



bodhi tree

FOREST MONASTERY AND RETREAT CENTRE

Basic Instructions for Vipassana – Ven. Pannyavaro

From the beginning and throughout the practice sessions the strategies and fundamentals of Vipassana meditation will be given so that you become well established in the essentials of the techniques involved. Then it is important that the meditator understands the practice in its context. So a frame of reference is necessary, in the form of a framework to the practice as given by the Buddha in his teaching in the *Satipatthana Sutta* or the discourse on The Four Foundations of Mindfulness.

As we go through the retreat further instructions will be given both during the personal interviews and in the morning instruction sessions. The evening Dharma talks will elaborate on the teachings based on the text - sufficient at least to give you an overview of the basic practice. Added to this will be instruction on Loving-kindness meditation to help support the Vipassana practice.

To allow the practice to develop the meditator must appreciate that Vipassana meditation is a holistic, dynamic practice that integrates 'Three Areas of Practice'.

The Three Areas of Practices

These Three Areas of Practice are the basic practice structure to follow. If you can link them together the benefit is that it will create a continuous 'thread of awareness' throughout the day that brings about the momentum that is needed to deepen the practice.

- 1. Formal Sitting** – where the primary focus is on the rise and fall movement of the abdomen, switching to secondary objects such as body sensations, thinking, mind states, etc, as they arise.
- 2. Formal Walking** – sensing into the movement of the foot as the component parts of the step in walking are meticulously noted.
- 3. During Daily Activities** – maintaining clear knowing of all body movements and postures with the support of mental noting throughout the day's activities.

The Technique of Mental Noting

A useful device to support meditative attention is naming or labeling the various objects as you investigate your own body and mind experience. Used judiciously, it is a very useful tool for focusing and sustaining the attention. The noting is done by repeatedly making a light mental note of whatever takes your attention in your body and mind: for example, 'touching', 'touching', 'feeling', 'feeling', 'thinking', 'thinking', etc. This is a powerful aid to help establish attentiveness especially at the beginning of practice, when it is vital to systematically note or label as much as possible to establish the attention. Otherwise, it is possible to get lost in unnoticed wanderings of the mind with long periods of inattention.

If the noting becomes mechanical or is so clumsy that it is interfering with the subtle attention then one needs to back off and do it more lightly. When mentally noting, ninety percent or more of the effort should go into being with the experience of the object and the rest in the labeling. When you have succeeded in sustaining the attention and the awareness has matured, only then should the mental noting be dropped. Although I would be careful not to drop the noting prematurely as it does have the added advantage of helping to develop mental detachment.

Having acquired the ability to monitor your experience with just 'bare' attention, you will need to return to the mental noting only when the attention weakens, is lost or needs to be re-established. The mental noting can also be combined with the practice of orientating to a sense door by naming the physical and mental objects as they arise during a sense impression. This practice also helps with the restraint of the senses. Be careful not to analyze or classify what is being observed, just register or note it without reaction, or if there is a reaction be aware of the reaction itself.

Instruction for Sitting Meditation

The first step is to find a balanced sitting posture. You should be relaxed and yet your spine needs to be straight with its natural curve. You may have noticed how a five-year-old sits up in a balanced way without effort. Allow your head to balance freely on the spine, checking that it is not pulled back or fixed. Allow your chin to drop slightly so that your eyes and ears are at about the same level with the face relaxed.

If sitting on the floor, use cushion(s) so that your knees are below your hips and in contact with the floor (otherwise your spine will collapse) or else use a chair with a firm base (not a sofa). Slumping only increases the pressure on the legs and discomfort in the back. Check that your

breathing is free and easy - any restriction indicates a fixed posture. Turn your awareness to the parts of your body that contacts the cushion, floor or chair, softening onto the supporting surfaces. At this stage, it is useful to spend five minutes scanning the entire body, part by part, relaxing each individual region.

