the meditation practice.

Please sit comfortably and find in your posture the combination of uprightness and alertness, and also ease and relaxation and the groundedness of connection to the earth. Have a sense that the body can rest on the foundation of the sitting base, and the spine can express that upward movement of alertness.

As you settle into the experience of the body sitting, begin noticing the movement of breathing. You may notice at first where you've been with it for the last ten days. If it's like that, then take the time to let the attention settle and stabilize in that area where the breath is felt most clearly as a way of collecting and

unifying the mind.

Then, as one step in the direction of opening the attention, allow it to expand to include the whole body: taking in the head, the shoulders and arms, the back...

The chest and belly. The hips and legs.

And now see if it's possible to feel the whole body as a connected unit. This is what we sometimes call taking the body posture as an anchor—just sitting, being mindful of the whole body in this posture. See if it feels comfortable to have opened the attention that far. If not, you're always free to return to the breath in a smaller area. Feel free to return to the anchor.

Now with this attention on the whole body, notice where you feel the impact of breathing throughout the body. When there's an in-breath, how far throughout the body can you feel the effect of breathing in? When there's an out-breath, how far throughout the body do you feel the impact of the out-breath?

In this kind of exploration of whole body breathing, it's most helpful if you have the sense of feeling the body from within, from inside. Sometimes in giving instructions for mindfulness of breathing, we might have the sense that there's an observer in the head looking out or down at where the breath is being felt. But in this meditation, it's more supportive if you can feel the whole body as a unit and then just feel each in-breath and out-breath. Some people express this as letting the mind drop into the body.

We don't need to force the breathing. If we just relax into the body, the breaths will happen by themselves.

Now taking the openness a little further by bringing the attention to sounds. At this point, let the attention become very wide, open, spacious. Just notice all the sounds that come and go—the sound of my voice, sounds of one another, hum of the machinery, sound of traffic, nature. There's no need to send the mind out in search of sounds, but rather if we rest within the body in the center of all sounds, then they're heard without any effort. It's like we're sitting in a concert hall with a very open and receptive attitude.

If this degree of openness is uncomfortable in any way, if you feel you're losing your ability to be present, then just come back to your anchor—breath or body. Let the attention become simpler and resettle. But if it's comfortable being with sounds in this wide, open, relaxed way, then we'll take it one step further and just ask: What else is here? What else can you notice within your experience right now?

Are there sensations connected with breathing? Other sensations in the body? Probably some coming and going of thoughts, which we just allow to arise and pass away. And some emotion or mood is here—could be restlessness, could be wanting, could be contentment, could be ease, could be aversion. Just notice that a mood or emotion is always present in some way, sometimes subtle, sometimes bigger.

Now we'll move into the formal meditation with choiceless attention. Start to notice in each new moment: of all the focuses, of all the phenomena in your experience, where is attention landing right now? Can you be mindful of that? Can you relate to that as a focus for meditation? In this new moment, where is the

attention landing now? And now?

Is it possible to notice for each new moment what is being focused on with this spotlight quality that attention gives? What phenomenon is being highlighted?

As you begin to settle into this practice, it would be fine if you notice something every few seconds—every three, four, five seconds, a noticing of the attention. Sometimes it may stay with the same object over that period; that's fine. But as we make this noticing a little more frequent, we find it helps to steady the mind in the present moment and continues to build up the quality of concentration even though the object is changing.

Play with this and see if it's something that might be helpful as a step toward openness. If it feels too spacey, too ungrounded, anytime just return to your anchor. Restabilize until you're ready and interested to open again. If you find the mindfulness is not really steady in following the attention, then it can be a good time to return to your anchor and re-stabilize in the present.

In this last part of the sitting, we want to explore this openness from a little different angle. So once again, connect with this sense that the attention can be very broad, wide, open—openness to sounds, to the breath, other sensations.

In this last part of the sitting, we want to explore this openness from a little different angle. So once again, connect with this sense that the attention can be very broad, wide, open—openness to sounds, to the breath, other sensations, thoughts and emotions.

Have a sense of the width of all the phenomena in your experience. Sounds can be very far away and still heard without effort. Sensations are more immediate. Do you have a sense of how wide your experience is? And can you place the attention on noticing that? You could say the extent of phenomena. Just rest the attention in noticing that wideness.

