

Mahāsi Sayādaw: Practical Vipassanā Meditation Instructions

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Retreat Talks · 18 min read

The following is a talk given by the Venerable Mahāsi Sayādaw, Ekā Mahāpaṇḍita Ūsopanā, given to his disciples on their induction into *vipassanā* meditation at Sāsanāyeta Meditation Centre, Yangon, Myanmar.

Practical Vipassanā Meditational Exercises

The practice of *vipassanā* or insight meditation is the effort made by the meditator to understand correctly the nature of the psychophysical phenomena taking place in his own body. Physical phenomena are the things or objects which one clearly perceives around one. The whole of one's body that one clearly perceives constitutes a group of material qualities, *rūpa*. Psychical or mental phenomena are acts of consciousness or awareness. These *nāma-rūpas* are clearly perceived to be happening whenever they are seen, heard, smelled, tasted, touched or thought of.

We must make ourselves aware of them, observing them and noting thus: seeing, seeing; hearing, hearing; smelling, smelling; tasting, tasting; touching, touching; or thinking, thinking. Every time one sees, hears, smells, tastes, touches or thinks, one should make a note of the fact. But in the beginning of one's practice one cannot make a note of every one of these happenings. One should, therefore, begin with noting those happenings which are conspicuous and easily perceivable.

With every act of breathing the abdomen rises and falls. This movement is always evident. This is the material quality known as *vāyodhātu*, the element of motion. One should begin by noting this movement, which may be done by the mind intently observing the abdomen. You will find the abdomen rising when you breathe in and falling when you breathe out. The rising should be noted mentally as "rising" and the falling as "falling."

If the movement is not evident by just noting it mentally, keep touching the abdomen with the palm of your hand. Do not alter the manner of your breathing. Neither slow it down nor make it faster. Do not breathe too vigorously either. You will tire if you change the manner of your breathing. Breathe steadily as usual and note the rising and falling of the abdomen as they occur. Note it mentally, not verbally. In *vipassanā* meditation, what you name or say doesn't matter. What really matters is to know or perceive.

While noting the rising of the abdomen, do so from the beginning to the end of the movement, just as if you are seeing with your eyes. Do the same with the falling movement. Note the rising movement in such

a way that your awareness of it is concurrent with the movement itself. The movement and the mental awareness of it should coincide in the same way as a stone thrown hits the target. Similarly with the falling movement.

Your mind may wander elsewhere while you are noting the abdominal movement. This must also be noted by mentally saying "wandering, wandering." When this has been noted once or twice, the mind stops wandering, in which case you go back to noting the rising and falling of the abdomen. If the mind reaches somewhere, note as "reaching, reaching," then go back to the rising and falling of the abdomen. If you imagine meeting somebody, note as "meeting, meeting," then back to the rising and falling. If you imagine meeting and talking to somebody, note as "talking, talking."

In short, whatever thought or reflection occurs should be noted. If you imagine, note as "imagining." If you think, "thinking." If you plan, "planning." If you perceive, "perceiving." If you reflect, "reflecting." If you feel happy, "happy." If you feel bored, "bored." If you feel glad, "glad." If you feel disheartened, "disheartened." Noting all these acts of consciousness is called *cittānupassanā*.

Because we fail to note these acts of consciousness, we tend to identify them with a person or individual. We tend to think that it is I who is imagining, thinking, planning, knowing or perceiving. We think that there is a person who from childhood onwards has been living and thinking. Actually no such person exists. There are instead only these continuing and successive acts of consciousness. That is why we have to know these acts of consciousness and know them for what they are. That is why we have to note each and every act of consciousness as it arises. When so noted, it tends to disappear. We then go back to noting the rising and falling of the abdomen.

When you have sat meditating for long, sensations of stiffness and heat will arise in your body. These are to be noted carefully too. Similarly, with sensations of pain and tiredness, all of these sensations are *dukkha vedanā*, feeling of unsatisfactoriness, noting them as *vedanānupassanā*. Failure or omission to note these sensations makes you think: "I am stiff, I am feeling hot, I am in pain. I was alright a moment ago, now I am uneasy with these unpleasant sensations." The identification of these sensations with the ego is mistaken. There is really no "I" involved, only a succession of one new unpleasant sensation after another. It is just like a continuous succession of new electrical impulses that light up electric lamps. Every time unpleasant contacts are encountered in the body, unpleasant sensations arise one after another. These sensations should be carefully and intently noted, whether they are sensations of stiffness, of heat, or of pain.

