Morning Instructions – Day 10 - Standing Meditation

Sally Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2010) · 58:49

As you know, we've been gradually expanding the instructions to include all aspects of our experience. The intention in this practice is that our mindfulness can open to and include everything, that nothing needs to be excluded from the field of our mindfulness. By doing this, we can develop a continuity of practice that really supports the deepening, the sense of presence, the sense of acceptance of our experience.

We've talked about the Satipatthana Sutta, that text which describes this practice in great detail and offers a number of different ways of being with experience, even just in the realm of the body. I spoke last week about the different aspects of body-based practices. One of the areas of practice that the Buddha emphasizes, a really simple way of describing practice, is that we should be mindful in all four postures: sitting, walking, standing, and lying down.

We give a lot of emphasis to the sitting posture. We talk a great deal about being present, how to do it, the different things we can be mindful of. We talk a little bit about walking—not enough, I don't think. We could say more about practicing in walking meditation. But on many retreats we say virtually nothing about standing or lying down meditation. So that's what I want to talk about today, and particularly standing meditation.

The Buddha said we should be aware in this important posture. It's a posture we often find ourselves in here on retreat, certainly in our lives—standing waiting for something, standing waiting in line for meals, or outside an interview, outside a shower or a bathroom. Even in our walking, there are often periods where we're just standing. Being able to include that very easily and naturally in our mindfulness is an important part of the practice.

Standing meditation is also a great balancer of energy. If you're sleepy, there is nothing better than standing up to bring energy into the body and the mind. As teachers, we're always very happy when we see people standing in the meditation hall because it means they're really serious about waking up—literally being awake in the practice. But I also think it can help balance other energies as well, such as the restlessness that I spoke about last night. If you stand, there's more energy required, more engagement in the physical posture, so it can be a real balancing for that.

I want to lead this meditation this morning to give some encouragement to incorporating standing into your practice on a regular basis.

Many people, I know, have a resistance to standing meditation. So notice what happens in the mind as I say that. Is there a kind of grumbling going on? "Oh, I like my comfortable seated posture. I curl up under my shawl and shut the world out, and I can just go into my own little realm." Is there a sense of reactivity, resistance to this idea of standing? Does it seem like it takes too much effort? Really just notice what happens when this idea of standing comes up.

Of course, if standing is difficult for you for whatever reason—physically, balance-wise—there's no need to do it. This is just offered as an option.

But I want to encourage you to, right now, bring mindfulness into your body. Really notice your body as it's sitting here seated. Particularly notice if there's any response to the concept of standing, the idea of standing—resistance or interest. Make sure there's a real establishment of mindfulness, because we want to also be present in these in-between times of moving between sitting and standing.

Now, as I ask you to stand, be mindful of all the movements you have to make to get into the standing posture. If you wish to stay seated, of course you can.

Find a comfortable posture, whether you stand on your zabuton or flat on the floor. You can experiment in these first few minutes of the meditation to see which is more grounding for you. Step on and off your cushion just to see what works best. Find a way that you can stand that feels easy. We're not doing any energy work here—it's not qigong. But if you're familiar with those practices, you might know easy ways of standing, and you can include those. Basically, we're just simply standing.

For most people, it's helpful to have the feet about hip width apart, seeing that your feet are somewhat aligned straight ahead, letting your hands and arms just rest really naturally by your sides. Take a moment to check the alignment of your posture. There's a sense of uprightness in the spine, not slouching or leaning forward. Check that the shoulders are dropped. And again, just like we do in seated meditation, allow the chest and belly to be soft and open. There's a sense of expansion there in the front of the chest. Let your feet be as firmly planted on the ground as possible, with even pressure on the feet. Just this full awareness of the body as it stands.

The interesting thing about standing meditation is you can just continue whatever practice you were doing if you wish. You can simply stay aware of the breath or sounds.

You can do mettā practice. Standing is simply another posture in which we can be mindful of mind and body—the same process as your sitting practice.

Or you can engage in a more physical, body-based practice, somewhat like we do in walking, where we're really aware of the physical nature of the body. You might notice the pressure on the soles of the feet, observing all the movements of the muscles in the legs that are constantly required to keep us standing upright. It can become a curiosity about the body in this posture—exploring the muscles, the tendons, everything that's required to maintain a stand. You can even become interested in the skeleton, the bones.

