



Serene and clear: an introduction to Buddhist meditation

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Week two: Contemplating movement

The divided mind

Last week we looked at how the Buddha drew a distinction between two approaches to meditation, which he called serenity (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*). We experimented briefly with serenity practice by watching the breath, allowing the mind to unify as it becomes absorbed into this single object. But even as we were watching the breath, aiming for serenity, we may have been preoccupied by the distractions posed by a body that would not become comfortable and a mind that would not stop thinking. We found our attempts at serenity were opposed by distraction, so that our experience as serenity practitioners became divided into the two separate and distinct spheres of our meditation object on the one hand and our distractions on the other.

How can the mind be divided like this? Remember our basic definitions: *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.* At the centre of meditation practice is the mental factor of attention. Attention has certain characteristics. For one thing, it always implies an element of choice. Attention chooses something out of the vast matrix of sense experience to focus upon, and ignores the rest. So, for example, last week we chose to watch breath, and in the moment of watching breath we ignore other physical sensations and our thinking. Even having made that choice, more choices had to be made. At what location within the body will we watch the breath? Will we add a count to it, or not? So attention always has an element of selection, or choice, about it. It chooses one aspect of experience upon which to focus.

We focus on some aspect of our experience, placing it at the centre of our awareness. When we do so, we immediately realise that there is a lot going on in the background, around that point of focus. For example, I may be looking at one person in this room, but I can also see the people around her, and in the periphery of my vision I can see the back wall, the ceiling, and so on. The visual field extends far beyond the single person on whom I choose to focus. When I choose to examine any one thing I have that one thing at the centre of my visual field. Focused on that, I can still see a great variety of things in the background, around the periphery of my visual field.

This is normally how it is when we place awareness on an object, regardless of which sense field we are working with. If concentration (*samādhi*) is very strong, the periphery disappears as the mind becomes unified on this single object. But until this happens, the mind is divided into the two spheres of the object at the centre of its focus, and all the things on the periphery. And in this divided condition, it is liable to distraction.

Distraction is the *unnoticed* movement of attention from one object to another. I am watching this inhalation, squarely focused on it, with a painful sensation in my leg in the

background. Suddenly I realise my focus is now on the painful sensation, with the breath in the background or disappeared entirely. My attention moved from breath to painful sensation, and I only know this after the event. We tend to “wake up” in the middle of a distraction, realising “I’m already distracted!” We don’t see the beginning of the distraction, the moment when attention shifts from one object to another. What would happen if we *did* see this movement?

In this moment

Another characteristic of attention is that we can only attend to what is happening now. We cannot attend to what did happen in the past, nor can we attend to what will happen in the future: both of these are impossible. We can only attend to what *is* happening, *now*. While this may seem obvious, we quickly forget it as we engage the practice, and so we become lost in thoughts of past and future, thoughts which seem more real to us than what is happening to the body in this present moment. Attention can only be directed towards what is happening now.

But for attention to become powerful, it must be sustained. Cultivating attention involves being continuously attentive over time. Since we can only be attentive to what is happening now, this means that we must return, *now*, to the meditation object; and then return, now, to the meditation object; and then return, now, to the meditation object; and so on. This is the immediacy and relentlessness of the practice. We can only do the practice now.

Yet the mind is divided, and our point of attention is moving from one thing to another. I direct my attention to the inhalation. The next thing I know I am thinking of what happened earlier today. I return to the breath, and the next thing I know I am feeling the pain in my back and complaining about it in my mind. This is distraction, and it is what the mind does, because the mind is both divided and in ceaseless movement.

This ceaseless movement of the mind means that experience is constantly changing. My experience *now*, in this moment, is not what it was before. One moment breathing in; the next moment breathing out. One moment focused on the meditation object; the next moment lost in thought. One moment the experience is like this; the next it is like that. The mind does not stand still. Inevitably, we find ourselves being dragged from one object of attention to another.

One way of describing this situation is to say that experience is impermanent, or changing (*anicca*). Nothing stands still. Everything is in motion. Understanding this universal fact of relentless change is central to the Buddha’s teaching. Seeing the impermanence of all experienced things, from the cosmos to the human body to each thought in the mind and sensation in the body, is foundational to developing insight. Everything we experience, the Buddha says, is “impermanent, conditioned, dependently arisen, subject to destruction, vanishing, fading away and ceasing” (Dīghanakha Sutta). So when we are practising insight meditation, we do not fight the process of change. Instead, we monitor the process of change. Change itself becomes our meditation object.

