Introduction to the Mahāsī Meditation Practice

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Tonight I want to talk about the Mahāsī meditation technique: where it came from, what qualities it develops, special features of the technique, and some pitfalls we can fall into.

This Mahāsī technique is a particular approach to Vipassanā or insight meditation. It's the form of meditation the Buddha adopted when he realized that none of the spiritual techniques he'd already learned were working for him.

His spiritual journey had followed from what we would now call a midlife crisis, when he was suddenly exposed to the reality of sickness, ageing, and death. This had started a period of intense suffering, enough to drive him away from his comfortable home and happy marriage to take up the life of a wandering ascetic.

Over the following years, he tried two different approaches to spiritual training which were being practiced in his day. One developed transcendent meditation states, while the other was based on very austere asceticism. When he saw that neither of these were answering his need to make sense of life, he realized he would have to find his own spiritual path.

The transcendent meditation had cultivated happy, peaceful mental states, while the ascetic training had invited hardship and suffering. He decided to steer a course between these two extremes—a middle way. He wouldn't see either happiness or suffering as the goal. The goal was to find a way to stop the suffering he felt from the knowledge that sickness, ageing, and death were in store for himself and for everyone he loved.

A memory came back of an incident in his childhood, where he had been watching his father doing a ploughing ceremony. He had been alert and curious, happy to be watching all the details of the ceremony, and also peaceful, at ease, not hoping for anything special to happen. He now recognized the spiritual potential of that mental state. If there was a way to live peacefully with the knowledge of death, his intuition told him that this combination of alert curiosity and relaxed attention would lead him there. He sensed his own potential to learn how to stop suffering.

While as a child he had been absorbed by watching what was happening around him, he realised he could turn that focus inward, become absorbed by watching his own moment-to-moment experience—his physical experience of sitting, breathing, walking, as well as his mental experience of thoughts and emotions. This is what we now term Vipassanā or insight meditation, also known as mindfulness meditation.

We can imagine the Buddha was going through various shades of grief and depression because of his acute apprehension of mortality, and probably also a desperate anxiety to find a way forward—not unlike our predicament much of the time. The insight that followed his childhood memory gave him the clue that the way through all these conflicting emotions was to observe them in Vipassanā.

The traditional story goes that once he made this determination to follow the middle way between joy and pain, it only took him six hours to reach the fully enlightened state.

When he afterwards started teaching others how to follow in his footsteps, he described his understanding in terms of four truths he had learned along the way, which we now know as the Four Noble Truths.

First was the truth of dukkha, usually translated as suffering, but better understood as unsatisfactoriness. He had detected this dukkha in all experience—not only in grief, depression and so on, but also in states of happiness and joy. When we examine these mindfully, we notice a subtle anxiety associated with the knowledge that these beautiful states are fragile and easily fade away. Usually we leap to conclusions here, blame ourselves, blame others, blame circumstances. But the Buddha's careful observation led him to conclude that blame only confused the issue, compounded the pain. The underlying reality was simply that the beautiful states of happiness and joy had faded.

Probing deep into his experience of body and mind, the Buddha had come to understand that it was all by nature unstable, uncontrollable, and therefore unsatisfactory. This sounds like a discovery that would lead to even deeper depression, despair, and maybe even suicide. But that original intuition that this method of meditation could lead him to the end of suffering proved stronger than any such temptations.

We can imagine him relaxing, becoming so sensitive to his experience that he could say, "This here is the feeling of depression. And this slight pushing on the edge of it—this is the desire to get rid of depression." And to his amazement, no doubt, he found that what was really hurting was not the depression itself, but the desire to be rid of it. And then, seeing that he could, for a moment at least, relax and let go of that desire—with that, the depression became bearable.

You can imagine that discovery lifted his heart, gave him a shot of joy. So then he notices, "This here is the feeling of joy. And this slight pulling on the edge of it is the desire to possess the joy, prolong it, become forever joyful." And while the joy itself is lovely, the desire to own it, prolong it, become it, is stressful.

Thus, tracking his own experience, he was able to convince himself that desire was causing suffering—whether it was the desire to be rid of unpleasant stuff like depression, or the desire to get more of the pleasant stuff like joy. This he later described as the second noble truth: desire is the cause of suffering.

