

MEDITATION: The Practice

**By Bhante Henepola Gunaratana from
*Mindfulness in Plain English***

Although there are many subjects of meditation, we strongly recommend you start with focusing your total undivided attention on your breathing to gain some degree of shallow concentration. Remember that you are not practicing a deep absorption or pure concentration technique. You are practicing mindfulness for which you need only a certain degree of shallow concentration. You want to cultivate mindfulness culminating in insight and wisdom to realize the truth as it is. You want to know the working of your body-mind complex exactly as it is. You want to get rid of all psychological annoyance to make your life really peaceful and happy.

The mind cannot be purified without seeing things as they really are. "Seeing things as they really are" is such a heavily loaded and ambiguous phrase. Many beginning meditators wonder what we mean, for anyone who has clear eyesight can see objects as they are.

When we use this phrase in reference to insight gained from our meditation, what we mean is not seeing things superficially with our regular eyes, but seeing things with wisdom as they are in themselves. Seeing with wisdom means seeing things within the framework of our body/mind complex without prejudices or biases springing from our greed, hatred

and delusion. Ordinarily when we watch the working of our mind/body complex, we tend to hide or ignore things which are not pleasant to us and to hold onto things which are pleasant. This is because our minds are generally influenced by our desires, resentment and delusion. Our ego, self or opinions get in our way and color our judgment.

When we mindfully watch our bodily sensations, we should not confuse them with mental formations, for bodily sensations can arise without anything to do with the mind. For instance, we sit comfortably. After a while, there can arise some uncomfortable feeling on our back or in our legs. Our mind immediately experiences that discomfort and forms numerous thoughts around the feeling. At that point, without trying to confuse the feeling with the mental formations, we should isolate the feeling as feeling and watch it mindfully. Feeling is one of the seven universal mental factors. The other six are contact, perception, mental formations, concentration, life force, and awareness.

At another time, we may have a certain emotion such as, resentment, fear, or lust. Then we should watch the emotion exactly as it is without trying to confuse it with anything else. When we bundle our form, feeling, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness up into one and try to watch all of them as feeling, we get confused, as we will not be able to see the source of feeling. If we simply dwell upon the feeling alone, ignoring other mental

factors, our realization of truth becomes very difficult. We want to gain the insight into the experience of impermanence to overcome our resentment; our deeper knowledge of unhappiness overcomes our greed which causes our unhappiness; our realization of selflessness overcomes ignorance arising from the notion of self.

We should see the mind and body separately first. Having comprehended them separately, we should see their essential interconnectedness. As our insight becomes sharp, we become more and more aware of the fact that all the aggregates are cooperating to work together. None can exist without the other.

We can see the real meaning of the famous metaphor of the blind man who has a healthy body to walk and the disabled person who has very good eyes to see. Neither of them alone can do much for himself. But when the disabled person climbs on the shoulders of the blind man, together they can travel and achieve their goals easily. Similarly, the body alone can do nothing for itself. It is like a log unable to move or do anything by itself except to become a subject of impermanence, decay and death. The mind itself can do nothing without the support of the body. When we mindfully watch both body and mind, we can see how many wonderful things they do together.

As long as we are sitting in one place we may gain some degree of mindfulness. Going to a retreat and spending several days or several months watching

our feelings, perceptions, countless thoughts and various states of consciousness may make us eventually calm and peaceful. Normally we do not have that much time to spend in one place meditating all the time. Therefore, we should find a way to apply our mindfulness to our daily life in order for us to be able to handle daily unforeseeable eventualities.

What we face every day is unpredictable. Things happen due to multiple causes and conditions, as we are living in a conditional and impermanent world. Mindfulness is our emergency kit, readily available at our service at any time. When we face a situation where we feel indignation, if we mindfully investigate our own mind, we will discover bitter truths in ourselves. That is we are selfish; we are egocentric; we are attached to our ego; we hold on to our opinions; we think we are right and everybody else is wrong; we are prejudices; we are biased; and at the bottom of all of this, we do not really love ourselves. This discovery, though bitter, is a most rewarding experience. And in the long run, this discovery delivers us from deeply rooted psychological and spiritual suffering.

