Introduction to Mahāsī Method

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This morning I want to introduce the meditation method that we're doing. There are many different approaches to meditation, and what we're doing in this retreat is just one of them.

Broadly speaking, when the Buddha talked about meditation, he talked about it in terms of cultivating serenity and insight—*samatha* and *vipassanā*. Both of these are necessary. Serenity is the calming, unifying, receptive aspect of the mind, and insight is what we recognize as what's happening when the mind becomes calmed and receptive. Any kind of meditation method has both of these aspects, but different methods will emphasize one over the other. Some will emphasize serenity over insight; others will emphasize insight over serenity. There are a whole number of meditation techniques available, and they have different flavors, largely depending on what aspect they emphasize.

This approach emphasizes insight. It was developed by a Burmese monk, Mahāsī Sayādaw, in Burma. He was coming out of the nineteenth and twentieth century revival of Buddhism and Buddhist practice that you found throughout Southeast Asia in particular, but other parts of Asia as well.

If we get down to basics and ask what we mean by meditation, we could say that meditation is the systematic training of attention. Attention is the deliberate placing of awareness on its object, and awareness is the knowing of the object.

Working backwards: awareness is the knowing of the object. Awareness is simply knowing that something is happening or knowing that something is present. It's very basic. For example, visual awareness—right now, I know that you are present because I can see you. But awareness has depth, and so I can be faintly aware or very deeply aware or something in between. At the moment I know that you're here, but you exist as rather blurry blobs until I put on the glasses, whereupon suddenly you have definition and you're quite clear. I take them off again and you're still here, but you've changed. Put them on again and you've returned. So awareness has depth and shallowness. And if it has depth, it can be developed. I can become increasingly aware; I can train awareness.

Awareness is the knowing of the object, of the experience. Attention is the deliberate placing of awareness on a subject. Attention is about being deliberately aware. Right now I'm seeing, and I'm not making any particular effort to see—it's just happening. But if I was wondering whether a certain person turned up to do this retreat, then I'd have to start looking. I'd have to start scanning the room. Is she here? This is the difference between seeing and looking. Looking implies something deliberate.

As soon as you talk about doing something deliberately, you bring in method. How am I going to look? Am

I going to scan the room from left to right, or from right to left? From front to back, or back to front? Or am I going to just look at random? Suddenly I'm faced with choices about what do I do and how do I do it. This is inherent in the whole aspect of doing something deliberately. So if I'm going to cultivate awareness, I need to first of all work on attention. Attention is being deliberately aware. And if I'm going to develop attention, I need some kind of method, some way of going about doing it.

Meditation is the systematic training of attention. This particular approach is characterized by the division between primary object and secondary object. Any kind of meditation approach gives you something to be aware of, something to be attentive to. Probably the most common meditation object would be the breathing.

So we sit there and be aware of the breathing. Whatever the object is, there's always some kind of meditation object. There it is. Be aware of this. Pay attention to this.

We take something to be aware of and work with it systematically over a period of time so that we really get to know that particular meditation object. And in the process, we cultivate, we make the quality of attention stronger and stronger, and the awareness becomes stronger and stronger and deeper and deeper. We call this the primary object.

The function of the primary object is to sustain attention over time. If we're going to have a meditation object, we need something that is always available, and that does something, that we can track, that we can follow. This is why breathing is so popular. We're always breathing, so it's always available, and it's always doing something. There's something going on all the time. It's good for tracking and for sustaining attention over a period of time.

If we start doing this process, at some point we discover what we call distraction. At some point we realise we're not doing it anymore because the mind has gone somewhere else. Is everyone here familiar with distraction? It's a common experience. In fact, it's universal. And yet, we tend to think of it as the enemy. Often you get people thinking or saying, "Oh, I can't meditate because I get so many distractions." And if you think about it, you realise, well, wait a minute—everybody gets distractions. So what's the deal? What's going on?

What distinguishes Mahasi Sayadaw's approach is that he turns the distraction into a meditation object and calls it the secondary object. The primary object is what sustains attention over time. It's what we start with, it's what we keep coming back to. The secondary object is what grabs the attention from time to time. Another way of looking at it is that we choose the primary object. The secondary object is what chooses us.