And then came the real breakthrough. As he continued to watch desire with calm, curious attention, feeling the suffering it caused, he was drawn ever deeper into the roots of his experience. And there came

a moment of profound stillness when all desire naturally faded away. With that, all suffering stopped and there was deep peace.

It may have only been momentary, because until we're fully enlightened, new desires keep arising. But luckily for us, he recognized that brief moment when desire faded as an experience of what he had been searching for: the cessation of suffering, a taste of nibbāna. This he later taught as his third noble truth—that there is an end to suffering.

Although the whole wearying process of wanting this, not wanting that, started up again, he now knew there was a way to work with this deeply ingrained conditioning. Studying his own emotions, attitudes, thoughts, and behaviour in Vipassanā, he was able to fine-tune his understanding of what caused suffering and what brought it to an end. This allowed him to work out a practical path that could be followed for spiritual awakening. He calls this the Noble Eightfold Path, and we know this as the Fourth Noble Truth.

There are three sections to the Path: wisdom, morality, and meditation training. Here we're mainly concerned with the third part, but we're based within the wisdom set by the Buddha in his Dhamma teachings, and having taken the precepts, we're working within a framework of morality.

Following his enlightenment, the Buddha spent the remainder of his life teaching others how to reach the same goal. But he stressed that words alone could only point in the direction of truth. Each person has to search for, detect, and realise the truth within their own experience.

Thus, we don't have to accept any of the teachings on blind faith. We don't have to think of ourselves as Buddhist or even believe in the historic figure of the Buddha. We can experiment with the Dhamma, see if these teachings prove a useful guide in our lives. The motive inspiring our practice can thus be to ask whether the Dhamma is really true, manifesting right here and now in my life. We answer the question by practicing Vipassana, examining our experience with a calm, curious, attentive observation.

But we don't want to get too far ahead of ourselves. Remember that we're on a training course here. We're not expecting full enlightenment. That's a very worthy long-term goal for meditation practice, but we need to put it aside for now, or else it will get in the way.

Joseph Goldstein gives the analogy of walking home through the woods at night. He could see the lights of his house ahead in the distance. That was his goal, to get to the house. But to make any progress, he had to look down at the ground in front of him, take it one step at a time. Looking ahead while stepping usually meant a tumble. In the same way, thoughts about enlightenment or perfect happiness get in the way of the meditation skills we're trying to learn here and now. So we have to let go of our desires for psychological well-being and spiritual insight and instead focus on learning the technique, trusting that the process will, in its own good time, bring about insight and happiness.

It's best to think of the retreat as essentially a training course. We're training ourselves in the art of

meditation as taught by the Mahasi Sayadaw of Burma. And like any training you've ever done, it's going to take time and effort and patience.

The Mahasi Sayadaw was a Buddhist monk teaching in a monastery in the north of Burma until 1948, when he was asked to come to Yangon and teach meditation to lay people. This was an unusual request, as it was widely held in Burma at that time that any progress in meditation required a remove from all worldly affairs so as to dedicate one's time fully to spiritual training for many months and years. This allowed very deeply absorbed states of concentration to develop, known as samatha jhanas. It was only monastics who had the necessary time and seclusion to master these states.

The training technique that the Mahasi Sayadaw had learned and practiced did not require the deep absorptions, but instead developed what is known as momentary concentration. It's not that the concentration only lasts for a moment—it is the same strength as various levels of jhana. The distinction between the two is that samatha focuses on one object, for example the breath, whereas Vipassana lets the focus switch between many objects. One moment we're aware of breathing, the next of hearing, the next of some emotion arising, and so on. Thus in Vipassana, the deep level of concentration is experienced over many moments of consciousness.

The Mahasi Sayadaw recognised that people could develop this level of concentration within a relatively short time frame, and thus that this meditation technique was ideally suited for lay people who could perhaps only make a retreat of a few weeks at the most. This is in keeping with the fact that one of the most prized of all the Buddha's teachings, the discourse on establishing mindfulness, was given in the townland of Kuru to lay people as well as to monastics. The Mahasi technique is based around many of the instructions given in this particular discourse, the Satipatthana Sutta.