Sometimes when the hall is quiet, we talk about noticing the extent of the silence. Can you notice the wide extent of phenomena and have a sense that the attention can rest in that noticing?

As you're noticing that wideness, then ask the question: Is there awareness there? In noticing the extent of phenomena, is awareness present? If the answer to that is yes, let the attention rest in noticing that awareness.

If you can, you can notice that this awareness—this wide awareness—includes all the phenomena of the senses, but it's not limited by them. It's wider than any one phenomenon. This is a step in knowing the awareness of awareness itself, and this is the direction we'll be heading in the next few days.

So if you find this approach helpful—either the choiceless attention or the extension to the wideness and the awareness—feel free to start bringing it into your meditations. If you find that the sense of space leads to spacing out, come back and reestablish the connection to the present with your primary anchor. Just

bring it in a little bit at a time as it feels of interest and attractive to you.

We have a little time for questions. This morning we're going to do questions through the microphone so everyone can hear.

"Hi, thank you for the practice today. I have a question regarding the difference between awareness and attention."

This is a question about the difference between awareness and attention. In the next few days we're going to be introducing a lot of vocabulary that may be new for you in terms of meditation instructions, and this is an important one.

Attention is the factor of mind that highlights one of the objects of our experience, one of the elements. So it moves around—everybody has attention all the time when we're awake. It's always moving to something or other. In every moment, it's that settling or highlighting of one aspect of experience.

Awareness is a quality of knowing what's happening. There's an intelligence in the awareness that isn't there in the attention. Attention can be quite mechanical. Turtles have attention—they may notice seaweed, they may notice humans floating in the water, they may notice their babies. But that attention is just happening on its own. The awareness has an aspect of intelligence similar to mindfulness. We'll draw that out more.

"In this context, when thought arises, if there's awareness of thought, is it appropriate to see that as an object or is it better to drop it?"

The question is: when a thought arises, is it useful to see that as an object or just to drop it? It depends what meditation style you're practicing at the moment. If you're practicing in a samatha style, where you're intending to develop concentration through single-pointed focus like the breath, it's more helpful to just leave the thought in the background. You recognize the attention has gone there, but we don't go so far as to pick it up as a meditation object. You just notice it coming and passing through, but you're not interested.

"In this case, it's choiceless, so I'm not picking it up and I'm not..."

In the state of choiceless awareness, you want to notice it as a meditation object. You let it continue its course.

You allow it to continue its course, and you're just aware of it, and that's okay. Yes, you allow it to continue its course, but often the influence of mindful attention on a thought will mean it has a shorter lifetime.

One of the powers of bringing mindfulness to the area of thinking is that when we notice a thought, it tends to get a little more shy and wants to run away because it's embarrassed at being seen. It's like when there are cockroaches in your kitchen and you turn on a light—they run for the corners. Thoughts are a

little bit like that.

But yes, in choiceless attention, you want to notice the thought and make it a focus for mindfulness, which means, as Sally was using the word last night, we connect the attention to it with mindfulness. We sustain it for the duration of the thought. And when the thought passes, the attention is unhooked and free to move on to the next focus.

I think that's all we have time for in terms of questions because we have many announcements this morning.

Today will be an interesting day. We have about fifty people arriving this afternoon who will join you this evening. As Sally said, we are all going to regard them with great openness, metta, and affection. That's our practice for today. It may be a little bumpy at times.

The schedule is getting complicated today because of the two groups. Just as it was a little complicated on closing day, it's going to be a little complicated today. Let me walk through the morning and afternoon schedules.

This morning we're starting the practice meetings with you all. We're beginning with group practice meetings, and today we'll see about two-thirds of you. That list is on the board, so please check to see if you're being seen today. If we don't meet with you today, we will meet with you tomorrow. After that, the rotation will be that we'll meet with the new yogis on the next day, and then we begin individual practice meetings the day after that. So each of you in this period of time will have one group meeting and two individual practice meetings as this retreat unfolds. We're starting with the groups today and tomorrow for all of you, so please check the board.