Mindfulness practice is the practice of one hundred percent honesty with ourselves. When we watch our own mind and body, we notice certain things that are unpleasant to realize. As we do not like them, we try to reject them. What are the things we do not like? We do not like to detach ourselves from loved ones

or to live with unloved ones. We include not only people, places and material things into our likes and dislikes, but opinions, ideas, beliefs and decisions as well. We do not like what naturally happens to us. We do not like, for instance, growing old, becoming sick, becoming weak or showing our age, for we have a great desire to preserve our appearance. We do not like someone pointing out our faults, for we take great pride in ourselves. We do not like someone to be wiser than we are, for we are deluded about ourselves. These are but a few examples of our personal experience of greed, hatred and ignorance.

When greed, hatred and ignorance reveal themselves in our daily lives, we use our mindfulness to track them down and comprehend their roots. The root of each of these mental states is within ourselves. If we do not, for instance, have the root of hatred, nobody can make us angry, for it is the root of our anger that reacts to somebody's actions or words or behavior.

If we are mindful, we will diligently use our wisdom to look into our own mind. If we do not have hatred in us we will not be concerned when someone points out our shortcomings. Rather, we will be thankful to the person who draws our attention to our faults. We have to be extremely wise and mindful to thank the person who explicates our faults so we will be able to tread the upward path toward improving ourselves. We all have blind spots. The other person is our

mirror for us to see our faults with wisdom. We should consider the person who shows our shortcomings as one who excavates a hidden treasure in us that we were unaware of. It is by knowing the existence of our deficiencies that we can improve ourselves. Improving ourselves is the unswerving path to the perfection which is our goal in life. Only by overcoming weaknesses can we cultivate noble qualities hidden deep down in our subconscious mind. Before we try to surmount our defects, we should what they are.

If we are sick, we must find out the cause of our sickness. Only then can we get treatment. If we pretend that we do not have sickness even though we are suffering, we will never get treatment. Similarly, if we think that we don't have these faults, we will never clear our spiritual path. If we are blind to our own flaws, we need someone to point them out to us.

When they point out our faults, we should be grateful to them like the Venerable Sariputta, who said: "Even if a seven-year-old novice monk points out my mistakes, I will accept them with utmost respect for him." Ven. Sariputta was an Arahant who was one hundred percent mindful and had no fault in him. But since he did not have any pride, he was able to maintain this position. Although we are not Arahants, we should determine to emulate his example, for our goal in life also is to attain what he attained.

Of course the person pointing out our mistakes himself may not be totally free from defects, but he can see our problems as we can see his faults, which he does not notice until we point them out to him.

Both pointing out shortcomings and responding to them should be done mindfully. If someone becomes unmindful in indicating faults and uses unkind and harsh language, he might do more harm than good to himself as well as to the person whose shortcomings he points out. One who speaks with resentment cannot be mindful and is unable to express himself clearly. One who feels hurt while listening to harsh language may lose his mindfulness and not hear what the other person is really saying. We should speak mindfully and listen mindfully to be benefitted by talking and listening. When we listen and talk mindfully, our minds are free from greed, selfishness, hatred and delusion.

Our Goal

As meditators, we all must have a goal, for if we do not have a goal, we will simply be groping in the dark blindly following somebody's instructions on meditation. There must certainly be a goal for whatever we do consciously and willingly. It is not the Vipassana meditator's goal to become enlightened before other people or to have more power or to make more profit than others, for mindfulness meditators are not in competition with each other.

Our goal is to reach the perfection of all the noble and wholesome qualities latent in our subconscious mind. This goal has five elements to it: Purification of mind, overcoming sorrow and lamentation, overcoming pain and grief, treading the right path leading to attainment of eternal peace, and attaining happiness by following that path. Keeping this fivefold goal in mind, we can advance with hope and confidence to reach the goal.

