Part 2 Instructions - Day 1

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2010) · 1:06:34

I'd also like to welcome those of you who just came for the second six weeks of this three-month retreat. I hope you had a good night's rest and are settling in.

For the next six or seven days, we'll be going over and reviewing the meditation instructions each morning at this sitting. For those of you who have been here, it never hurts to hear them again. You can get a sense for yourself of whether to just continue your practice as you've been doing it over the last week, or whether you'd find it helpful to practice the instructions sequentially as we offer them each morning. Because as you know, we can hear the same thing many times, and depending on where our practice is at a particular time, we begin to hear the instructions in a new way. We begin to hear or understand different nuances of them. So you might find it helpful to go along with the sequence of instructions as they're given. But if you find that somehow that's a struggle or it doesn't quite fit, don't attach too tightly to that idea.

I'd like to begin the series of instructions with those words of the Buddha from the Satipatthana Sutta, the Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness, the basic set of instructions that we follow in Vipassana practice. The Sutta is amazingly thorough and complete in describing how to practice mindfulness meditation—what we should be mindful of, and how we should hold and understand these experiences with wisdom.

After the opening paragraph of the discourse, where the Buddha declares this is the direct way to awakening, this is the direct way to enlightenment—namely the four foundations of mindfulness—the very first set of instructions he gives is mindfulness of breathing.

Over the years of my practice, I heard many instructions and read a lot of the teachings. And finally, over the years, with the wisdom of age, I thought it might be a good idea to actually follow what the Buddha said. So I've become more interested in just seeing the very specific set of instructions the Buddha gave in how to watch the breath, how to feel the breath.

I'll go over those in brief this morning. You can begin to get a feel for it, get a sense of it, and begin to at least get some idea of the tremendous richness and nuance of working with an object as simple as the breath. Just this could take us the entire way to enlightenment. It's a powerful set of instructions.

There are basically four steps the Buddha laid out. Through the sitting, we'll start just with the first one, and then I'll guide you through the other three. If there are questions afterwards, we can discuss it a bit.

One of the very key elements in having the mind settle, becoming mindful, becoming more concentrated,

is relaxing. It's not from tightening. It's not from grabbing onto an object. As Annie was indicating last night, concentration itself comes from letting go, from settling back in steadiness. And that itself is an art. We need to learn how to relax back.

As a way of beginning, just feel the body sitting. You might do a quick scan, either starting from the top of the head and going down or starting from the legs and going up. Just get a sense of feeling your body sitting, feeling the posture, settling into your seat, settling back into it, so your back is well supported without being tense.

Quite importantly, and something to remember throughout the sitting, is to relax the eyes. We often unnecessarily tense the eyes in an effort to be mindful. We engage the eyes in a way that's unnecessary. Just for a moment, experience a softening of the eyes, relaxing, and remember to check in with that throughout the sitting.

So we're firm in our seat. The spine and back well supported by the cushion, by the chair. The eyes are soft. Soften the jaw so we're not clenching in any way. Soften the throat and the shoulders. Soften the chest. Doing a quick scan up and down the body in this place of relative relaxation, of ease.

The very first instruction the Buddha gives with regard to the breath: he says, "Ever mindful one breathes in. Ever mindful, one breathes out." It's quite a general instruction. Staying relaxed, staying open. Ever mindful, one breathes in. Ever mindful one breathes out. Keep it that simple. No straining, no struggling. We're breathing anyway. Breathing in, simply know you're breathing in. Breathing out, simply know you're breathing out.

No forcing, no hurrying of the breath. Let it come in its own time, its own rhythm. If there's a space between the out-breath and the next in-breath, simply be aware of the whole body sitting until the next in-breath comes by itself. You're not forcing, you're not rushing it. Breathing is the most natural process in the world. We can relax into it just as it is. Notice any tendency to struggle, to want, to hold on—and then relax. Relax back into the body, relax the eyes. The breathing is happening all by itself. It's simply to be aware, to be mindful. Ever mindful one breathes in, ever mindful one breathes out.

