Morning Instruction

Sally Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2012) · 15:14

Good morning. I hope you all slept well. It's often a little challenging the first night in perhaps a new place, certainly a new room.

We won't begin our regular schedule of sitting and walking in silence until tomorrow. As we said last night, today is a day to help you settle in, get to know each other a little, get to know the place and the staff. We'll have the ceremony this afternoon to celebrate the groundbreaking of the new building.

Every day at this time throughout the retreat, at 8:15, we'll have this sitting where we all come together. There will generally be instructions, especially for the first week or so, and at the end of the period, a time to ask questions of the teachers and get answers. So that will be a stable presence throughout the retreat.

We'll be giving instructions to encourage you to connect directly with your experience. All of the different instructions we give will carry this basic intention: Can you sit and know what's happening? Can you walk and know what's happening? Can you stand or eat or speak and know what's happening? This is the direction of our practice.

As we always say, it sounds so simple, and yet it's so difficult to do, because the mind has its habits—wandering off, resistance, fear, loneliness, sadness, resentment, or being lost in bliss and wonderment about something and not actually even paying attention to the joy that's present right here. So our practice is this coming back again and again to what's happening, what's happening here, what's happening now.

To invite that sense of presence, it's really helpful that we begin from a place of ease and relaxation, that we consciously incline the mind and the body towards that so that the body and the mind become a welcoming place. As Joseph said last night, our mind becomes our friend. When we have that basic intention, that place of connecting with practice, it becomes much easier to come back. In fact, we want to come back. We want to know what's happening. Our fantasy world seems less appealing than just knowing the truth of this moment.

As we begin this morning, I encourage you to find a relaxed and comfortable posture. Most of you have sat before and kind of know how the body feels in sitting. But unconsciously, subconsciously, we've created areas of tightness or pressure—the body isn't as upright as it might be, there are places where we hold or contract around the breath and in other areas of the body.

I really find it helpful at the beginning of every sitting, and perhaps periodically through a sitting, to find this balance between uprightness and ease. One of the easy ways to do this is to take a few deeper breaths

at the beginning of the sitting. On the in-breath, let the air as it comes in straighten the body, open the body. Really feel that the chest and the abdomen can fill with air in an easy way. Perhaps your shoulders lift a little bit, your back straightens. There's just that sense of dignity and uprightness that can come on a nice, deep in-breath. And then on the out-breath, you relax a little and soften.

In doing that a few times and then letting the breath become more natural, you can find that balanced state between uprightness and ease. In some sittings, you may need to do that a few times. You find you've gotten slumped or tired, dull, contracted. Invite again that breathing a little deeper, sitting up a little straighter, and just beginning again.

This is one of the things we'll invite you to over and over: just be willing to begin again, to start afresh, to greet this moment as a new moment of experience. Not to be always judging and complaining about what happened in the past, what you didn't do, what you should have done better. But now, here, this moment, this breath—this is meditation.

Perhaps also do a short body scan, just to find the places in the body where there's unnecessary tension or holding that you might be able to soften, relax, release.

Starting at the top of the head and moving down through the forehead and the eyes. Seeing if the eyes can just be gently closed. Touching the cheeks and the jaw. The mouth is gently touching. The tongue is resting easily in the mouth. Relaxing in the throat. Letting the shoulders drop. Many of us spend much of our time with our shoulders hunched up through all of the things we do with typing and phones and all the other instruments we relate with. Just see if you can let them drop. Relax.

Allowing the chest and belly to be as open as you can let them. Seeing if the breath can move easily in and out. The same with the back, the shoulder blades, the middle and lower back, the whole pelvic region.

As you sit, the sitting bones, genitals—just relaxed and soft. Down through the arms, into the hands, however you have them arranged. Can they rest there without extra effort or tension? You can sometimes find tension in the oddest places—in the upper arm or the calf of the left leg—moving down through the legs. However you're sitting, just releasing and relaxing into the sitting posture and into the feet.

There's a sense that the awareness has filled or touched all parts of the body. There's a sense of knowing the body in this intimate way through mindfulness—inviting the body into a degree of comfort, but not getting into a fight with it, wanting it to be completely different. Just as it is, can you find comfort and ease in this posture?

Out of that awareness of the body, begin to notice the movement of the breath. It comes in and goes out. It's often helpful to begin with a wide awareness of the breath, not immediately going to some narrow or simple sensation. This full body breathing, keeping the awareness quite wide and open, can often invite a softness in the mind that's helpful, especially at the beginning of a period of practice. So just notice the breath wherever you notice it. The attention might move around a bit. Perhaps you can take in the whole

movement of the breath in this large field of awareness. Breath beginning at the nostrils, down the back of the throat. Maybe your shoulders lift, chest expands, diaphragm expands, belly moves. But do your arms move with the breath? Or your hands? Your thighs move, your calves or feet? Not trying to make something happen if it's not clear to you, but just expanding the awareness of breath to this experience of the whole body. Letting the mind be soft so it can move easily through this expansive awareness of body.

Within that field of breath, there may be a place where you most easily or clearly notice the sensations. Perhaps it's a place you often work with the breath. Maybe it's a new experience of breath at the nostrils, in the chest, or abdomen. If it feels helpful for you to simplify a little with the breath, to let the attention rest just in this one area, you can choose to do so. But especially in these early days, if you find that you're getting tight, contracted, trying to hold on to the breath, it can be helpful to open up in the way we just did, so there's a softness to the mind that's paying attention to the breath.

What we're really training here is the mind and its capacity to notice, its capacity to stay connected, present, alert. We're not training to be good breathers or to breathe in any particular way. We're just using the tool, the vehicle of the breath, to train the mind to be present. We keep that in mind as we do this practice. We're not holding onto the breath like it's a life preserver and we're drowning, kind of flailing away, trying to keep a hold of it. It's more like we're a fish swimming in an ocean of breath—just needing to breathe and noticing that you're breathing.

Of course the mind will wander into thought, thoughts of past or future, perhaps even commenting on this current experience. This is really natural and normal. We want to recognize that it's happening. We'll be talking much more about working with thought and attitude of mind. But for today especially, just notice your thinking—thinking or remembering—and not in a way of rejecting the thought, being aversive to it. Thought is what the mind does. But just a preferring of coming back to simply being with the breath and the body in this simple way.

If you find you're getting tired or dull—this often happens in the early days of a retreat—you can open your eyes, straighten up, breathe a little more deeply, or even stand up. Standing up is a great way to work skillfully with dullness or sleepiness.

We're just training to be present. We're not looking to have any particular experience. Just connecting moment after moment. What's happening now?

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