Practice

Once you sit, do not change the position again until the end of the time you determined at the beginning. Suppose you change your original position because it is uncomfortable, and assume another position. What happens after a while is that the new position becomes uncomfortable. Then you want another and after a while, it too becomes uncomfortable. So you may go on shifting, moving, changing one position to another the whole time you are on your meditation cushion and you may not gain a deep and meaningful level of concentration. Therefore, do not change your original position, no matter how painful it is.

To avoid changing your position, determine at the beginning of meditation how long you are going to meditate. If you have never meditated before, sit motionless not longer than twenty minutes. As you repeat your practice, you can increase your sitting time. The length of sitting depends on how much time you have for sitting meditation practice and

how long you can sit without excruciating pain.

We should not have a time schedule to attain the goal, for our attainment depends on how we progress in our practice based on our understanding and development of our spiritual faculties. We must work diligently and mindfully towards the goal without setting any particular time schedule to reach it. When we are ready, we get there. All we have to do is to prepare ourselves for that attainment.

After sitting motionless, close your eyes. Our mind is analogous to a cup of muddy water. The longer you keep a cup of muddy water still, the more mud settles down and the water will be seen clearly. Similarly, if you keep quiet without moving your body, focusing your entire undivided attention on the subject of your meditation, your mind settles down and begins to experience the bliss of meditation.

To prepare for this attainment, we should keep our mind in the present moment. The present moment is changing so fast that the casual observer does not seem to notice its existence at all. Every moment is a moment of events and no moment passes by without noticing events taking place in that moment. Therefore, the moment we try to pay bare attention to is the present moment. Our mind goes through a series of events like a series of pictures passing through a projector. Some of these pictures are coming from our past experiences and others are our imaginations of things that we plan to do in the future.

The mind can never be focused without a mental object. Therefore we must give our mind an object which is readily available every present moment. What is present every moment is our breath. The mind does not have to make a great effort to find the breath, for every moment the breath is flowing in and out through our nostrils. As our practice of insight meditation is taking place every waking moment, our mind finds it very easy to focus itself on the breath, for it is more conspicuous and constant than any other object.

After sitting in the manner explained earlier and having shared your loving-kindness with everybody, take three deep breaths. After taking three deep breaths, breathe normally, letting your breath flow in and out freely, effortlessly and begin focusing your attention on the rims of your nostrils. Simply notice the feeling of breath going in and out. When one inhalation is complete and before exhaling begins, there is a brief pause. Notice it and notice the beginning of exhaling. When the exhalation is complete, there is another brief pause before inhaling begins. Notice this brief pause, too. This means that there are two brief pauses of breath--one at the end of inhaling, and the other at the end of exhaling. The two pauses occur in such a brief moment you may not be aware of their occurrence. But when you are mindful, you can notice them.

Do not verbalize or conceptualize anything. Simply notice the in-coming and out-going breath without

saying, "I breathe in", or "I breathe out." When you focus your attention on the breath ignore any thought, memory, sound, smell, taste, etc., and focus your attention exclusively on the breath, nothing else.

At the beginning, both the inhalations and exhalations are short because the body and mind are not calm and relaxed. Notice the feeling of that short inhaling and short exhaling as they occur without saying "short inhaling" or "short exhaling". As you remain noticing the feeling of short inhaling and short exhaling, your body and mind become relatively calm. Then your breath becomes long. Notice the feeling of that long breath as it is without saying "Long breath". Then notice the entire breathing process from the beginning to the end. Subsequently the breath becomes subtle, and the mind and body become calmer than before. Notice this calm and peaceful feeling of your breathing.

What To Do When the Mind Wanders Away?