While some Vipassana training techniques encourage a broad, open awareness, the Mahasi technique focuses on detail. In the first place, on the sensations of the abdomen caused by breathing, or else the sensations in the feet caused by walking. We track these until the mind calms down and becomes interested in present experience. Then we let whatever calls attention become the new focus. It could be a sound, an itching sensation, some discomfort in the body perhaps. We allow our attention to go wherever it is naturally called. And if nothing in particular calls, we go back to the breath at the abdomen, the feeling of the tummy rising and falling. This cultivates momentary concentration, where the mind can focus on each little detail of what attracts attention.

There are two other aspects to the Mahasi approach that distinguish it from other forms of Vipassana training. One is noting, and making a special effort to note intentions. Another is slowing down all physical activities to a snail's pace.

Noting involves making a short mental note of what you're experiencing. When feeling the rising and falling movements of the breath, we note "rising, rising, falling, falling." This helps draw attention more closely to those sensations. Whereas if we don't make that mental note, we might be only vaguely aware

that we're breathing. When we make the mental notes "rising, falling," we are engaging the perceptual faculty of the mind, the ability to discern one thing from another—knowing red from green, hot from cold, and so on.

Perception is a very powerful mental process and a very important aspect of the spiritual path. When Ananda asked Sariputta why it was that people did not attain liberation, Sariputta told him that it was basically a problem of misperception. Because we perceive things wrongly, our minds end up in a confused turmoil that obscures the underlying peace of Nibbana. Perception conditions all our thoughts, words and deeds.

I remember one walking meditation where the person in front of me kept sniffing—every footstep, sniff, sniff. It was driving me bananas. I was doing my best to watch the irritation, but the thoughts kept pouring out. Why doesn't he just blow his nose? How could anybody be so rude, so inconsiderate?

After several minutes of torture, I saw his hand go into his pocket and pull out a tissue. I watched with bated breath, heard him blow his nose, and gave a deep sigh of relief. But before he'd even put the tissue away, there was another sniff.

To my own amazement, my response wasn't anger, but compassion.

It was only afterwards, on reflection, that I realised what I'd been reacting to was not the sound of sniffing, but my own presumption that this was a thoughtless, inconsiderate person who wasn't polite enough to blow his nose. The sniff following the nose blow showed me that whatever was causing him to sniff—perhaps he had asthma or an allergy—couldn't be fixed by simply blowing his nose. He wasn't a thoughtless, inconsiderate person after all.

It was such a joy to be relieved of all my fury. He sniffed away at every footstep till the end of the walking session, but it no longer bothered me at all.

Although the sounds were the same, they were heard differently. The pre-nose blow sniffs were heard within a tumult of indignation and anger. The post-nose blow ones were heard with relief and compassion. In fact, I grew fonder of him with every sniff, because he had taught me such a valuable Dharma lesson.

There's another point to draw from this incident. It was the fact that compassion arose spontaneously once I saw that the sniffing was due to illness. I'm using the word "I" here, but in fact the thinking mind that I identify with was totally surprised by compassion. It had expected an even deeper burst of anger. The thinking mind only slowly unravelled the knot and realised that anger was due to a misperception.

This is an example of intuitive intelligence. It's in direct contact with reality—in this case, the sound of sniffing. It experiences the sound without presumptions about rudeness and inconsideration, sees that the sniff doesn't connect directly to those angry thoughts. It doesn't need the convoluted logic of the thinking

mind, but understands things in a flash.

The insight that comes from intuitive intelligence is not just intellectual. When it sees clearly, the heart opens. Again, this is instantaneous. By comparison, my thinking mind took several seconds to work out why my attitude had changed from anger to compassion. Intuitive intelligence is primary. The thinking mind catches up slowly.

This illustrates why we are taking such pains to train ourselves to become aware of present experience rather than lost in thought. It's easy for us to dismiss detail like the sensations of the tummy rising as irrelevant, but they're providing the training ground for mindfulness. Just knowing those sensations is a peek beyond thought. And slowly we learn to trust in a wordless intelligence that is in direct contact with reality, not influenced by beliefs and presumptions. It's this level of intelligence that we need for insight into the true nature of reality.