We don't choose our distractions. They choose us. We're meditating away and then suddenly we realise our awareness is not on the meditation object—it's somewhere else. At that point we're faced with a choice. We could treat that something else as the enemy. We could see it as a signal of our failure as a

meditator. We've stuffed it. We can't do this. We'd better go back and resume the meditation. Or, we can recognise: right now, this is what I'm aware of. So right now, this is my meditation object.

It's this approach that distinguishes this particular method. It's based on a very simple fact: we can only be aware of what's happening now. It sounds obvious when you say it. We cannot be aware of what did happen in the past, and we cannot be aware of what will happen in the future. It sounds obvious, but we ignore this simple fact again and again and again.

So I suddenly realise that I'm in the middle of a distraction. And then what do I do? I immediately reject this experience. This experience is no good. It's a distraction. It's terrible. I've got to get back to the past, when it was working okay. But wait a minute—I can't be aware of the past. I can only be aware of the present.

And what's happening right now is the distraction, which means the only thing I can be aware of right now is the distraction. So if I'm to be aware, I must be aware of this, which is happening now. We incorporate distraction into the meditation practice, and we call it the secondary object. When we realize we're distracted, we deliberately turn the awareness to that experience and note it.

Now, in this approach to meditation, you often hear the verb "to note." We're constantly noting the object, noting the meditation object. To note has a certain ambiguity. It means, first of all, to be deliberately aware of, to pay attention to. So to note a distraction means to be deliberately aware of the distraction. Secondly, it also means to name the experience. Here we use a naming technique to help with the attention—we name what we're attending to.

If it's the breathing, Mahasi Sayadaw recommends the breathing sensed inside the body, particularly the lower body, in the abdominal area. He says that as we breathe in, there's movement and it's like the abdomen rises. As we breathe out, it's like the abdomen falls. So there's a rising and a falling.

People often get caught up with the specifics of the anatomy when they hear about this, but it's not about anatomy. Sometimes people say, "But it's not the abdomen, it's the diaphragm." Or, "It's not rising, it's kind of moving some other way." All of this is completely irrelevant. It's really movement sensed inside the body. We call the movement associated with the inhalation "rising," the movement associated with the exhalation "falling." What you call it is really irrelevant, but if we're going to talk about it, we have to call it something. So we call it rising, falling.

As you breathe in, you feel that movement and you name it: rising. As you breathe out, you feel the movement and you name it: falling. Rising, falling. Rising, falling.

The attention goes not to the name, but to what's being named. The name is about aim—it's like a finger pointing. Right now I'm looking at this. And now I'm looking at that. And now this is happening. And now it's that. The name directs awareness to what's actually happening. Don't get stuck on the name itself.

So I'm meditating away—rising, falling, rising, falling—and then suddenly I realize that I'm distracted. The two most common forms of distraction are physical pain and thinking, but there are others of course. Whatever it is, I put my awareness on it and name it.

Let's say it's the body, physical pain. That's relatively straightforward—it hurts somewhere. I put my awareness to it and make that pain the meditation object. And I name it as accurately and as objectively as I can. I could, if I wanted to make it simple, just say to myself, "Ah, pain." And that works, except that the word pain has a negative connotation in the mind. Ideally you want something more neutral, but also something more accurate.

What is it exactly? Is it hardness? Is it pressure? Is it sharpness? Is it heat? Is it numbness? Recognize what it is, then name it. That becomes the meditation object. Put your awareness there, then come back to the primary object. Acknowledge what is going on, acknowledge the distraction, and return to the primary object.

If it's thinking, the same principle applies. With thinking, don't be concerned about what you're thinking about. Usually we get completely caught up in the story, in the narrative. Here we're stepping out of the narrative and simply acknowledging the fact of thought and the feel of it. What does it feel like to be sitting here caught up in thought? Name that. Often we feel the thought going on up in the head area. So put the awareness there and acknowledge it. Thinking. Or distracted. Or lost it. Whatever name fits. Acknowledge it deliberately, then come back to the primary object.