We grow more aware of the earthy nature of the body that allows us to stand upright.

Find the practice that works for you, noticing at the same time what's happening in the mind. How are you relating to this experience of standing? Is there curiosity, acceptance? Is it neutral? Or is there some resistance, discomfort, irritation?

Notice all the subtle movements required to keep us upright. We're not standing still—the body is expressing itself with this movement of life, responding to the breath, the pulsing of the body, the constant balancing that happens. If you find it hard to feel steady, you're welcome to open your eyes. If you're standing near a chair or a wall, you can use that for balance.

Stay engaged, present for the body in this standing posture. See if there can be a degree of relaxation. Try not to have the knees unnecessarily locked and tight—allow some softness there. Notice if any tension is building up that you can release and relax around. See if this can be a comfortable posture, if there can be a sense of ease in the standing. Notice if tension has built up anywhere—the face, the shoulders, the belly—and allow that to soften, relax, open.

For the remainder of the period, if you wish, you can continue standing and sit whenever you feel that would be most supportive of your mindfulness. Otherwise, sit down with full mindfulness of the body, resuming the seated posture. Stay standing if you wish for as long as feels right, and sit down at any point during the rest of the period.

A couple of years ago, Guy, Carol, and I took a trip through Northern California and stopped at the forests of the giant redwoods. It's quite an amazing experience to walk among those huge trees. I was actually reminded of that this morning as I looked out and you were all standing there. It really felt like a beautiful forest with that same sense of stillness but aliveness. Quite impressive to see.

I hope this was an inspiration to include some standing meditation in your practice. As I mentioned, it can be an antidote for sleepiness or restlessness. It can simply be helpful to give the body another posture when you're tired of sitting, when the back or knees are aching—just stand. You can do it here in the hall. Quietly, mindfully stand at any point. I notice we call it a "sitting," don't we? Maybe we need to change that now—it's also a standing. Stand at any point for as long as feels supportive of your practice, then quietly sit down again.

Be creative with it. Periods scheduled for walking could include more standing, or you can incorporate standing into the walking period. We find ourselves standing at the beginning and end of each section of our walking path—those moments can be extended. There are many ways to include standing in your practice.

I also want to mention lying down meditation. Again, it's a posture we often find ourselves in, and

bringing mindfulness into it will really extend our practice. As you lie down at night getting ready to sleep and find you're not falling asleep right away, or when you wake up in the morning perhaps not quite ready to get up, you can simply continue your practice.

When I do this, especially at night when I'm tired but not yet asleep, I do a very spacious breath meditation—not too focused or tight, a whole-body breath meditation, making the breath a little deeper so it's more relaxing. That's what works for me, but you can explore for yourself.

If you're lying down to take a nap in the middle of the day, continue the mindfulness instead of spilling over into fantasies and daydreams. I actually have one teacher who encourages everyone to do a period of lying down meditation each day, both to encourage mindfulness in that posture and so we can get to know what it's like to practice when the body is really relaxed and comfortable.

If you're going to do that, obviously the intention is not to fall asleep. There are a couple of things people find helpful. Sometimes it's simply propping the arm up so that if it starts to fall over, you know you're drifting. Some people find they need to do a more energetic practice when lying down. A body scan can be helpful, where you move your attention systematically but very gently through the body. You can explore different ways of including lying down practice in your day.

A question arose about an observation that sometimes before a thought forms, there's a little energy blip that one can notice. Is that the intention before a thought? Possibly it is. Someone added that it's almost like that energy blip is the thought already complete, just not unpacked yet. Yes, exactly—it's the whole thought right there, that thought energy. You know what it is, but then you think it out.

We can have this experience where we notice this energy prior to a thought. In that moment there's an intuition of what the thought is going to be about, but we always unpack it and then often get lost in it. Mindfulness can show us this quite clearly, this thought energy. Sometimes the awareness of that is enough for it to simply release. You can really see that happening, and it's actually quite a relief when it does. As I was talking about last night, we see we don't really need to unpack it. The knowing is there in that energy and can just let it subside. It's the mind wanting to, as it does, get in there and investigate and break things apart and know what's happening that engages us in that thinking.

But as our practice deepens and the mind gets quieter, we can just see it. My image of it is like a bubble rising up through a lake or even mud. If you notice it, it just disperses. It doesn't have to come into form. And I don't think anything is lost. I don't think we're missing anything.