We suffer because of our misperceptions. For example, we mistake what is transient as enduring, reliable. Our house, our body, our mobile phone—we expect them to be there when we need them. We're distraught when they break down. That's because we rely on our thinking mind far too much. At the level of direct experience, a million flashes of colour might pass through the eyes and we think, "that's my phone." The thought gives us a feeling of certainty about those million flashes of colour, which we might not even see anymore. But we still believe that my phone is there where I saw it a moment ago.

By training ourselves to experience life directly, moment to moment, we start to break down our preconceived notions of reality. It might be during a very ordinary experience like tracking the feet as we walk. We might feel the foot touch the floor and realise, "Gosh, this is totally different to how it felt a moment ago as it moved forward." At one level, nothing has changed—we know we're just walking. But the experience is now being seen through new eyes, with avid interest in each transient sensation. We feel totally alive, in touch with our bodies, with the environment.

This vibrant perspective may only last a few moments, but it's a genuine insight into the nature of reality. Each glimpse into a world without the filter of thoughts and conception deepens our faith in the practice. Slowly, we learn to see, as the Buddha did, that all is transitory, a magic show, and that it's a mistake to believe this magic show can deliver anything but sorrow while we try to hang on to what we like and get rid of what we dislike.

To promote these glimpses of the world unfettered by thoughts and ideas, Vipassana practice trains our attention away from the thinking mind and towards sensory experience. It's ironic that the noting word itself is a thought. We're using thought to bring us beyond thought.

Say we were building an observation tower. We want to be high up in the air, above all houses and trees and whatever else will get in the way of our vision. We want to be well off the ground, but we build our tower from materials we take from the ground, like wood and steel. Each time we want to go a bit further

up, we need more from the earth to build another step, another floor.

Similarly, the word "rising" directs attention away from all the thoughts we'd otherwise be getting lost in. But we're not interested in the noting word—that would be like going up to the top of the observation tower only to stare at the floor beneath us. The noting word just serves to direct attention. What we're really interested in are those sensations in the tummy. They are our direct contact with sensory reality.

When we're directing the mind using the noting word, we're at the first level of concentration in vipassana, called *vitaka* in Pali. We're gathering the mind. If we can keep doing that throughout the retreat, this is excellent practice.

You may notice that at some moments the mind gets fascinated with its present experience. We're absolutely riveted by an itching sensation, for example, really wanting to feel every little tingle. At that stage, we often forget to note. And that's fine—there's no need. The noting has already served its purpose. We're up in our observation tower, seeing clearly. We don't need to build any higher.

This is the second level of concentration, *vichara* in Pali. An analogy often used is a bee among flowers. The flowers are swaying around in a breeze, so the bee has to track the flower, move around with it. This is *vitaka*, where we're tracking the experience using noting words. There comes a moment when the bee gets close enough to land on the flower. Even though the flower is still bobbing around, she no longer has to make any effort. She's being carried around with the flower. This is *vichara*, the second level of concentration, where there is an immediate, direct contact with itchiness. It's absorbing all your attention.

Don't worry if the noting stops when you get riveted by the direct experience of reality—but you have to start it again as soon as you lose that level of concentration. Don't think of the loss as a problem or a failure. It's the same for the bee. Once she's sipped the nectar from the flower, she must fly off in search of another. Similarly, we spend a few moments sipping the nectar of direct experience. Everything is vivid, fascinating. Then our desire to understand things conceptually gets the better of us and we withdraw into our world of thought again. The itchy sensation may seem fuzzy, distant, confusing.

This is part of the natural process of learning about direct experience. So long as you don't give in to the desire to think your way to enlightenment, it's not a problem. It's just the way we learn. All you need to do is start making the effort to direct the mind again using the noting technique. Sometimes a note like "wondering, wondering" allows the mind the space it needs to take in the wonder of that little glimpse beyond thought. After a while, the itchiness or some other sensation in the body may call attention again.

A couple of common mistakes happen with the noting technique. Firstly, we can get into knots trying to find exactly the right word. Is this sensation itching or stinging? Is this a feeling of anger or frustration? As soon as you notice you're trying to find exactly the right word, stop fussing and just use the simplest word that comes to mind. In fact, the words "thinking" and "feeling" cover everything. The noting word is only to direct the mind towards sensations and feelings, away from thoughts. If it happens that you can't stop

trying to get the right word, try the noting word "thinking, thinking"—because that's what's happening. You are thinking about what word is best.