Note that there is no such thing as the 'perfect posture'. Postural aches will come and go as a natural part of the unfolding practice. One's posture will never be one hundred percent. It is more important to concentrate on the meditation process at hand rather than trying to achieve a perfect posture. If pain becomes overwhelming or is due to injury, mindfully adjust the posture after noting the various sensations. However, as concentration develops, sensations of hotness, stiffness and itchiness will arise, as part of the contemplation of feeling and sensation, and here it is important to note them mindfully without fidgeting.

It is sensible to attend to your posture with wisdom, not insensitive willpower. Posture will improve with time, but you need to work with the body, not use force against it. If you have a lot of pain during a period of sitting, change posture, sit on a chair or use a kneeling stool, or even stand up for a while. A preparatory session at the beginning of the sitting session is valuable, where you systematically relax and open up the body while checking your sitting posture.

Checking your sitting posture

- are the hips leaning back? This will cause you to slump.
- the lower back should retain its natural, unforced curve so that the abdomen is forward and 'open'.
- imagine that someone is gently pushing between the shoulder blades, but keep the muscles relaxed.
- note and gently release any tension in the neck and shoulder region.

Once you have settled into a comfortable, upright, balanced position then you are ready to begin meditating. Do not move the body during a formal sitting session unless you absolutely have to. If you do move, then note the movement and sensations as you move. Be clear about what has caused you to move: is it the pain or discomfort of the posture or is it some agitation in the mind? In this way, you will come to know cause and effect.

Tuning into the Primary Object

One needs to first establish the attention on the body. To do this, you connect with the predominant touch sensation of hardness or softness (earth element) from the body's contact with the cushion or chair. This will anchor the attention to the body, especially when assisted by the mental

label of 'touching', 'touching'. Stay with the sitting touch point until it is well defined. Then from the sitting 'touch point' allow the attention to move into the natural rising and falling movement of the abdomen, which then becomes the primary meditation focus. Having tuned into the movement make a mental note or label it as 'rising', 'rising' concurrently with the upward movement and 'falling', 'falling' with the downward movement.

Make sure when noting the rise and fall movement of the abdomen, that you are connecting with the airflow and not just the conceptual form and shape of the abdomen. When you have tuned into the specific characteristics in the movement, such as vibration, pressure, and the subtle, fine nuances of the movement, and then one knows that one is on track.

Primary and Secondary Objects

The primary focus in the sitting meditation is the *movement* caused by the expansion and contraction of the abdomen. This is not to be confused with any breathing practice. Be careful not to manipulate or force the natural movement in any way. Close attentiveness to the internal abdominal movement has to be established and developed by the meditator from the beginning. You will find that secondary objects such as thinking, body sensations, pain, emotions, mind states, mental images, etc, will take the attention away. You must then allow the attention to avert to them and mentally note these secondary objects as best you can without reactions.

Just register the secondary objects as they manifest with 'bare attention', that is as an impartial observer - a witness. After which, one returns again to the rise and fall movement of the abdomen with close attentiveness.

It is important to be aware of the specific characteristics of the various experiences under observation e.g. a series of sensations in the movement of the abdomen (wind element) or the specific characteristics found in pain such as heat, throbbing, etc. (fire element). Maintaining the crossed legged sitting posture without moving allows you to focus intensely and apprehend at a microscopic level the body's elements and the subtle mind events.

Maintaining 'Presence' during the Changeover

At the end of each sitting session allow for a gentle transition. That is, do not abruptly breakout of the meditation, but carefully follow through by being aware of unfolding the limbs while noting the body sensations, the release of the pressure in the posture, and the detailed movements in standing up and stretching. In this way, you are carrying the practice into

the next activity as well as sustaining the mindfulness and concentration that would have developed during the sitting session.

Take extra care in the traveling between the sitting and the formal walking meditation. Note all the detailed movements of the body as you move. Try to do this without a break, because by connecting the sitting and walking sessions it will allow for the continuity to the practice to develop that is required for the practice to deepen.

Technique in Walking Meditation

While meditation is usually associated with the sitting posture, Vipassana meditation exercises are also practiced while walking. The walking exercise is essentially about the awareness of movement as you note the component parts of the steps. Alternating walking meditation with sitting meditation helps to keep one's meditation practice in balance and the mind fresh and the body relaxed.