So in insight meditation, distraction is not the enemy of our practice; here, distraction is the content of our practice. To practise any form of meditation we must train ourselves to be attentive to what is happening *now*. To maintain attention over time means we must develop a continuous stream of attention. When we are practising serenity meditation, this continuous stream of attention is directed toward a single object, say the breath, and whenever we realise we have strayed from our meditation object we drop that distraction and return to our object. But when we are practising insight meditation we develop a

different relationship to distraction, because we are developing a different relationship to the fact of change.

In serenity meditation we are cultivating a continuous stream of attention directed towards a single object. In insight meditation we are cultivating a continuous stream of attention directed towards a series of different objects. So in insight meditation, while our *attention* is continuous, the *object of attention* is discontinuous. Dealing with the fact of discontinuity is fundamental to this enterprise. Note that we do not fight the fact of discontinuity, the fact that our experience of the meditation object is constantly changing. Change is just movement, and our practice is not to fight the movement of the mind, but to watch it.

We have said that distraction is the unnoticed movement of attention from one object to another, and asked what would happen if we did see this moment. From the point of view of insight, if we see the movement of attention from one object to another, this is not distraction; this is seeing impermanence (*aniccatā*), the fact of change.

But to do this, we must be sharp. Any phenomenon we experience has a beginning, its moment of arising; a middle, when it is manifesting; and an end, its moment of ceasing. Normally we tune into things during the middle. When we are lost in thought, for example, normally the thought has already begun by the time we are aware of it. Then we are lost in another thought, and again we only know it when the thought has already begun. It is as if we are watching a series of movies on TV and always miss their beginnings and ends. If we want to catch the movement of the mind, we need to turn our attention to the point where the attention shifts from one object to another. These constitute the beginnings and ends of phenomena, the intersections of experience.

Watching movement

We can begin this monitoring of the movement of attention by watching the movements of the body. Last week we experienced movement within stillness. While the body is still, there is movement within the body as we breathe and adjust our posture. This week we are experiencing stillness within movement. As body and mind moves, we keep watching those movements, so the watching mind itself remains still.

In the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta the Buddha says:

When walking, a bhikkhu knows he is walking; when standing, he knows he is standing; when sitting, he knows he is sitting; when lying down, he knows he is lying down. Whatever way his body is placed, he knows that is how it is. ...

When going forward or going back, a bhikkhu clearly understands what he is doing. When looking forward or looking back, he clearly understands what he is doing. When bending and stretching, he clearly understands what he is doing. When carrying his inner and outer robe and his bowl, he clearly understands what he is doing. When eating, drinking, chewing and tasting ... when shitting and pissing ... when walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep and waking up, speaking or staying silent, he clearly understands what he is doing.

This is the contemplation of body through posture. Notice how the Buddha says, "Whatever way his body is placed, he knows that is how it is." It doesn't matter what the body is doing; what matters is that we *know* what the body is doing. This involves cultivating a sensitivity to posture, awareness of body sensation and of the alignment of the entire body. The body moves; we watch those movements, moment by moment. In doing so, we directly monitor change or impermanence (*aniccatā*), seeing it in the body. In watching distraction, we

directly monitor impermanence in the mind. And the key to this practice is to come back to this present experience; this alignment of body and mind *now*.

Working with distraction, I see that when I am lost in thought, my focus is on the story in my mind. My awareness of my body is in the distant horizon. At the moment I realise, "I'm distracted!" at that moment I know my attention has shifted. Immediately, at this moment, what is happening in the mind? Where is the mind now? Acknowledge that thought or that feeling. From there, return to the body. How is the body placed? What is its posture? At *this* moment, what is the body doing? When we realise we are lost in thought, at *this* moment, what is the mind doing?

Standing

Stand with your feet no wider than shoulder length apart. Keep your legs straight and relaxed, so that your knees are not locked but just slightly loose. Bring your attention to the touch of your feet on the floor. How are you gripping the floor? How is your weight distributed? As soon as you realise you are lost in thought, know that experience. Then return to the posture.

