

Surely meditation shouldn't feel like this?

Bhante Bodhidharma · Tips of the Day · 6 min read

When I started meditating it was with the Sōtō Zen tradition which has no particular focus for meditation — it is described as ‘just sitting’. I enjoyed its very open form, found it easy to relax, let the world go by as I sat still. When our group switched to Theravada and Mahasi practice my troubles started. As I brought attention to the breath, noting ‘rising, rising’ during the in-breath, ‘falling, falling’ during the out-breath, I would feel little twinges of panic. What was the matter? Surely meditation shouldn’t feel like this? I could think of myself as reasonably capable during daily life, but during Mahasi meditation I became a bag of nerves. When I eventually got around to telling Bhante Bodhidharma of my problem, his answer changed everything: ‘Instead of thinking of this as a problem, your job is to turn around your attitude and think of it as an opportunity to get to know whatever underlying fears are manifesting on the breath.’ What a relief! By then I was in the throes of a mid-life crisis, knowing my life was undermined by fear, but with no inkling of how to approach the emotional turmoil. It was wonderful to realise that by paying attention to the breath, I had access to my underlying fears and could start to befriend myself through them. The panic persisted, but now it was welcome in all its forms. In time, mindfulness of breath became a refuge, a source of strength. The Buddha’s instructions for mindfulness of breathing includes noticing whether the breath is long (slow, deep) or short (rapid, shallow). In daily life the breath’s pace varies with physical activity, but while we’re sitting in meditation it tracks our emotional state. We breathe slowly when relaxed; quickly when any emotion is expressing its energy through the body. We can identify so strongly with our emotions that we are not aware of them. Angry thoughts drive more angry thoughts. Our full attention is on who said what and why they shouldn’t have... But if we remember this exercise, we may notice that the breath is faster than normal. Then we see the cascade of angry thoughts objectively, realise that we’re experiencing a bout of anger. Just knowing this has a powerful impact. We might still feel angry, but we will also have the benefit of some objectivity on the matter. If we are panting with fear, we might be tempted to calm ourselves by taking a few slow, deep breaths. But this is to suppress, to persuade ourselves there is nothing to fear. Which is true, but it’s a truth we need to re-learn from scratch each time fear emerges in meditation. That’s how we work our way through fears that are an inevitable part and parcel of delusion. Not interfering, letting the jerky, panicky breath continue till it slows and calms of its own accord - this allows fear to be felt, expressed and released. Each time this happens we grow less afraid of fear, more willing to step outside of our emotional comfort zone. The non-interfering approach is similarly therapeutic for all emotions – lust, anger, guilt, shame, confusion. Thus the practice of mindful breathing gives us a means of coping with emotional outbursts that can otherwise ruin relationships, undermine our self-esteem, lead to cynicism or isolation. All the while we’re assimilating the first noble truth - that this world cannot satisfy our needs and wishes. As that sinks in, we grow ever more curious

about and sensitive to whatever keeps us going, motivates us to continue searching for the wisdom, joy and peace we can never fully pin down. Surely meditation shouldn't feel like this??? On the contrary, however it feels right now is perfect for teaching us how to develop self acceptance and unconditional love, learn the Dhamma of liberation. Full Awareness

Noirin Sheahan

The Buddha asks us to act in 'full awareness' when we go about the ordinary tasks of daily life. The first exercise he prescribes is full awareness while going forth and returning. Say we are walking to our workplace. As we note the sensations of walking in the legs and feet, attention is drawn into the present moment. For full awareness the context must also be born in mind: we are going to work. Full awareness requires a broad understanding of our actions alongside the stream of sensations that accompanies them. Instead of the detailed note we use for Mahasi practice, broad-brush phrases work better here. On our way to work we can note: 'Going to work... going to work.' Sounds obvious but how easy it is to forget the bigger picture. We go to work on autopilot, so familiar with every step of the journey that we can devote our time to worrying or daydreaming. The note 'going to work' lifts us out of the doldrums, lets us feel more purposeful, helps us appreciate our surroundings. Reminding ourselves of the broader context can expose hidden emotions. We might feel a deep reluctance to note 'going to work', for example, but feel happy later in the days as we retrace our steps, noting 'going home'. This highlights a negative attitude to work. If we do not make the note, that negativity might sneak out as carelessness, not bothering to finish tasks properly, alienating colleagues and making the situation worse. However, if we note 'going to work' the weariness or anxiety or depression we associate with work comes to the fore. Although it might feel worse than heading for the job on autopilot, bearing with the feelings means the negativity can be acknowledged. Acknowledging suffering is a form of self-care and has a very beneficial impact psychologically. We are much less likely to act from negativity once we're aware of it. We might even start noting satisfaction in completing a task, finding pleasure in cooperating with colleagues. Imperceptibly, perhaps, the situation starts to improve. Even for less emotionally charged activities, the experience of going forward can differ from returning. Say I have to nip down to the shop for groceries. I may be bright and purposeful at the outset. My step is light and I look with interest at the neighbour's gardens. Coming home my steps might be more plodding, my eyes downcast. What I am seeing here is the dukkha of transience. Each new activity offers a glimmer of hope that this world can make us happy. But when the choice between carrots and broccoli, biscuits and cake have been made and all the money spent, it becomes clear that my shopping spree has not delivered the goods I was secretly hoping for. Of course the pattern can vary. For instance, the prospect of meeting friends may find us brighter on the way home than heading out. Worthwhile noting as it helps us appreciate our friends when we see how they lift our mood. The second task the Buddha prescribes is to be fully aware when looking ahead and looking away. Say we are returning from the shops on autopilot, rehashing our problems, eyes vaguely scanning the pavement. Now and again, we look up and ahead in a semi-automatic check of the broader environment. If we have primed ourselves to see 'looking ahead' as worth registering, that automatic check might awaken mindfulness. Looking ahead also reminds us of our destination, so we can return to full awareness instead of being lost in negativity. While looking ahead is often stimulating, looking away often

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carries subtle dukkha. A friend practising mindfulness of speech found that when reacting against what another person was saying, her eyes turned slightly aside. Once she had detected the pattern, she was able to use this as a 'wake-up' call to notice aversion. Her communication could then be much more honest and straightforward. Full awareness does not mean self-awareness. Say we are preparing dinner. We may be cutting carrots, totally absorbed in the task. Then suddenly we become aware of 'me' who is cutting carrots and worry that we weren't being mindful because we hadn't been self-aware. That's a mistake. If we hadn't been lost in thought while cutting carrots, then we were being mindful. The sense of self comes and goes and can disappear altogether when we are fully absorbed in an activity. Following the Buddha's exercises for Full Awareness supports mindfulness throughout all aspects of daily life. Instead of taking ourselves and our situation for granted we wake up to the extraordinary treasure we call awareness.

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