Vipassanā Instructions

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Finding yourself some quiet place to sit comfortably for about 45 minutes for this *Vipassanā* meditation practice. And making sure your clothing is loose and comfortable, switching off your mobile phone or anything else you can do to help yourself relax.

The guidance given here is according to the technique developed by the Mahāsi Sayādaw of Burma, known as the Mahāsi Method. We are letting go of all our usual busyness and taking time to relax, sit still and notice what this actually feels like. Sometimes it may feel like a relief and then after a while we might get fed up and want something more active to do. The challenge is to take an interest in both experiences, the sense of relief and the feeling of being fed up. It's the same for whatever comes our way. Deep peace, disturbing noises, happiness, sleepiness, itchy toes, heavenly bliss, cold hands are just plain old matter-of-fact ordinariness. We get to know the moment-to-moment feeling of all of these.

We're spending time getting in touch with the moment to moment feeling of our life, the raw data, so to speak, that comes into our senses each moment. So we get to know ourselves and the world we live in at a deeper, more basic level in this practice. This knowledge is of itself healing. And when we know the world around us and the world within us at the deepest possible level, we will come into total harmony, compassion and peace. For the present though, our job is to stay awake, to relax as best we can, while also maintaining an interest in our various experiences.

See if you can find a way of sitting comfortably, while also having your back straight, as this helps you to be more alert. You might imagine a puppet string attached to the crown of your head, tugging your head and neck gently upwards towards the ceiling. And your chin might drop a little as your neck lengthens. And the upward pull lifts each bone in the spine, so you're sitting upright. And all the rest of the body can relax, as if you are a puppet, just dangling on the end of that puppet string.

Your face can relax. Your eyes can close gently, or if you prefer, keeping the eyes slightly open, but gazing downwards towards the floor. Your shoulders relaxing, and the arms falling from the shoulders, falling down to the hands which are resting comfortably in your lap. Traditionally, the right hand rests in the left. The chest can relax, and the waist, and the stomach, abdomen, pelvis, all softening, relaxing.

You might feel yourself sitting down more heavily into the cushion or chair and your hips loosening a little as all the muscles lose tension, soften and relax. The muscles of the thighs as well, not having to bear your weight now so they can take it easy. And your knees also, as if the upper and lower legs are only loosely bound at the knees. The lower legs can relax as well, falling loosely into the ankles. And the feet as if they were falling out of the ankles. And the toes as if they're just falling out of the feet.

It can also help us relax if we deliberately tense muscles and then relax them slowly. Sounds strange, but it really works. It brings underlying tensions to the surface to where they can be released. But if you have any physical injury or weakness, you might just have to do this very gently. Or maybe just imagine yourself doing it, whatever is right for your body.

We often hold underlying tension in the jaws, the forehead and all around the face and neck. So if you like squeezing all those muscles in the scalp, the forehead, the face, jaws, tongue, lips, throat, neck and holding all that tension for a few moments and then relaxing slowly. And you might even find yourself sighing as underlying tension is released on the out breath. Trying that again, if you like, squeezing all the muscles, holding the tension and releasing slowly, sighing all the tension away.

You could also try that for the shoulders and hands, if you like, pulling the shoulders upwards, squeezing them in, tightening the hands into a fist. You might feel the whole upper body brace somewhat, holding that tension and then slowly releasing. Repeating that if you like, bracing the shoulders, the arms, the hands, holding the tension, holding, and then releasing slowly.

It can also help us relax by taking a deep breath and after a few moments releasing the air suddenly as a big sigh. And if you want to try that now, taking in a deep breath that fills all the chest and pushes the stomach high, holding for a few moments and then releasing completely. And you could try that again the next time the breath comes in, taking it in deeply, holding, holding and then sighing.

So perhaps your body is relaxing now. But if not, that's not a problem. If you're feeling uptight, that's just some underlying emotion surfacing. Can you see this as an opportunity to get to know the experience of feeling uptight? Maybe reminding yourself now and again that it's okay to feel uptight. It's part of every human life. In *Vipassanā*, our job is to get to know every aspect of life, so whatever comes our way is welcome.

Body awareness is a really powerful aspect of Vipassanā, so we'll do a short body scan, letting attention sink into each part of the body, from the crown of the head down to the toes. If you start feeling sleepy during the scan, then sitting upright, imagining that puppet string being pulled upwards towards the ceiling. Or if that doesn't help, opening your eyes for a while. Or standing up, whatever you need to do to remain awake.