In the beginning of the yogi's meditational practice, these sensations may tend to increase and lead to a desire to change his posture. This desire should be noted, after which the yogi should go back to noting the sensation of stiffness, heat, etc. "Patience leads to Nibbāna," as the saying goes. This saying is most relevant in meditational effort. One must be patient in meditation. If one shifts or changes one's posture too often because one cannot be patient with the sensation of stiffness or heat that arises, *samādhi*, good

concentration, cannot develop. If *samādhi* cannot develop, insight cannot result, and there can be no attainment of *magga*, the path that leads to Nibbāna, *phala*, the fruit of that path, and Nibbāna.

That is why patience is needed in meditation. It is patience mostly with unpleasant sensations in the body, like stiffness, sensations of heat and pain, and other sensations that are hard to bear. One should not immediately give up one's meditation on the appearance of such sensations and change one's meditational posture. One should go on patiently, just noting as "stiffness, stiffness," or "heat, heat." Moderate sensations of these kinds will disappear if one goes on noting them patiently. When concentration is good and strong, even intense sensations tend to disappear. One then reverts to noting the rising and falling of the abdomen.

One will, of course, have to change one's posture if the sensations do not disappear, even after one has noted them for a long time, and if, on the other hand, they become unbearable. One should then begin noting as "wishing to change, wishing to change." If the arm rises, notice "rising, rising." If it moves, note "moving, moving." This change should be made gently. Note that it is "rising, rising," "moving, moving," and "touching, touching." If the body sways, "swaying, swaying." If the foot rises, "rising, rising." If it moves, "moving, moving." If it drops, "dropping, dropping." If there is no change but only static rest, go back to noting the rising and falling of the abdomen.

There must be no intermission in between, only continuity between a preceding act of noting and a succeeding one, between a preceding *samādhi* state of concentration and succeeding one, between the preceding act of intelligence and succeeding one. Only then will there be successive and ascending stages of maturity in the yogi's state of intelligence. *Magga* and *phala ñāṇa*, knowledge of the path and fruition, are attained only when there is this gathering momentum.

The meditative process is like that of producing fire by energetically and unremittingly rubbing two sticks of wood together so as to attain the necessary intensity of heat when the flame arises. In the same way, the noting in *vipassanā* meditation should be continual and unremitting, without any resting interval between acts of noting whatever phenomena may arise. For instance, if a sensation of itchiness intervenes and the yogi desires to scratch because it is hard to bear, both the sensations and the desire to get rid of it should be noted, without immediately getting rid of the sensations by scratching. If one goes on perseveringly noting thus, the itchiness may generally disappear, in which case one reverts to noting the rising and falling of the abdomen. If the itchiness does not disappear, one has, of course, to eliminate it by scratching. But first, the desire to do so should be noted. All the movements involved in the process of eliminating this sensation should be noted, especially the touching, pulling, pushing and scratching movements with an eventual reversion to noting the rising and falling of the abdomen.

Every time you make a change of posture, you begin with noting your intention or desire to make the change and go on to noting every movement closely, such as rising from the sitting posture, raising the arm, moving and stretching it. You should make the change at the same time as noting the movements

involved. As your body sways forward, note it. As you rise, the body becomes light and rises. Concentrating your mind on this, you should gently note as "rising, rising."

The yogi should behave as if he were a weak invalid. People in normal health rise easily and quickly or abruptly. Not so with feeble invalids who do so slowly and gently. The same is the case with people suffering from backache who rise gently lest the back hurt and cause pain. So also with meditating yogis. They have to make their changes of posture gradually and gently. Only then will mindfulness, concentration and insight be good. Begin, therefore, with gentle and gradual movements. When rising, the yogi must do so gently like an invalid, at the same time noting as "rising, rising."