In this relaxed, open easefulness of awareness, we might begin to notice that no two breaths are exactly the same. This is the basis for the Buddha's next set of instructions: "Breathing in long, one understands, I breathe in long. Breathing out long, one understands, I breathe out long. Breathing in short, one understands, I breathe in short. Breathing out short, one understands, I breathe out short."

This is a simple refinement of our understanding of how the breath is happening—a simple recognition with each in-breath, with each out-breath: is it relatively long, relatively short? It's not to make it long or short. It's simply to recognize with each breath how it is. You don't have to measure the breath. There's no absolute long or short in this instruction. It's just the general sense. Is it relatively long? Is it relatively short? You could even add to the Buddha's instruction: medium.

In order to know whether the breath is long or short, we simply need to be present, staying relaxed, open, letting the breath come and go in its own time. And with each in-breath and out-breath, simply understand, simply know: this is a relatively long one, a relatively short one. It keeps changing.

If for whatever reason the mind gets a little tired of noticing whether it's long or short, go back to the first instruction. Ever mindful one breathes in, ever mindful one breathes out. Then relax the mind, open to the natural process of the breathing. Relax the eyes, the throat. Relax the heart and the belly. The breath is coming and going by itself.

We begin with the awareness that we're breathing in or breathing out. In the second step, we refine our understanding a bit more, understanding with each breath whether it's on the long side or the short side. And in the third step of the instructions, the Buddha adds a little intentionality to the practice. He says, "One trains thus: I shall breathe in experiencing the whole body."

There's that sense of just the slight intentionality of training—an intention to breathe in, experiencing the whole body. This has been interpreted in two ways. It's breathing in experiencing the breath through the whole body, and it's been interpreted as the whole body of the breath. So, I breathe in experiencing the whole body of the breath—that is, from the very beginning through the middle to the end of the breath. You can experiment with both of those ways.

We train thus: I shall breathe in experiencing the whole body—feeling the breath throughout the whole body, or feeling the whole body of the breath. One trains thus: I shall breathe out experiencing the whole body.

The art of the practice here is to feel, to experience the whole breath body without forcing, without tightening, keeping the mind and body relaxed. It's not a holding to the breath. It's a letting go—and being steady with it. Letting the breath breathe itself.

He talks about training—one trains thus. He talks about setting the intention in the mind: "I shall breathe in, experiencing the whole body." He sets the intention: "I shall breathe out, experiencing the whole body." And again, it could be the body of the breath, feeling the whole breath, or it could be the breath throughout the body. See which you connect with more easily.

With all of these instructions—simply being mindful you're breathing in and out, understanding whether each in and out breath is long or short, training to experience the whole breath or the breath in the whole body—can you do each of these with a mind and heart that's relaxed, settled back, open? Simply letting the breath appear as it does, without forcing, without trying. The breath is a natural process. The body knows how to breathe. And we're simply feeling it as it does breathe.

In the last set of instructions the Buddha gave on breathing, he said: "One trains thus, I shall breathe in, tranquilizing the body formations. Breathing out, I shall tranquilize the body formations." Body formations could mean the body of the breath—that is, we breathe in, calming the breath; we breathe out,

calming the breath. Or it could mean calming the entire body: breathing in, calming the body; breathing out, calming the body.

Again, this is an intention of training. One trains thus, I shall do this. So we set that gentle intention. As you breathe in, you might use a phrase to help guide the mind in this instruction. As you breathe in, you might say in the mind, "Breathing in calming, breathing out calming." Or simply use the word "calm"—calm the body, calm the breath. It's a reminder. Notice what happens as you do this.

Relax the eyes. Relax the body. It's not about wanting or holding on. It's about settling back. The whole breathing process is happening by itself. Just allow its natural process. If the mind feels like it's struggling or wanting or confused, simply come back to the very first step of breathing in and knowing you're breathing in. Breathing out, knowing you're breathing out. You can keep it that simple.