Walking meditation is a skillful way to energize the practice if the calming effect of sitting is making you dull or you are becoming overly concentrated. Actually for many experienced insight meditators, it can be the preferred mode as it is a dynamic meditation that invigorates the practice.

You will need to find a level surface from ten to fifteen metres long on which you can walk back and forth. Your arms should hang naturally with your hands lightly clasped in front. Gaze at a point about two metres on the floor in front of you to avoid visual distractions.

Establish your attentiveness by firstly noting the standing posture and the touch sensation of the feet contacting the floor the start of the walking track. Then, as you walk, keep the attention on the *movement* of the foot without identifying with it and not on the leg or any other part of the body.

For the first five to ten minutes or so, you can start with noting each step as 'left', 'right', then you can move to noting four parts of each step: 'lifting', 'pushing', 'dropping', and 'touching'. Mentally note or label each step part-by-part, building up until you are noting all the six component parts, 'raising', 'lifting', 'pushing', 'dropping', 'touching', and 'pressing', concurrently with the actual experience of the movements.

While walking and noting the parts of the steps, you will probably find the mind is still thinking. Not to worry, keep focused on the noting of the steps as long as the thoughts remain just as 'background thoughts'. However if you find you have been walking and 'lost in thought', you must stop and vigorously note the thinking as 'thinking', 'thinking', 'thinking' until it stops.

Then re-establish your attention on the movement of the foot and carry on. Keep the foot soft and relaxed and be careful that the mental noting does not become so mechanical that you lose the experience of the movement.

Try to do a minimum walking period of half an hour, and build it up to a full hour. Strategically it is better to do a walking period before a sitting session, especially first thing in the morning, as it loosens stiff muscles and also after meals as it assists digestion and helps to avoid sleepiness.

If you can alternate the walking and sitting sessions without any major breaks you will develop a continuity of awareness that naturally carries through into the awareness of daily activities.

Mindfulness of Daily Activities

For the awareness to deepen, continuity that gives momentum to the practice must be maintained for at least three or more hours in the practice day. Continuity arises through careful and precise attention to movements and postures for as long as possible during the routine activities of the day.

Again we use the 'primary and secondary object' strategy to help maintain awareness throughout the day. As you walk about in the retreat environment maintain awareness of, or mentally note the steps as you walk, as 'walking', 'walking'. Then as you stand, 'standing', 'standing', or when sitting, 'sitting', 'sitting' or laying down, as 'laying down': that is, noting the 'Four Postures' as the primary focus. Then as other things take your attention, such as seeing, hearing, thinking, mind states, etc., they become secondary objects. In this way, you can more easily maintain moment-to-moment awareness during daily activities. It is a simple thing to do, and is used as a 'thread of awareness' practice from which you will find more details in your daily activities as your mindfulness intensifies.

Monitor the four main postures throughout the day, until the end of the day when you lay down to take rest for the night. There are many details to be found in the postural movements as you make a transition from one posture to another. This will help to maintain the continuity of the attention, which in Vipassana practice is the key to its success.

Upon awakening of a morning, you would establish attentiveness to the postures from the moment of awakening in bed in the lying down position: first note or be aware of all the touch sensations of the body on the bed. Then as you rise, note the sitting posture as 'sitting', 'sitting' and then having got out of bed, you are standing, note it as 'standing', 'standing' and as you move, note it as 'walking', 'walking' and as secondary objects arise, such as seeing, hearing, etc., pay attention to them as well.

Nothing can be dismissed as unimportant when noting daily activities such as domestic chores, eating, cleaning your teeth. All these are opportunities for the meditator to practice presence of mind. Repeatedly note any and every movement and activity in order to establish the practice so that it becomes 'second nature' for you to note them in your daily routine. Of course, this is not so easy to establish. It requires patience and perseverance, especially in being kind to yourself when you feel frustrated by constant forgetfulness!

Bodhi Tree Forest Monastery & Community Retreat Centre
78 Bentley Road, via Lismore NSW 2480 Australia
Tel: +61 (02) 6628 2426 Email: pannyavaro@buddhanet.net