Not only this. Though the eye sees, the yogi must act as if he does not see. Similarly, when the ear hears, while meditating, the yogi's concern is only to note. What he sees or hears are not his concern. So whatever strange or striking things he may see or hear, he must behave as if he does not see or hear them, merely noting carefully.

When making bodily movements, the yogi should do so gradually as if he were a weak invalid, gently moving the arms and legs, bending or stretching them, bending down the head and bringing it up. All these movements should be made gently. When rising from the sitting posture, he should do so gradually, noting as "rising, rising." When straightening up, standing, note as "standing, standing." When looking here and there, note as "looking, seeing."

When walking, note the steps, whether they are taken with the right or the left foot. You must be aware of all the successive movements involved, from the raising of the foot to the dropping of it. Note each step taken, whether with the right foot or the left foot. This is the manner of noting when one walks fast. It will be enough if you note this when walking fast and walking some distance.

When walking slowly or doing the *caṅkama* walk, walking up and down, three movements should be noted in each step: when the foot is raised, when it is pushed forward, and when it is dropped. Begin with noting the raising and dropping movements. One must be properly aware of the raising of the foot. Similarly, when the foot is dropped, one should be properly aware of the heavy falling of the foot. One must walk noting as "raising, dropping" with each step. This noting will become easier after about two days. Then go on to noting the three movements as described above, as "raising, pushing forward, dropping." In the beginning, it will suffice to note one or two movements only. Thus, "right step, left step," when walking fast, and "raising, dropping," when walking slowly.

When walking thus, if you want to sit down, note as "wanting to sit down, wanting to sit down." When actually sitting down, note concentratedly the heavy falling of your body. When you are seated, note the movements involved in arranging your legs and arms. When there are no such movements, but just a stillness, static rest of the body, note the rising and falling of the abdomen. While noting thus, if stiffness or beliefs and sensation of heat in any part of your body arise, go on to note them, then back to "rising, falling."

While noting thus, if a desire to lie down arises, note it and the movements of your legs and arms as you lie down: the raising of the arm, the moving of it, the resting of the elbow on the floor, the swaying of the body, the stretching of the legs, the listing of the body as one slowly prepares to lie down. All these movements should be noted. To note as you lie down thus is important. In the course of this movement, that is lying down, you can gain a distinctive knowledge, that is *magga ñāṇa* and *phala ñāṇa*, the knowledge of the path and its fruition. When *samādhi*, concentration, and *ñāṇa*, insight, are strong, the distinctive knowledge can come at any moment. It can come in a single bend of the arm or in a single stretch of the arm.

Thus it was that the Venerable Ānanda became an *arahant*. The Venerable Ānanda was trying strenuously to attain *arahantship* overnight on the eve of the first Buddhist council. He was practicing the whole night the form of *vipassanā* meditation known as *kāyagatāsati*, noting his steps, right and left, raising, pushing forward and dropping of the feet, noting, happening by happening, the mental desire to walk and the physical movement involved in walking. Although this went on till it was nearly dawn, he had not yet succeeded in attaining *arahantship*. Realising that he had practiced the walking meditation to excess and that in order to balance *samādhi*, concentration, and *vīriya*, effort, he should practice meditation in the lying posture for a while, he entered his chamber. He sat on the couch and then laid himself down. While doing so and noting "lying, lying," he attained *arahantship* in an instant.

The Venerable Ānanda was only a *sotāpanna*, that is, a stream-winner, or one who has attained the first stage of the path to Nibbāna, before he thus laid himself down. From *sotāpanna* he continued to meditate and reached *sakadāgāmi*, that is, the condition of the once-returner, or one who has attained the second stage on the path; *anāgāmi*, that is, the state of the non-returner or one who has attained the third stage on the path; and *arahantship*, that is, the condition of the noble one who has attained the last stage on the path. Reaching these three successive stages of the higher path took only a little while.

Just think of this example of the Venerable Ānanda's attainment of *arahantship*. Such attainment can come at any moment and need not take long. That is why the yogi should note with diligence all the time. He should not relax in his noting, thinking "this little lapse should not matter much."