Starting at the crown of the head and the whole scalp area. How does that feel now? And letting your attention sink deep within the head and then surfacing towards your face as if you're coming up in your face from underneath the skin. Letting attention dwell in the forehead. Maybe it's frowning in concentration. If so, can it relax?

Attention dwelling in the eyebrows and the eyes and the cheeks and the nose. You might feel how the in breath cools the nostrils slightly. Maybe flares them just a little too. What's the feeling of the out breath in the nostrils? And bringing attention into the upper jaw. And the lower jaw. And that hinge region behind

the mouth where the jaws meet. If that area feels tight, then just circling the lower jaw for a few moments might loosen this.

And your lips, you might try curling the corners of the lips upward slightly into a very slight subtle smile. Just seeing if that feels comfortable or pleasant. And inside the mouth, how do the teeth and gums feel? If the upper and lower teeth are locked together, see can they open slightly? Can the tongue relax, the tip just resting behind the front teeth? Can you follow sensations back down the tongue, down into the throat? How does the rest of the neck feel?

Sometimes it's all a blank or a blur and sometimes there might be little tingling sensations in places when we bring our attention up close to the body like this. There's no right or wrong way to feel. There's just the truth of your present experience.

Bringing attention into the shoulders. Are they tight? Tense? If so, can they relax a little? Tracing attention down the arms to the elbows. Is there a bony feeling to the elbows? It doesn't matter if you don't have words to describe sensations. Just resting the attention in the body is what's important. And the lower arms, how do they feel? Sometimes we don't feel any sensations in various parts of the body. That's fine too. Just noticing that blank feeling. And the wrists. And the hands. Do your hands feel warm in places, for example? Can you feel your hands touching one another? Or maybe they're touching your lap?

And bringing the attention into the chest, tracing the back down from the shoulders to the waist. Can you feel the ribs rising and falling with each breath? Any feelings from deep inside the chest? Tingly feelings, strange feelings, maybe no feelings? Can you feel the heart beating?

And if your mind wanders, no big deal. That's the nature of the mind, wanting something more interesting than just relaxing within the body. So not giving yourself a hard time about your mind wandering, but encouraging yourself to leave worries and plans and troubles and dreams and whatever aside for this time. And instead to spend a bit of time within yourself, getting to know your body a bit better.

And bringing the attention to the waist area. You might feel the diaphragm, that big muscle underneath the chest as it plunges downwards into the abdomen on the in breath. You might feel how it floats up again as you breathe out. And can you feel how the tummy rises with each in breath? Falls back down again on the out breath. Or deep within the abdomen pelvis. Are there any sensations? Can you feel the internal organs being pushed downwards towards the pelvic floor as you breathe in? And relaxing back again as you breathe out. How does the lower back feel?

And if there is discomfort here or anywhere else in the body, see and can you relax around the discomfort, feeling it just as it is. Bringing attention to the genital area. To the hips left and right. And letting attention drift along the thighs all the way from the hips and right throughout that large muscle mass down to the knees.

How do the lower legs feel? Are there touching sensations in places? Perhaps the legs touching one

another or touching clothing. Itching sensations maybe. Noticing how your ankles feel. And your feet. The heels. Through the sole of the foot. The upper part of the foot. And right down to the toes. The big toes, the little toes, and all those toes in between.

And having visited every part of the body, bringing your attention to the wave of breath that swells the trunk of the body as it passes through. And just breathing naturally, not trying to breathe slowly or deeply or any way special. All we're doing is getting to know the physical sensations associated with breathing.

So can you feel the tummy rising and falling as you breathe? Or it might be that you feel the breath in the chest, the rising and falling of the chest every time you breathe. If you can't feel any movements, then you might place a hand on your tummy or your chest and that can focus attention there so you feel the movement more clearly. So just spending a few moments now finding which area of the body is moving most obviously as you breathe.

And once you've settled on an area, best keep your attention there rather than moving it around from place to place. And if you've already trained yourself to concentrate by feeling the breath at the nostrils, that's fine. But for the Mahāsi meditation practice, it is recommended to feel the breath deep within the trunk of the body.

It's also recommended to make a mental note of whatever you're experiencing as this helps to steady the mind and strengthens awareness. So as you feel a rising movement, you could be noting to yourself, rising, rising. And as you feel a falling movement, falling, falling. If you're following the breath of the nostrils, then noting in, in and out, out as you feel the breath coming in and out of the body.

These noting words can be very soft, almost like a footnote, because it's the physical sensation we're interested in. So if the noting word seems really loud in your mind, obscuring the feeling of breathing, then you could deliberately soften that. It's almost like a feather just brushing against the physical feelings of breathing.