In spite of your concerted effort to keep the mind on your breathing, the mind may wander away. It may go to past experiences and suddenly you may find yourself remembering places you've visited, people you met, friends not seen for a long time, a book you read long ago, the taste of food you ate yesterday, and so on. As soon as you notice that your mind is no longer on your breath, mindfully bring it back to it and anchor it there. However, in a few moments you may be caught up again thinking how

to pay your bills, to make a telephone call to you friend, write a letter to someone, do your laundry, buy your groceries, go to a party, plan your next vacation, and so forth. As soon as you notice that your mind is not on your subject, bring it back mindfully. Following are some suggestions to help you gain the concentration necessary for the practice of mindfulness.

1. Counting

In a situation like this, counting may help. The purpose of counting is simply to focus the mind on the breath. Once your mind is focused on the breath, give up counting. This is a device for gaining concentration. There are numerous ways of counting. Any counting should be done mentally. Do not make any sound when you count. Following are some of the ways of counting.

a) While breathing in count "one, one, one, one..." until the lungs are full of fresh air. While breathing out count "two, two, two, two..." until the lungs are empty of fresh air. Then while breathing in again count "three, three, three, three..." until the lungs are full again and while breathing out count again "four, four, four, four..." until the lungs are empty of fresh air. Count up to ten and repeat as many times as necessary to keep the mind focused on the breath.

b) The second method of counting is counting rapidly up to ten. While counting "one, two, three, four, five,

six, seven, eight, nine and ten" breathe in and again while counting "one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine and ten" breathe out. This means in one inhaling you should count up to ten and in one exhaling you should count up to ten. Repeat this way of counting as many times as necessary to focus the mind on the breath.

c) The third method of counting is to counting secession up to ten. At this time count "one, two, three, four, five" (only up to five) while inhaling and then count "one, two, three, four, five, six" (up to six) while exhaling. Again count "one, two, three, four fire, six seven" (only up to seven) while inhaling. Then count "one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight" while exhaling. Count up to nine while inhaling and count up to ten while exhaling. Repeat this way of counting as many times as necessary to focus the mind on the breath.

d) The fourth method is to take a long breath. When the lungs are full, mentally count "one" and breath out completely until the lungs are empty of fresh air. Then count mentally "two". Take a long breath again and count "three" and breath completely out as before. When the lungs are empty of fresh air, count mentally "four". Count your breath in this manner up to ten. Then count backward from ten to one. Count again from one to ten and then ten to one.

e) The fifth method is to join inhaling and exhaling. When the lungs are empty of fresh air, count mentally "one". This time you should count both

inhalation and exhalation as one. Again inhale, exhale, and mentally count "two". This way of counting should be done only up to five and repeated from five to one. Repeat this method until you breathing becomes refined and quiet.

Remember that you are not supposed to continue your counting all the time. As soon as your mind is locked at the nostrils-tip where the inhaling breath and exhaling breath touch and begin to feel that you breathing is so refined and quiet that you cannot notice inhalation and exhalation separately, you should give up counting. Counting is used only to train the mind to concentrate on one point.

2. Connecting

After inhaling do not wait to notice the brief pause before exhaling but connect the inhaling and exhaling, so you can notice both inhaling and exhaling as one continuous breath.

3. Fixing

After joining inhaling and exhaling, fix your mind on the point where you feel you inhaling and exhaling breath touching. Inhale and exhale as on single breath moving in and out touching or rubbing the rims of your nostrils.

4. Focus your mind like a carpenter

A carpenter draws a straight line on a board and that

he wants to cut. Then he cuts the board with his handsaw along the straight line he drew. He does not look at the teeth of his saw as they move in and out of the board. Rather he focuses his entire attention on the line he drew so he can cut the board straight. Similarly keep your mind straight on the point where you feel the breath at the rims of your nostrils.

5. Make your mind like a gate-keeper

A gate-keeper does not take into account any detail of the people entering a house. All he does is notice people entering the house and leaving the house through the gate. Similarly, when you concentrate you should not take into account any detail of your experiences. Simply notice the feeling of your inhaling and exhaling breath as it goes in and out right at the rims of your nostrils.