Before taking questions this morning, I'd like to offer a couple more introductions. I'd like to elaborate a little on Andrea's introduction. She is indeed from California, and I've known her quite a long time. She teaches a lot at Gil Fronsdal's center in Redwood City. She's taught the month-long retreat for several years at Spirit Rock Meditation Center. She's taught at the retreat for Westerners held in Burma at the Pa-Auk Monastery in Upper Burma. She's been a nun in Burma and practiced there for a long time. So she's quite a well-experienced yogi and teacher. Andrea, Greg, and Winnie have all completed the IMS Spirit Rock teacher training program, which is some number of years—three, four, five, six, something like that.

I'd also like to introduce Winnie. Those of you who have been here know her. Winnie is assisting us during this retreat very graciously, and she's done many, many years of practice. She has one of the unique distinctions of having sat for a year at the Forest Refuge—a year-long retreat. So she's very familiar with all the ups and downs of one's meditation practice. Winnie is available for sign-up interviews. The rest of us will have scheduled interviews, and you'll see your names on the daily schedule each day. Winnie will have a sign-up sheet with slots that you can write in. These are for people who are not being seen that day. So if you're scheduled to see one of the other teachers, don't also sign up for Winnie, unless the emergency is raging. Mostly it's for people who would like a little extra support on days when you're not scheduled for an interview.

Do you have any questions about these instructions or about your practice?

A question came in from someone who has just come from a very busy, hectic time—trying to arrange everything to come—and is experiencing the not unusual difficulties of settling in: discomfort in the body, difficulty getting into the ease of the sitting posture and practice.

First, know it's completely to be expected. So it shouldn't be a surprise. Mostly I would just make space for it. Don't have an idea that it should be one way or the other. Your practice is really to settle back and see what's happening. You can approach this from two levels.

One approach, even though we're starting with these instructions on the breath in a pretty systematic

way, is to recognize that if you find—and you know this from your Vipassana practice—if you find there are other things which are more predominant, whether restlessness in the body, a lot of thinking, or different emotions, the general guideline for Vipassana practice is to be with what's predominant.

So don't fight or struggle to be with the breath. If something else is going on, take some time to open to it and be with it, so you can relax behind that, whether it's discomfort in the body or thoughts in the mind. Make some space. And in that more relaxed space, you're aware of it, and then gently come back to the breath for a while. When this stuff happens again, you open again. You're not in a struggle with it.

You might also, depending on what you're used to, if sitting in this cross-legged posture for so many sittings a day really seems challenging and you're struggling with that, sit sometimes in a chair, just to give the body a little ease. But mostly, don't worry. It's quite natural and will settle out over the next few days.

Just in line with that, this afternoon a good friend and ex-staff person, Eowyn Ahlstrom, will be leading a yoga session particularly geared for ease of sitting posture. That's optional if you'd like, but it might also help in learning to relax into the body in a different way.

The question was whether in these instructions it's better to use the phrases almost as one would do in metta practice, where we're using specific phrases—"ever mindful I breathe in, ever mindful I breathe out"—or just to take it as an instruction and then be with it without the phrase.

I would experiment. My guess is it will be different for each one of you. It could be useful to use them a little bit as a reminder, and then let them go and just be with it. If the mind starts really wandering and spacing out again, you might bring in the phrase a bit. I'll post them on the board, so see what's useful.

I have one general approach to all of these meditation instructions, and over the week there will be different ones given: whatever works. They shouldn't be held rigidly at all. These are the words of the Buddha, and so we should at least give him the benefit of the doubt—that might be a good approach—but not with a sense of holding on tightly to any one particular technique. So I would experiment.