If there's a gap between breaths, then you could bring attention to some touch point. For example, the hands touching one another or the buttocks touching the cushion. And noting touching, touching until you next feel a movement due to breathing. So you're just following the physical sensations due to breathing and noting in your mind rising, falling, touching, rising and so on, following the pace of your breath.

If your mind wanders, then as soon as you notice this, you could be curious about the general direction of your thought. For example, planning or dreaming or worrying. And then making a gentle note of this before inviting your attention back to the feeling of breathing. Not giving yourself a hard time for wandering. We're not making an enemy out of the wandering mind, but getting to know it as well. Becoming more aware of the general direction you tend to wander in. That can bring us to a deeper self-awareness.

So perhaps you could cultivate an amused curiosity about the direction of your wandering mind, rather

than a sense of exasperation towards it. And having noted planning or worrying or whatever, then bringing your attention back into the body and the feeling of breathing. And sometimes you might not remember what you were thinking about. No need to go racking your brain trying to work out whether it was a plan or a worry or whatever. But just coming back then to the feeling of breathing, rising, falling, touching and so on.

If you're feeling sleepy, then sitting upright, giving a little tug at that puppet string, or opening your eyes, letting in the light, or standing for a while, whatever you need to do to remain awake. But we're not making an enemy out of sleepiness. Our job here is to get to know every human state. So we're interested in the feeling of sleepiness. Does it feel pleasant, for example? Do you like that feeling? How does your body feel? Is it heavy in places? And your mind, how does your mind feel? Does it feel a bit dull? Seeing can you just stay awake and alert enough to get to know the moment to moment feeling of sleepiness.

If your mind is wandering a lot, then it's best to keep returning to the breath and let that rhythmic wave of breathing calm down the busy mind. But if your attention has steadied and you feel interested in your present experience, then letting your attention be drawn to whatever attracts it. Maybe an itching feeling in the body draws attention. If so, letting that come to the forefront and noting itching, itching while you let all those physical sensations be felt. Or maybe some sound takes your attention. So noting hearing, hearing as you listen to the detail of the sound, all its notes and rhythms.

Whatever draws attention, letting yourself zoom into this experience to feel it fully. And if it fades away, if it doesn't take your attention anymore, and if nothing else particularly draws attention, then going back again to the rising falling movements of breathing.

If you notice yourself reacting, for example, disliking the feeling of itching, liking some sounds, disliking others, then noting these reactions, liking, liking or disliking, disliking. You might notice how these reactions can sometimes set up a whole train of thoughts and internal arguments. Keeping track of these as best you can, noting thinking, thinking or arguing, arguing to deepen the acknowledgement. If you notice yourself feeling calm and peaceful, then noting this calm, calm or peaceful, peaceful for as long as it holds attention.

And if you're getting stiff or in pain, then bringing this centre stage and noting stiff, stiff or pain, pain. Bringing attention right into the heart of the discomfort. Is it aching or burning or pressing? Or maybe there are no words to describe it. Is it all concentrated in a point? Or is it a line of discomfort? Or a general area? How far does it extend? Resting attention there right in the heart of the discomfort.

Also noticing any mental reactions, for example irritation, anxiety, wishing the pain would go away. Again, noting all these, allowing your body and mind to be just as they are. And sometimes the mental reactions are more subtle, harder to notice. So it can help to switch attention from the painful area to a more comfortable area for a while and then back to the painful area again. This can help us feel how the mind reacts to pain. But we're not trying to torture ourselves. So if you feel it's all too much, then moving

mindfully to relieve the discomfort. Noticing how your mood might lift as your body gets comfortable again.

Letting whatever calls attention to become center stage in our awareness. And if nothing particularly calls attention, then going back to rising, falling again. If you notice yourself trying hard to meditate to get it right, you can note trying, trying and become curious about the feeling of trying. If it's the opposite and you're feeling lazy, not wanting to bother noticing anything, you could note lazy, lazy and allow that experience to take centre stage for as long as it lasts. Letting yourself feel just exactly as you do feel.

And if whatever you're noting seems to fade away, stops calling attention, and if nothing else takes attention, then you can go back to the rising, falling feelings again. If you find your mind is wandering, then the very moment of waking up and noticing this is a very rich opportunity. How does that wake up feel? Is it a slight startle?