All movements involved in lying down and arranging the arms and legs should be carefully and unremittingly noted. If there is no movement but only stillness of the body, go back to noting the rising and falling of the abdomen. Even when it is getting late and time for sleep, the yogi should not go to sleep yet, dropping his noting. A really serious and energetic yogi should practice mindfulness as if he were foregoing his sleep altogether. He should go on meditating till he falls asleep. If the meditation is good and has the upper hand, he will not fall asleep. If, on the other hand, drowsiness has the upper hand, he will fall asleep.

When he feels sleepy, he should note as "sleepy, sleepy." If his eyelids droop, "drooping." If they become heavy or leaden, "heavy." If the eyes become smarting, "smarting." Noting thus, the drowsiness may pass

and the eyes become clear again. The yogi should then note as "clear, clear," and go on to note the rising and falling of the abdomen.

However perseveringly the yogi may go on meditating, if real drowsiness intervenes, he does fall asleep. It is not difficult to fall asleep. In fact, it is easy. If you meditate in the lying posture, you gradually become drowsy and eventually fall asleep. That is why the beginner in meditation should not meditate too much in the lying position. He should meditate much more in the sitting and walking postures of the body. But as it grows late and becomes time for sleep, he should meditate in the lying position, noting the rising and falling movements of the abdomen. He will then naturally, automatically fall asleep.

The time he is asleep is the resting time for the yogi. But for the really serious yogi, he should limit his sleeping time to about four hours. This is the midnight period permitted by the Buddha. Four hours sleep is quite enough. If the beginner in meditation thinks that four hours sleep is not enough for health, he may extend it to five or six hours. Six hours sleep is clearly enough for health.

When a yogi awakens, he should at once resume noting. The yogi who is really bent on attaining *magga* and *phala nāṇa* should rest from the meditational effort only when he is asleep. At other times, in his waking movements, he should be noting continually and without rest. That is why, as soon as he awakens, he should note the awakening state of his mind as "awakening, awakening." If he cannot yet make himself aware of this, he should begin noting the rising and falling of the abdomen.

If he intends to get up from bed, he should note as "intending to get up, intending to get up." He should then go on to note the changing movements he makes as he arranges his arms and legs. When he raises his head and rises, note as "rising, rising." When he is seated, note as "sitting, sitting." If he makes any changing movements as he arranges his arms and legs, all of these movements should also be noted. If there are no such changes, but only sitting quietly, he should revert to noting the rising and falling movements of the abdomen.

One should also note when one washes one's face and when one takes a bath. As the movements involved in these acts are rather quick, as many of them should be noted as possible. There are then acts of dressing, of tidying up the bed, of opening and closing the door. All these should also be noted as closely as possible.

When the yogi has his meal and looks at the meal table, he should note "looking, seeing, looking, seeing." When he extends his arm towards the food, touches it, collects and arranges it, handles it and brings it to the mouth, bends his head and puts the morsel of food into his mouth, drops his arm and raises his head again, all these movements should be duly noted. This way of noting is in accordance with the Burmese way of taking a meal. Those who use fork and spoon or chopsticks should note the movements in an appropriate manner.

When he chews the food, he should note "chewing, chewing." When he comes to know the taste of the

food, he should note "knowing, knowing." As he relishes the food and swallows it, as the food goes down his throat, he should note all these happenings. This is how the yogi should note as he takes one morsel after another of his food. As he takes his soup, all the movements involved, such as extending of the arm, handling of the spoon, and scooping with it, and so on, all these should be noted.

To note thus at meal times is rather difficult, as there are so many things to observe and note. The beginning yogi is likely to miss several things which he should note, but he should resolve to note all. He cannot, of course, help it if he overlooks and misses some, but as his *samādhi*, concentration, becomes strong, he will be able to note closely all these happenings.

I have mentioned so many things for the yogi to note. But to summarise, there are only a few things to note. When walking fast, note "right step, left step." "Raising, dropping," when walking slowly. When sitting quietly, just note the rising and falling of the abdomen. Note the same when you are lying, if there is nothing particular to note. While noting thus, if the mind wanders, note the acts of consciousness that arise, then back to the rising and falling of the abdomen. Note also the sensation of stiffness, pain and ache and itchiness as they arise, then back to the rising and falling of the abdomen. Note also as they arise the bending and stretching and moving of the limbs, bending and raising of the head, swaying and straightening of the body, then back to the rising and falling of the abdomen.