So really notice what it's like when you have that experience and bring your awareness to it. If there's a sense of just acceptance or presence, there isn't the need, there isn't the grasping onto the thought, and it can simply dissipate without even forming into words.

Is this just a retreat-only experience, this subtle awareness of thought? Can it happen outside? I'm sure it can happen outside if we're paying enough attention. But most of the time there's so much stimulation and

our thoughts are just tumbling over each other that there's not the space to notice this kind of energy. I always think of what Bruce said about the child going to the top of the slide—this arousing of energy. You can feel the impulse, and if the mindfulness is there, it can be let go of. So it is possible, just much more difficult. That's why it's so helpful and interesting to train here on retreat with these supportive conditions, so we can actually see this nature of thought.

As I was talking about last night, we have such an urgency usually around our thinking. Because I'm thinking it, it must be true, and it's worth saying, and it's worth preserving, and it's worth recording, and it's worth everyone else knowing about. I would question that assumption. If we really start to look at our minds, we see how crazy it is—and even a lot of what comes out of our mouths.

A question came about proper posture for standing meditation. I'm not an expert in body practices—people who've done Qigong or other body-based practices would know more. I just gave simple guidelines that work for me: relatively straight and upright, the head not leaning forward, shoulders not hunched but relatively back so the chest is open, feet hip-width apart, arms just resting naturally by your sides. But each of us has developed a different body structure, and there can be ways you need to adjust for that. I would just experiment. The longer you do it, the more you'll find a comfortable posture.

At first, standing meditation can be really challenging. Doing a period of standing makes sitting look pretty good, doesn't it? "Oh, I get to sit again!" You can really develop those muscles. Anything the body isn't used to takes adjustment, just the same as we have to get used to sitting. So it is with standing.

I was really appreciating the number of people who stayed on for whatever length, some through the whole sitting. There was probably some challenge in that if you haven't done it for a while. What I noticed for myself is I would feel a little uncomfortable and there'd be this thought, "Oh, I could just sit." And I'd look at my experience and ask, "What's actually uncomfortable? What's different from how it was a minute ago when I didn't have the thought to sit?" And there wasn't much different. It was really more of a mental relationship to the standing—that sitting would be better, that I would be happier sitting. But when I would question that, there wasn't any real justification. I was actually quite comfortable standing. My feet—I could feel the solidity in them—but apart from that, it was quite okay.

So I would just explore it, and the more you do it, the more the body will adjust and find its own natural balance. It's something we need to explore. And as I said, in the standing we're not standing still. I think it's helpful to allow the body to make those little adjustments and find its natural balance. The body will respond to the life that's in there—the breathing and the pulsing, the muscles. So just make it an exploration.

A question came up about the natural movements that arise, especially in standing but even in sitting or walking: should we notice the intention before those movements? We'll actually do a whole guided meditation on intention in the next day or so. There's intention before virtually every action that we take—maybe every action. Some of the subtlest ones I don't know about, but the grosser movements, yes,

there are intentions before those, and it can be really helpful to notice them.

But we don't want to drive ourselves crazy trying to pay attention to all of that. It's just too much because it's there all the time. Intention is one of the universals—it's always present in mind moments. So for me, I look to where intention is obvious, where it's making a change or shift that I can really be aware of.

In sitting, I think it is helpful to notice the intention to adjust, to scratch, to itch, to change the posture in those gross ways. In standing, it's much more a natural response to the body and the balance that's needed. I don't think it's so helpful in those subtle cases to notice the intention. If you were really going to shift strongly from one foot to the other or make a big movement of the shoulders, perhaps you could notice the intention—that would be helpful.

If you're out walking and you notice the body is leaning and then you come back, that I think is really helpful to notice the intention, if you can. When you're working with intention, you don't want to drive yourself crazy with it. But it's like the thought process—if we notice that about-to moment, yes, be right there with it. Because that's what gives us the choice point. That's what's so powerful about intention: do I make this movement or not? And if I choose to do it, can I do it with mindfulness? So it is an important place of practice.

But sometime after this sitting, if you hear a brief sounding of an alarm, that's just them testing. If you hear an extended sounding of the alarm, that's not a test—you should respond. I presume you were given instructions about gathering outside and waiting to be counted. Hopefully it's just going to be a test today, but it will be quite loud. You will notice it. Just notice hearing.

It's another perfect day to practice.

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