Or maybe a gentle sliding back into awareness? Sometimes we can still feel the emotion that was driving the wandering mind or the startle reaction. If so, see can you allow these feelings to become centre stage for as long as they last, using whatever noting words help acknowledge the experience, like dreaming, dreaming, if you still have the feeling of daydreaming, or worrying, worrying, if you can still sense that feeling of being worried.

And getting to know these feelings in our bodies as well. Worrying can sometimes tense the forehead or the jaws, for example, maybe the chest, the stomach. Or that feeling of dreaming might have an effect, maybe in the chest again, maybe warm, pleasant feelings this time. Just see if you can notice any part of the body that's associated with the underlying emotion. Can you let your attention dwell there to acknowledge the experience more deeply? And then, if the experience fades away, no longer calls attention, and if nothing else particularly calls attention, then going back to the feelings of the breath again. Rising, falling, touching, and so on.

If you're feeling sleepy, then straightening the back, giving a little tug at that puppet string, opening your eyes or standing or whatever you find helps you to stay awake and alert enough to get to know the feeling of sleepiness.

If any emotion arises, see if you can experience this fully. So whether it's a pleasant emotion, like maybe you're feeling happy or calm, just noting these. So happy, happy, calm, calm. Or if it's an unpleasant state, like maybe you're feeling irritable or impatient. Again, can you note this? Irritable, irritable, impatient, impatient.

Being curious about the body as well. Every emotion has some effect on the body. So if there's any part of the body calling attention, just letting your attention rest there. And that'll help you to acknowledge the emotion at a deeper level. And if the emotion fades away and nothing else particularly takes your attention, always going back to the rising falling again.

If your mind is wandering, then being curious about the feeling of waking up and any remaining feeling of the emotion that might have been driving the wandering mind, the feeling of worrying, the feeling of planning, the feeling of dreaming, perhaps just allowing those feelings to be fully felt in mind and body for as long as they last.

If your mind is very restless, hopping from one thought to the next, then noting restless, restless, as you bring attention into the body as well, especially to any areas of tension, relaxing whatever is possible. And perhaps letting the rhythmic wave of breathing provide a calm background to the experience of restlessness.

Allowing yourself to be just as you are, to feel your body and your emotions fully. Not trying to interfere and fix what you don't like, but allowing whatever experience you're going through to be felt just exactly as it is. So if you feel yourself struggling or judging that you're doing something wrong, that you shouldn't be feeling like this, noting these experiences as struggling, judging and so on, bringing attention right into the body, especially into the heart area there at the centre of the chest to feel how the heart is responding to whatever you're going through.

These are actually valuable experiences teaching us about the true nature of human suffering. So see, can you allow yourself to relax and feel them fully? If you can, you may get a glimpse of the four noble truths, the essence of the Buddha's teaching.

If you're struggling against physical pain, for example, wishing it would go away and let you meditate in peace, then this provides an experience of the first truth, that there is *dukkha*, or difficulty, in life. The Buddha's injunction is to fully understand dukkha. And for this reason we allow ourselves to feel the physical pain and any reactions such as the sense of struggling somehow, trying to relax perhaps.

Noticing all this, we sometimes just tire of the struggling, even just for a moment. To our great surprise we find that, although the pain is still there, we feel okay for that moment, relaxed and at peace even in the midst of the pain. We realise that it was the struggling against pain that was causing the misery. In this moment we're experiencing the second noble truth. That dukkha is caused not by the circumstances we find ourselves in, but by our reactions of trying to get rid of what we dislike and to hold on to what we do like.

That feeling of ease we get when we stop struggling is a glimpse of the third noble truth, that dukkha does stop. When we reflect on all this, we realise we found a method to allow dukkha to come to its natural end by letting go of our instinctive reactions of desire to hold on to what we like and to get rid of what we dislike. So we found for ourselves the fourth noble truth, the way to the end of all suffering.

This is the great value of Vipassana. It teaches us to see things just as they really are and thereby to come to the end of the difficulties associated with the human condition.

So let's continue with the practice in silence for a few more moments, letting each experience teach us the

way to the end of suffering.

And bringing our meditation practice to a close with a good wish for ourselves and others. May I be safe and well and happy and enjoy a fulfilling, fruitful life. Extending those good wishes to close family and friends. May you be safe and well and happy and enjoy fulfilling and fruitful lives. Extending those good wishes further to our neighbours, colleagues at work, a wider circle of friends. May you be safe, well and happy and enjoy fulfilling and fruitful lives. And finally, extending those good wishes throughout the world to all people on Earth, if you like, including animals, plants, even the physical Earth itself. May all be safe and well and happy and enjoy fulfilling and fruitful lives.

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