Another common mistake is to put too much emphasis on the note, as though we're shouting at ourselves. If this happens, if the note sounds loud and gets in the way of the sensations and feelings, then deliberately soften it. I've heard the note described as a feather brushing against whatever it's noting—a very light touch.

Sometimes the sound of the note just won't soften. We're pounding it out and can't stop. This is usually a sign of over-effort. We're so determined to do the practice well that we're getting all frenzied and uptight. If this happens, relax all effort for a while. Remind yourself that there's no exam coming up, that any new skill takes a lot of time and patience to learn. And if the moment you go back to noting that same frenzied pounding starts up, that means some underlying anxiety has surfaced. Perhaps you tend to be perfectionist and can't bear to think that you may be making any mistake.

This is actually to be welcomed. We want to allow our many underlying anxieties to surface in Vipassana—to learn to recognise them, to work with them mindfully. You can note "uptight" or "frustrated" or "trying to get it right" and allow yourself to feel that very experience. In time, this will show us how to live more patiently with perfectionism.

We can also listen out for any emotional tone in the note. Is it neutral? Perhaps it's tense with anger? If so, we can switch to noting "anger" instead, becoming curious about the experience of anger. Thus, the tone of the note can be a very helpful indicator of some buried emotion that we might otherwise miss.

But be careful. It's very easy to get curious about *why* we're angry rather than the experience of anger itself. To start thinking about the cause is to go down a rabbit hole. But the moment-to-moment experience can be a revelation. Sometimes anger simply disappears in a flash when we become aware of it. Sometimes we have to work at it for a long time before there's any relief. Like in my sniffing experience, I had been noting anger for a few minutes before that magic moment where the intuitive intelligence darted forth to make sense of it all.

This also illustrates how the intuitive intelligence is working away even in a bout of anger. It doesn't matter what we're aware of—awareness itself is the key. So there's no need to judge anger as wrong, judge greed as wrong, judge confusion or fear or anxiety as wrong. So long as we're maintaining awareness, our intuitive intelligence is at the ready, taking in what is happening, learning to see things as they really are.

The last thing I want to say about the noting technique is that it fosters ongoing mindfulness. This is because of its link with perception. If we perceive something, no matter how vaguely, we naturally want to perceive it more clearly.

Say you're looking out your window. You're vaguely aware of trees and bushes, but not really interested, in a bit of a daydream. Then a squirrel jumps from a branch, but all you see is a flash of motion. Suddenly

you're alert, looking intently at the garden, trying to figure out what it was that caught your eye. This shows the stimulating power of perception—it's woken you up from your vague daydream, brought you into present experience.

Now, that doesn't necessarily mean you are now being mindful as you scan the garden wondering what caught your eye. Mostly we are so busy looking *for* something that we forget to register that the basic experience is one of looking, of seeing. The same thing can happen in meditation. The noting gets us so interested in the detail of what we're seeing or hearing or sensing that we forget that the basic experience is one of seeing, hearing, sensing. For that we need to take a step back, stop trying to achieve anything at all—even to see or hear or sense things in detail.

We need to balance the stimulation provided by noting by focusing on whatever will help calm us down, become aware that we're seeing, hearing, sensing. For most people, the focus on the breath is naturally relaxing, but not for everyone. When I first started practising, a panicky feeling emerged as soon as I brought my attention to the abdomen. Bhante explained it as underlying fears that were manifesting on the breath. Once I heard that, I was delighted, as it gave me a ready way to work with fear, which I already knew was undermining my life.

But I also needed an alternative to the breath as a calming focus. In this case, the Mahasi recommends touching points. For example, focus attention on the buttocks touching the cushion, the hands on the lap. So if the belly moving up and down as you breathe feels agitating rather than neutral or pleasant, then see what physical sensations would bring a degree of calm—the hands, the feet, the weight of the body pressing on the cushion. Use the noting word "touching, touching" to draw attention away from thought and ground it in the body.

Another aspect of calming the mind is to maintain mindfulness outside the meditation hall. Being fully present during our daily activities helps the mind to settle. The noting technique is a great support here, as we so easily forget to be mindful outside of formal practice. If we get lazy and stop noting, then the mind quickly runs away into daydreams and thoughts. Although this feels a lot easier than noting, it's only a short-term feel-good, as the mind is getting stirred up by its habitual desires and delusion. And that isn't calming at all, as we find when we next try to meditate.