As you continue your practice your mind and body becomes so light that you may feel as if you are floating in the air or on water. You may even feel that your body is springing up into the sky. When the grossness of your in-and-out breathing has ceased, subtle in-and-out breathing arises. This very subtle breath is your objective focus of the mind. This is the sign of concentration. This first appearance of a sign-object will be replaced by more and more subtle sign-object. This subtlety of the sign can be compared to the sound of a bell. When a bell is struck with a big iron rod, you hear a gross sound at first. As the sound fades away, the sound becomes very subtle. Similarly the in-and-out breath appears

at first as a gross sign. As you keep paying bare attention to it, this sign becomes very subtle. But the consciousness remains totally focused on the rims of the nostrils. Other meditation objects become clearer and clearer, as the sign develops. But the breath becomes subtler and subtler as the sign develops. Because of this subtlety, you may not notice the presence of your breath. Don't get disappointed thinking that you lost your breath or that nothing is happening to your meditation practice. Don't worry. Be mindful and determined to bring your feeling of breath back to the rims of your nostrils. This is the time you should practice more vigorously, balancing your energy, faith, mindfulness, concentration and wisdom.

Farmer's simile

Suppose there is a farmer who uses buffaloes for plowing his rice field. As he is tired in the middle of the day, he unfastens his buffaloes and takes a rest under the cool shade of a tree. When he wakes up, he does not find his animals. He does not worry, but simply walks to the water place where all the animals gather for drinking in the hot mid-day and he finds his buffaloes there. Without any problem he brings them back and ties them to the yoke again and starts plowing his field.

Similarly as you continue this exercise, your breath becomes so subtle and refined that you might not be able to notice the feeling of breath at all. When this happens, do not worry. It has not disappeared. It is

still where it was before-right at the nostril-tips. Take a few quick breaths and you will notice the feeling of breathing again. Continue to pay bare attention to the feeling of the touch of breath at the rims of your nostrils.

As you keep your mind focused on the rims of your nostrils, you will be able to notice the sign of the development of meditation. You will feel the pleasant sensation of sign. Different meditators feel this differently. It will be like a star, or a peg made of heartwood, or a long string, or a wreath of flowers, or a puff of smoke, or a cob-web, or a film of cloud, or a lotus flower, or the disc of the moon or the disc of the sun.

Earlier in your practice you had inhaling and exhaling as objects of meditation. Now you have the sign as the third object of meditation. When you focus your mind on this third object, your mind reaches a stage of concentration sufficient for your practice of insight meditation. This sign is strongly present at the rims of the nostrils. Master it and gain full control of it so that whenever you want, it should be available. Unite the mind with this sign which is available in the present moment and let the mind flow with every succeeding moment. As you pay bare attention to it, you will see the sign itself is changing every moment. Keep your mind with the changing moments. Also notice that your mind can be concentrated only on the present moment.

This unity of the mind with the present moment is

called momentary concentration. As moments are incessantly passing away one after another, the mind keeps pace with them. Changing with them, appearing and disappearing with them without clinging to any of them. If we try to stop the mind at one moment, we end up in frustration because the mind cannot be held fast. It must keep up with what is happening in the new moment. As the present moment can be found any moment, every waking moment can be made a concentrated moment.

To unite the mind with the present moment, we must find something happening in that moment. However, you cannot focus your mind on every changing moment without a certain degree of concentration to keep pace with the moment. Once you gain this degree of concentration, you can use it for focusing your attention on anything you experience--the rising and falling of your abdomen, the rising and falling of the chest area, the rising and falling of any feeling, or the rising and falling of your breath or thoughts and so on.