So instead of just trying to stay with one thing all the time and failing, it becomes: stay with the primary object, then go out, check this, that, come back. Go out, come back, go out, come back. The primary object serves as the central reference point, while the secondary objects start to define a broader field of what's really going on.

When you start to incorporate distraction, it becomes important to recognize what we actually mean by distraction. For example, I could be distracted by sound. Right now, sitting here, I can hear sounds—the birds, some kind of faint mechanical hum in the background. Or is it the highway? Yes, road sounds. So I've got birds and road sounds. Let's say I'm meditating on the breathing and I can hear birds or road sounds. Is that distraction? Well, not necessarily.

If I'm paying attention to something, attention always has the structure of centre and periphery. If I'm looking at something—above the doorway there, there's a picture of the Pope—if I look at that picture, that picture is now at the centre of my visual awareness. But I can see other things around it: the wall, the payback underneath, the corridor and the larger picture at the end, the roof, the floor, this carpet here, the people around. There's centre and there's periphery—the field.

If my attention gets drawn somewhere else, the centre shifts. I can see a person at the centre of my field while also seeing the room, the floor, and sensing the Pope up there to the right. Shift the awareness again,

and the whole configuration rearranges. Wherever attention goes, there's centre—what I'm focused on—and all the activity happening around it.

So I can be with the breathing at the centre, while on the periphery there's physical sensation, maybe some thought going on in the background, sounds further out. That's not distraction. That's periphery. And as you meditate, you can find yourself becoming more and more sensitive to what's going on in the periphery.

One very common phenomenon—I don't think we experience it here—is the meditation hall clock. You start a retreat and notice there's a clock in the hall, but it's mercifully silent. After a day or two, suddenly it starts to tick. A day or two after that, it's ticking incredibly loudly. Of course, it's making the same sound all the time. But we're becoming more sensitive.

So it seems louder. You can find that the environment starts to press in. Things you didn't notice before, you start to really notice. They can really bug you. This is developing sensitivity as the mind becomes stronger through the meditation. It becomes stronger and more sensitive. You start to notice more.

Now, the fact that I'm with the breathing—the fact that I can hear sound, and even if that sound is bugging me—that's not necessarily distraction. Distraction is when I've left the breathing and I'm now obsessing over the sound. At that point, the centre of my awareness is with the sound and my reaction to the sound. Distraction is when the centre of awareness is taken from one thing to another.

The fact that I'm also thinking in the background is not distraction. Distraction is when I realize I'm completely caught up in thought and the breath has either disappeared or it's very faint in the background. That's distraction. And at that point, I acknowledge: ah, that's my meditation object now, because this is where the centre of my awareness is. It's in the thinking. It's not in the breath. And that's when I note "thinking," or, if it's sound, "hearing."

Again, if you're hearing, it doesn't matter what you hear. Just hearing itself. There's a Zen expression I heard fairly recently: "Hear the bark, not the dog." It sums it up beautifully. It's just the sound. Don't be bothered about what it's a sound of. It's just the sound. If it's sight, it's just seeing. Don't worry about what you're seeing. It's just seeing. And so on.

Does that make sense? Anybody totally confused?

When you say that at that point you say "aha, this is my meditation object now"—but actually it was, isn't it?

Yes. At that point: well, that was my meditation object then, noted, and then back to the primary object. So it's sort of a past thing that you've noted. It can be. With thought, for example, often you notice it and when you deliberately notice it, it goes. So then if you name it, you've named what just happened. With thought, that's a very useful exercise because you're training yourself to go there. Even if you get there a bit late, still you're training yourself: okay, that's going on, now come back.

Other times it sticks around. For example, if it's sound or physical sensation, it stays. And then you are really looking at something in the present.

And then what do you do about making a decision? You say this is my object now—the bird is chirping, it's sound...

Yes, I often get caught up in... it can get complicated. Why is it stuffing around there?

What about painful sound? Do you stay with those as well? In other words, do you find sound suitable as a meditation object?

If you find that you have a sensitivity towards sound, stay there. There's no need to rush away. And when you're ready, come back.

There's nothing particularly magical about the breath. So if you find that sound works as a meditation object, stay with it. And when you've had enough, go back to the breath.