With regard to these four steps, you can also experiment a bit. If you found it helpful, as we did through this guided sit this morning, to spend a little time going through each one sequentially, then you might do that for a while in each sitting. It may be that you found one or another of those four steps particularly helpful. Maybe it was the first one, just that general way of breathing in and breathing out. Maybe it was the calming. Maybe it was feeling the whole body, whether the whole body or the body of the breath. So just see: is there one that you really connected with easily? You might either start with that one or give emphasis to it. There's a lot of flexibility in how we're using and practicing these instructions. You'll learn for yourself what really serves your practice.

The question or comment was that in that step of calming or tranquilizing, she can feel this yearning for peacefulness, but that very yearning can actually become a struggle when that's not what's happening.

I don't think this instruction is the same thing as what you're describing as the yearning for peacefulness, because that's a kind of expectation and wanting and desire which can very much get in the way—we're not simply with what is. My sense is that the Buddha here is talking about a much more immediate experiential sense. We might translate it or use slightly different words. We might say, "Breathing in, I relax the body. Breathing in, I relax the breath." So it's just a reminder of how we can be with it. It's not a yearning for some state. It's just a reminder: let everything relax, let everything calm. Using that word and then seeing what happens. Don't be attached to outcome.

Because as soon as you're attached to outcome, it's a setup for suffering. We can't control the outcome. So I see this last step as just a gentle reminder or guide. Breathing in, calm. Breathing out, calm. And as I said, if any one of these instructions doesn't quite connect for now, or if it's creating more difficulty, let that one go. Use the one that is most helpful.

Just feeling the body standing here, settling into this posture—the standing posture, one of the four postures that the Buddha taught. He taught to practice in the sitting, standing, walking, and lying down postures. So that covers pretty much the whole thing. You could include the transitions between each of these postures as part of it as well.

We're just settling into the sensations of the body, the elements of the body as we experience it—this flow of sensations of pressure and movement and various textures. Whatever you notice, we call body, this experience. Let the eyes close if you want to, or it might be easier to balance if you let the gaze be soft. The eyes can be open—gentle, soft gaze.

Earth standing on Earth, supported by the Earth.

And now just gently, as we're standing here, shift the weight. Let the weight shift slowly to the right foot, shifting over until you feel that weight and pressure really in the right side. Notice all the changes in the body as you do that. And then slowly lifting the left foot off the ground, moving it forward, placing it down, and then shifting the weight forward onto that left foot. Feeling what happens as you shift the weight, the changes in the body.

When the weight is shifted over to the left foot, allowing the right foot to lift, move forward, and place down. Just the simplicity of bodily movement as we shift the weight.

Just as Joseph was saying in the instructions on mindfulness of breathing—this could be a complete practice. Mindfulness of the breathing could take us all the way to enlightenment. Walking meditation is just as good. It gets you all the way. Yet it gets relegated sometimes to second-class status, as though somehow walking is something we do in between sittings, or when we're not sitting because we've got to

go somewhere—we have to go to the bathroom or go eat. But it's just as good, even better. Top-notch practice. So don't relegate it to second-class status.

Usually we teach three paces for the walking, and I'd recommend you really explore these. I like to start at a more natural, normal pace.

The question was whether we would consider walking to be mainly a concentration practice and less of a mindfulness or vipassanā practice. I would say no. Some people find it very helpful for concentration—it's so tangible and clear, and it does greatly aid concentration. But I wouldn't tend to separate those too much. We're being mindful of what's there, and we're noticing all kinds of things. We're still seeing the three characteristics—we're seeing impermanence and change within it. But let that arise very naturally and organically. Let that be the case no matter what.

In the walking, especially for those of you who've just arrived, my suggestion would be to really keep it very, very simple. Stay grounded in the physicality of the body, the sensations in the feet and the legs as we move. But you're going to notice everything.

You know, it's just life unfolding. That's what we're paying attention to here—life unfolding in all these different ways and times and postures. Walking meditation is one of them, and so all things will manifest within it. I don't know if that confused or clarified matters, but keep it simple. Let the concentration come through it, and the insight also.

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