This afternoon's schedule is where it gets a little complicated. There will be the usual sits at 2:00 and 3:30, and the practice leaders for those sits will be as normal. Then at 2:45, we have to do a sound check. The teachers have to do a sound check in here for the online version of the event. So at 2:45, it's going to get a little noisy in here. We'll be mumbling things into the microphone so the online people can check our sound. I would suggest walking at 2:45 today.

At 3:30, there will be a sitting—a silent sitting. We're asking the managers to communicate to the incoming yogis to bring their belongings into the hall during walking periods only. So during the 2:45 walking and the 4:15 walking, the new people may be coming in to put their things down on a spot. If you normally sit during those times, just know that it could be a little bit noisy. But there shouldn't be talking, though there may be a little traffic. During the sits at 2:00 and 3:30, those should be quiet.

Then dinner. The way the schedule is set up, you all will be having dinner from 5:00 to 5:30, and it will be in silence. Hopefully that will protect you over the mealtime. At 5:30, the arriving yogis are welcome to have their dinner, and that will be talking. So I would encourage you to eat quickly and get out, keeping things as silent as possible. The meditation hall will always be in silence, apart from the sound check, so

this is always a good refuge.

At 6:30, there is a scheduled sitting, and there will be a practice leader in here, but the sitting will be short—only twenty minutes, so the bell should be rung at 6:50. Then you have a walking period because the course opening manager's talk is going to happen in here at 7:00.

One of the blessings of being a continuing yogi is that you don't have to attend the opening manager's talk. You already know the territory—you're already living it. But there is one piece I do want to mention: if you happen to have reclaimed your cell phone after renouncing it at the beginning of the last retreat, there will be another opportunity for renunciation tomorrow morning, Wednesday. I think you get double the merit for renouncing it twice, which has great appeal.

Tomorrow morning we'll have a cell phone renunciation ceremony during the morning sit. You're welcome to participate. There will be pouches again, and you're invited to label your device, place it in one of the pouches, and the managers will collect them for safekeeping.

There is an affinity sit this evening—please check the board to confirm which group. The affinity sit will happen with a flexible ending time, and everyone will reconvene here at 7:20 for the retreat opening, which is marked on the schedule.

So the flow will be: at 6:30 there's a sitting for those in the hall, followed by a walking period. Those attending the affinity sit can stagger your timing and return here at 7:20 when we'll all be together for the course opening. There will not be a late-night guided sit tonight since the opening may continue until close to 9:00. After sitting for an hour and forty minutes, we're not asking you to sit from 9:00 to 9:30—you're on your own after that. If you still have energy at 9:00, you could do walking practice or return for more sitting, but the formal schedule today ends at 9:00.

Any questions on logistics? It's a lot for me to keep in mind, so I can imagine it's challenging for you as well. Check the notice board—everything is posted on the schedule.

Finally, I want to offer a fuller introduction to Christina, whom we're very happy to have with us. This is Christina Barre. She lives in Canada but teaches often in the States. Sally and I have known her for years, both as a yogi and student, and she brings many wonderful qualities to the teaching role. She completed her four-year teacher training this year, guided by Marcia Rose, Sally, and myself. She is now a full teacher and works in that capacity at retreats at Spirit Rock and elsewhere.

We're delighted that she's agreed to join us as an assistant. It's somewhat of a drop in her pay grade, but she's interested in this material, so it's an opportunity for her to both learn and serve. Once the new retreat opens fully, she will sit in on our interviews from time to time and will offer sign-up interviews, generally in the afternoons, beginning tomorrow. Any of you are welcome to sign up. Christina will also be teaching, probably offering a couple of the Brahma Viharas later in the week, so you'll hear her expression and get to know her better that way.

Christina, thank you for joining us. We're truly happy to have you.

So we're at 9:30, time for walking. I hope you have a very rich day and can stay stabilized, finding your way amidst all the comings and goings. This is a good kind of day, especially in the afternoon, to practice in your room or outside—to remove yourself. You know the value of seclusion. The Buddha said there are these roots of trees, there are these empty huts. That's the kind of day this can be—a roots of trees kind of day.

So please practice well, and we'll all return to silence this evening at 7:00.

So be well, and we'll see some of you in interviews soon. Thank you for listening.

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