The Buddha likened the practice to swimming upstream against the tide of habitual desires. So no wonder it feels like hard work to keep noting during ordinary activities like walking to the dining room, going to the bathroom. Remember, we're swimming upstream, training the mind to focus on present experience. Another feature of the Mahasi technique that helps bring us into the here and now is to slow down. We walk slowly, open doors slowly, eat slowly, and so on.

The slow pace quietens the mind and develops respect for our present experience. Instead of rushing to the meditation hall, all eager to start meditation, we take an interest in walking slowly toward the meditation hall—already meditating, already sensitive to present experience.

Slowing down also helps to sharpen our attention. We notice many little sensations in each footstep, for example. In turn, this extra sensitivity helps our minds to get more interested, more steady, more present.

Both of these techniques—slowing down and noting—help us to strengthen a very powerful aspect of the Eightfold Path: conscious, intentional activity. Noting intentions is important because the intention behind any action sows a seed of kamma. If we act out of greed, we reap the fruits of greed, growing ever more selfish and needy. If we act out of anger, we reap the fruits of anger, always ready to blame, losing friends, growing more bitter and isolated.

Most of the time we don't notice the intention behind our actions. We go through our days on autopilot, and so we reap the fruits of mindlessness, growing ever more entranced within our mental bubble, ever less sensitive to the reality around us.

Here on retreat it's a time to start sensitising yourself to these many intentions that govern our future. Make them deliberate, considered. If we rush towards the meditation hall, we won't notice any intentionality at all. But if we slow down, we notice when we have to turn, or put on our shoes, or open a door. Each of these can then be done deliberately by first noting the intention: "intending to turn," then turning; "intending to walk," then walking; "intending to bend down," then bending down, and so on.

Here we're sowing the powerful kamma seed of mindfulness, which is the key to waking up and living well—conscious of our impact on the world, sensitive to others and to our environment.

The technique is a demanding one, and there might be times when you feel totally fed up and discouraged. At those times, it's good to remember that every spiritual path is going to bring us to the edge of our comfort zone. That's actually the point of deepest learning. So "totally fed up and discouraged" is the ideal setting for practice. If we can somehow persuade ourselves to keep at it, we will be doing ourselves a great favour in the long run. I do hope you succeed. And if you're really disheartened, come and find me. Talking the problem through will often help.

In summary, it's best to think of the retreat as a training course. You are learning Vipassanā, a meditation technique that involves a curious, open-minded scrutiny of present experience. This is the form of meditation developed by the Buddha, which led him to full awakening and his comprehensive picture of moral psychology that has survived 2,500 years of scrutiny.

Vipassanā trains our intuitive intelligence—an understanding of ourselves and the world we live in that is not limited by prejudices and opinions but emerges from direct experience. Intuitive intelligence works from the bottom up, you could say, from embodied awareness, making sense of life at the level of sensations and feelings and then feeding its understanding to the thinking mind. This intuitive intelligence can see through our stories and confusion, as in my sniffing example. Ultimately, it lets us follow the footsteps of the Buddha to full enlightenment.

The Mahasi technique is a particular form of Vipassanā training. It relies on attention to detail and

momentary concentration. Whatever calls our attention becomes the focus for meditation. This form is particularly suited to lay people, as it facilitates insight even within a relatively short timescale.

To practise according to the Mahasi method, we use a noting word to direct attention toward present experience. This sharpens perception, stimulates alertness, and supports mindful investigation. To balance these, we need to foster tranquillity, which is done by choosing a calming focus for attention—usually the breath at the abdomen or the feet while walking—by slowing down all activities to a snail's pace, and last but by no means least, maintaining mindfulness all day long. We also make an effort to note intentions, which fosters the choice to be mindful in daily activities rather than just lost in autopilot.

It's a challenging technique, so we need to be prepared to feel frustrated, confused, perhaps disheartened from time to time—but at other times, hopefully, inspired, maybe agog with wonder, and assured that this is a valuable practice, worth going through all the pain and torture that it takes to find the path to the end of suffering.

May your retreat be very beneficial. May it give you confidence that you too have the potential for full awakening, perfect peace and harmony.

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