Some people use sound as their primary object. The primary object is what sustains attention over time. It could be anything. Some people use thinking as their primary object—not many, but some do. Some people use sound, some people use body sensations, some people use breathing. You can use anything, so long as you can sustain attention over time with it.

One student shared: "I find that sound can be quite good if I'm getting distracted by something else. To hear something like a bird or whatever seems to bring things back to the present, and then it's easier to go back to the breath after that."

Yes, that sounds like a good approach. So again, use sound. Stay with it. Sound has great advantages as a meditation object. It's always there—there's always some sound. It too is always moving; sound is never still. And one of its advantages is that it has depth. You can go out and get into what the Buddha calls the space element with it. It has many advantages as a meditation object. So certainly stay there. As long as it's holding your attention, stay with it.

Emotion also works this way. When emotion comes up—and emotion is always complex, with different things happening—for example, emotion is usually accompanied by thinking. Then there's also the emotional feel, the quality of the emotion itself, what it actually feels like. Now that's more stable, and it's associated with the body. Often you notice that you carry your emotion in a particular part of the body, so it has location. You can put your awareness there, stay with it, and then name the emotion. Name the emotion—not the thinking, not the story.

If I'm angry, I'm angry with someone about something. That "someone" and that "something" is just the story, just the thinking. But what I'd be focusing on is simply anger, irritation. What does it feel like? Where is it? What does it do? If I feel sorrowful, I'm usually sorrowful about something. That "something" is in the story, in the narrative—forget it. Just focus on sorrow itself. What is it? What does it feel like?

Where is it?

Often, for example, I find that anger has a sharp, energetic quality to it. Sorrow often has a softer, moister quality. So you start to use the emotion itself as the meditation object. Again, until it doesn't hold you anymore, and then come back to the primary object.

So in sitting meditation, breathing sensed in the body is the primary object, and we call it the rising and falling. In walking meditation, it's the movement of the body—in particular the legs and the feet—and the contact, the touch on the ground.

Let's go through the walking practice. For walking meditation, you need a walking track, real or imaginary, that you can walk up and down. You start with standing, as we were doing this morning—feet shoulder-width apart, outside edges of the feet parallel, getting into that sense of balance. You can have the hands hanging by your side, hold them in front, hold them behind you, put them in pockets—whatever feels natural. Again, it has a lot to do with the shoulders, getting the shoulders right. Then you step out and start to walk, usually at a touch slower than normal.

Walking meditation speed is a factor. How fast do you walk? You can do fast walking meditation—it can be very effective, especially if you're feeling tired or dull after meals or whatever. If you do fast walking, you have a longer track. You can do slow walking; you get a shorter track. The advantage of slow walking is that you can develop a very strong concentration with it. So what I've emphasized here this morning is the slow walking, but you can do fast walking.

I recommend starting a touch slower than normal, not because there's anything wrong with normal pace, but because we tend to be most mindless in our normal pace. Usually we don't pay attention as we walk. We're busy thinking something. We're busy going somewhere. The thing about walking meditation is we're not going anywhere. So if you go a touch slower than normal, it makes it a bit more deliberate. You might start off like that.

Your meditation object is movement and touch. Movement of the body as you're cruising along, particularly of the legs and the feet, and touch—the impact of the foot on the ground. And you can name it: "walking, walking, walking." You get to the end of your track: "stopping, standing, turning, turning, standing, walking," and so on.

Once you settle into it, you start to slow down, and as you slow down, you become more focused on the feet and the contact. Then you can start to divide the walk into "left, right, left, right." As you become more settled into it, you can slow it down and make the awareness more precise. Start to divide each step into two: "lifting, placing. Lift, place. Lift, place."

You can be more detailed and divide it into three: "lifting, pushing, placing. Lift. Push. Place." You can divide it into four: "Lift. Push. Place. Touch"—as the weight shifts onto the foot. "Lift. Push. Place. Touch." And so on.