As the yogi goes on noting thus, he will be able to note more and more of these happenings. In the beginning, as his mind wanders here and there, the yogi may miss noting many things, but he should not be disheartened. Every beginner in meditation encounters the same difficulty, but as he becomes more practiced, he becomes aware of every act of mind wandering till eventually the mind does not wander anymore. The mind is then riveted on the object of its attention, the act of mindfulness becoming almost simultaneous with the object of its attention, such as the rising and falling of the abdomen. In other words, the rising of the abdomen becomes concurrent with the act of noting it and similarly with the falling of the abdomen.

The physical object of attention and the mental act of noting are occurring as a pair. There is in this occurrence no person or individual involved. Only this physical object of attention and the mental act of noting occurring as a pair. The yogi will in time actually and personally experience these occurrences. While noting the rising and falling of the abdomen, he will come to distinguish the rising of the abdomen as physical phenomena and the mental act of noting of it as psychical phenomena. Similarly with the falling of the abdomen. Thus, the yogi will distinctly come to realise the simultaneous occurrence in pairs of these psychophysical phenomena.

Thus, with every act of noting, the yogi will come to know for himself clearly that there are only this material quality which is the object of awareness or attention and the mental quality that makes a note of it. This discriminating knowledge is called *nāma-rūpa pariccheda ñāṇa*, the beginning of the *vipassanā ñāṇa*. It is important to gain this knowledge correctly. This will be succeeded, as the yogi goes on, by a

knowledge that distinguishes between the cause and its effect, which knowledge is called *paccayapariggaha ñāṇa*.

As the yogi goes on noting, he will see for himself that what arises passes away after a short while. Ordinary people assume that both the material and the mental phenomena go on lasting throughout life, that is, from youth to adulthood. In fact, that is not so. There is no phenomenon that lasts forever. All phenomena arise and pass away so rapidly that they do not last even for the twinkling of an eye. The yogi will come to know this for himself as he goes on noting. He will then become convinced of the impermanency of all such phenomena. Such conviction is called *aniccānupassanā ñāṇa*.

This knowledge will be succeeded by *dukkhānupassanā ñāṇa*, which realises that all this impermanency is suffering. The yogi is also likely to encounter all kinds of hardship in his body, which is just an aggregate of sufferings. This is also *dukkhānupassanā ñāṇa*.

Next, the yogi will become convinced that all these psychophysical phenomena are occurring of their own accord, following nobody's will and subject to nobody's control. They constitute no individual or ego entity. This realisation is *anattānupassanā ñāṇa*.

When, as he goes on meditating, the yogi comes to realise firmly that all these phenomena are *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā*, he will attain Nibbāna. All the former Buddhas, *arahants* and *ariyas* realised Nibbāna following this very path. All meditating yogis should recognise that they themselves are now on this *satipaṭṭhāna* path in fulfilment of their wish for attainment of *magga ñāṇa*, knowledge of the path, *phala ñāṇa*, knowledge of the fruition of the path, and *nibbāna dhamma*, and following the ripening of their *pāramī*, perfection of virtue.

They should feel glad at this and at the prospect of experiencing the noble kind of *samādhi*, tranquillity of mind, brought about by concentration and *ñāṇa*, supramundane knowledge or wisdom, experienced by the Buddhas, *arahants* and *ariyas*, and which they themselves have never experienced before. It will not be long before they will experience for themselves the *magga ñāṇa* and *nibbāna dhamma* experienced by the Buddhas, *arahants* and *ariyas*. As a matter of fact, these may be experienced in the space of a month or of 20 or 15 days of the meditational practice. Those whose *pāramī* is exceptional may experience these dhammas even within seven days.

The yogi should therefore rest content in the faith that he will attain these dhammas in the time specified above, that he will be freed of *sakkāyadiṭṭhi*, ego-belief, and *vicikicchā*, doubt or uncertainty, and saved from the danger of rebirth in the lower worlds. He should go on with his meditational practice in this faith.

May you all be able to practice meditation well and quickly attain that Nibbāna which the Buddhas, *arahants* and *ariyas* have experienced. *Sādhu, sādhu, sādhu*.