To make any progress in insight meditation you need this kind of momentary concentration. That is all you need for the insight meditation practice because everything in your experience lives only for one moment. When you focus this concentrated state of mind on the changes taking place in your mind and body, you will notice that your breath is the physical part and the feeling of breath, consciousness of the feeling and the consciousness of the sign are the

mental parts. As you notice them you can notice that they are changing all the time. You may have various types of sensations, other than the feeling of breathing, taking place in your body. Watch them all over your body. Don't try to create any feeling which is not naturally present in any part of your body. When thought arises notice it, too. All you should notice in all these occurrences is the impermanent, unsatisfactory and selfless nature of all your experiences whether mental or physical.

As your mindfulness develops, your resentment for the change, your dislike for the unpleasant experiences, your greed for the pleasant experiences and the notion of self hood will be replaced by the deeper insight of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and selflessness. This knowledge of reality in your experience helps you to foster a more calm, peaceful and mature attitude towards your life. You will see what you thought in the past to be permanent is changing with such an inconceivable rapidity that even your mind cannot keep up with these changes. Somehow you will be able to notice many of the changes. You will see the subtlety of impermanence and the subtlety of selflessness. This insight will show you the way to peace, happiness and give you the wisdom to handle your daily problems in life.

When the mind is united with the breath flowing all the time, we will naturally be able to focus the mind on the present moment. We can notice the feeling arising from contact of breath with the rim of our

nostrils. As the earth element of the air that we breathe in and out touches the earth element of our nostrils, the mind feels the flow of air in and out. The warm feeling arises at the nostrils or any other part of the body from the contact of the heat element generated by the breathing process. The feeling of impermanence of breath arises when the earth element of flowing breath touches the nostrils. Although the water element is present in the breath, the mind cannot feel it.

Also we feel the expansion and contraction of our lungs, abdomen and low abdomen, as the fresh air is pumped in and out of the lungs. The expansion and contraction of the abdomen, lower abdomen and chest are parts of the universal rhythm. Everything in the universe has the same rhythm of expansion and contraction just like our breath and body. All of them are rising and falling. However, our primary concern is the rising and falling phenomena of the breath and minute parts of our minds and bodies.

Along with the inhaling breath, we experience a small degree of calmness. This little degree of tension-free calmness turns into tension if we don't breathe out in a few moments. As we breathe out this tension is released. After breathing out, we experience discomfort if we wait too long before having fresh brought in again. This means that every time our lungs are full we must breathe out and every time our lungs are empty we must breathe in. As we breathe in, we experience a small degree of

calmness, and as we breathe out, we experience a small degree of calmness. We desire calmness and relief of tension and do not like the tension and feeling resulting from the lack of breath. We wish that the calmness would stay longer and the tension disappear more quickly than it normally does. But neither will the tension go away as fast as we wish nor the calmness stay as long as we wish. And again we get agitated or irritated, for we desire the calmness to return and stay longer and the tension to go away quickly and not to return again. Here we see how even a small degree of desire for permanency in an impermanent situation causes pain or unhappiness. Since there is no self-entity to control this situation, we will become more disappointed.

However, if we watch our breathing without desiring calmness and without resenting tension arising from the breathing in and out, but experience only the impermanence, the unsatisfactoriness and selflessness of our breath, our mind becomes peaceful and calm.

Also, the mind does not stay all the time with the feeling of breath. It goes to sounds, memories, emotions, perceptions, consciousness and mental formations as well. When we experience these states, we should forget about the feeling of breath and immediately focus our attention on these states—one at a time, not all of them at one time. As they fade away, we let our mind return to the breath

which is the home base the mind can return to from quick or long journey to various states of mind and body. We must remember that all these mental journeys are made within the mind itself.

Every time the mind returns to the breath, it comes back with a deeper insight into impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and selflessness. The mind becomes more insightful from the impartial and unbiased watching of these occurrences. The mind gains insight into the fact that this body, these feelings, various states of consciousness and numerous mental formations are to be used only for the purpose of gaining deeper insight into the reality of this mind/body complex.