The slower you go, the more concentrated you become. It's very important not to try to go slow. Sometimes you see experienced meditators walking really slowly and you think, "I have to catch up with them. I've got to walk at least as slowly as they are." And you get this perverse race where the prize goes to the slowest. But it's got nothing to do with it. If you try to walk too slowly too soon, you just get really tight and agitated. If you notice that, start to speed up—even go faster than normal, get out into the garden, up and down. Allow yourself to slow down. You will slow down as you become more focused; it's a natural process. So just allow it to happen.

With the walking—slow walking in particular—posture is very important. You don't want to be too tight with it. Sometimes you see people walking like this. Do you see what's wrong? Yes, stiff as a board. Because I'm so focused down here that I'm cut off from the rest of the body. And there's a tension.

There's a mental tension, but it comes out through the whole body. So when you walk, you walk with the whole body. When we walk normally, there's a swing, there's the whole body walking. It's the same thing with the slow walking. So I'm standing, head upright. Step out with the left foot, and then lean in with the left shoulder. Step out with the right foot, and lean in with the right shoulder. So even though I'm walking very slowly, it's the whole body that's walking. And it's a much more comfortable thing to do. It's like the Theravada Buddhist equivalent of Tai Chi. You just flow with the whole body.

Walking meditation is not what we do to take a break between sits. It's a very important meditation practice. Whatever you do in the sitting, you can do in the walking—concentration, insight, whatever. The advantage of walking meditation is twofold. One is that the concentration you build up in walking lasts longer than that which you build up in sitting. So you can bring that concentration with you into the sitting, and it's like you turbocharge the sitting practice. Secondly, walking meditation is the halfway house, it's the hinge between the sitting on the one hand and the ordinary activities on the other.

When we're not doing sitting meditation or walking meditation, then we're doing something—meals, jobs, room, bathroom, and so on. This is the third aspect of the meditation, where you stay with whatever you're doing, and you stay in particular in the body. Normally we're lost in thought, and as soon as we get lost in thought, we're disconnected from the body. Drop the thinking, come back to the body. And the walking meditation is great training for that, to get into that habit of just staying with the body as it moves.

The gaze, as in the sitting, is just naturally directed down. So there's no particular length. It depends on height and so on and so forth. But it's just restfully dropped down, and then the eyes just glide along as you walk. They're not grabbing at anything, they're just gliding along. In the walking, of course, you tend to get distracted by seeing and hearing much more than in the sitting. So when that happens, note it. "Seeing." And come back.

There are different ways of doing walking. In this particular approach, the movement of the walk itself is the meditation object, so breathing would be a secondary object. But some people find that they naturally tune into the breath as they walk, and some people find that the steps start to come into tune with the

breathing. If any of that happens, let it happen. It can really help. But don't force anything. If it happens, it happens. If it doesn't, forget about it. Some people use breathing meditation in walking, using breath as the primary object. That's another way of doing it. But here we're more focused on movement and touch. There's always more than one way to do it.

In terms of the same place? Yes. Find yourself a spot and settle in there. If someone has the audacity to move in and grab your spot, it's not necessary to go up and hit them. These things happen. Find another spot.

One time Sayadaw U Janaka was teaching in Canberra and he gave a talk on walking meditation. He explained the whole thing and then asked, "Any questions?" Someone put up their hand and said, "How do you do walking meditation again?" Which is the meditation teacher's nightmare, when people ask questions like that. But his response was really good. Without hesitation he said, "You must walk to and fro, not here and there." So walking meditation isn't having a nice wander around, enjoying the view. It's choom, choom, choom, choom.

Any other questions before we proceed?

"Do you need to label all the time?"

No. The labelling is about aim. What can happen, particularly in walking, is that you find the awareness goes to the label and not to what's being labelled. If you notice that happening—and with walking it can be obvious—then drop the names. Just drop them and ignore them. Just walk. Just feel.

In sitting and in walking, the naming is meant to cultivate aim. Some people use it a lot. Some people just use it a little bit. It's very much up to the individual. Sometimes you find the naming useful, especially when, for example, the experience has changed in some way. You notice that it's changed, but you can't quite put your finger on it. Then you name it. "Ah, that's what it is." And then drop the name.

So you can use it in all sorts of ways. Don't get caught up with the names. The names help aim. If they get in the way, drop them.

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