Beginning with the feet, imagine the body as a stack of blocks formed by its major segments. Feel the feet; then the lower legs; then the upper legs; then the abdomen; then the chest; then the shoulders. Allow the arms to hang loosely. Feel the balance of the neck and head.

Then sway the body in small arcs forward and back and from side to side and. Feel the shift of weight in the feet. Feel how tension and pressure in the body increase the more you move away from the vertical axis. Make sure the swayings are coming from the ankles, and not just the waist. Gradually come in to the centre, the vertical axis, finding the point of balance.

Again, beginning with the feet, move your awareness through the body, feeling the balance through its major segments. Then allow your awareness to drop into the abdomen, and focus on the breath. Your breath is at the centre of your focus, but on the periphery you can feel the entire body. You are not shutting anything out. Anytime you feel any tension or imbalance in the body, relax the tension and return to your vertical axis, your balance. As soon as you realise you are lost in thought, know that experience, and then return to the posture.

Walking

Maintaining this sense of alignment, begin to walk. Centre your attention on the movement of your legs and the sense of touch as your feet impact upon the ground. Walk straight up and down on an imaginary path. At the end of the path, stop and resume standing. Then maintaining balance, turn and stand. Then walk to the end of your path. As soon as you realise you are lost in thought, know that experience, and then return to the posture.

In walking, keep your eyes down but your head erect and balanced. Make sure your head does not drop to the floor. Loosen the neck and head as you walk. As you become more comfortable with the walking, focus your attention ever more closely on the movements of your feet and the sensations as they impact on the ground.

Sitting

Maintaining this sense of balance, sit down on your cushion, bench or chair. Bring the body back into its vertical alignment. Treat the sitting posture in the same way you treat the standing, for in sitting we are standing from the pelvis up. Check how your buttocks are making contact with the cushion, bench or chair. Sway from left to right, finding the balance between the buttocks. Sway forward and back, finding the balance in the centre. You could make a wide circle with the upper body. Then again sweep the body with your awareness, checking the major segments of the body. Feel the abdomen; then the chest; then the shoulders. Allow the arms to hang loosely. Feel the balance of neck and head.

Allow the body to lift up from the buttocks to the tip of the head; then relax your awareness into the abdomen. Focus on the movements of the breath in the abdomen, but without shutting out your sense of the rest of the body. When you feel tension or imbalance in the body, relax the tension and return to your vertical axis, your balance. As soon as you realise you are lost in thought, know that experience, and then return to the posture.

The factors of the path

What does it take to be continuously aware of movement? This is a fundamental question. Very quickly we discover how hard it is to maintain attention on something as simple as the movements in and of the body. Why? What's happening in the mind which makes continuous attention difficult? Finding the answer to this question is a fundamental aspect to the practice of meditation, and it is bound up with our relationship to change. After all, to be continuously aware of movement requires us to monitor experience over time, and this means to monitor *change*.

The Buddha's path of practice involves eight factors, and is known as the noble eightfold path. These eight factors are: right view, right intention; right speech, right action, right livelihood; right energy, right attention, and right concentration. The last three of these factors are directly engaged in meditation, the systematic training of attention. These are the mental factors we need to cultivate if we are to engage in any form of meditation practice.

- Attention (*sati*) is the deliberate placing of awareness on its object. The Pāli word *sati*, usually translated as "mindfulness," literally means "memory." It is classically defined as "remembering the object." What happens when we lose our meditation object? We forget it. What happens in the moment we emerge from distraction? We remember what we are doing. So the opposite of attention is forgetfulness. Attention is the continual process of remembering this present moment.
- Energy (*vāyāma*) is the energy required to deliberately turn the attention to and place it on the object. Energy implies qualities of volition, deliberation, and aim. As we have seen, normal, everyday awareness is something that happens to us; meditative awareness is something that we do. It is that quality of effort or energy that distinguishes between normal awareness and meditative awareness. Energy or effort always implies *choice* or *intention*; we choose to place our awareness on a particular object - movement - rather than another - our thoughts and preoccupations. When we attend, we choose a specific object of attention and then choose to focus on it. Hence our definition: Attention is the deliberate placing of awareness on its object.
- Concentration (*samādhi*) is the focusing of attention on a single object, and is classically defined as "the unification of the mind," bringing everything in the mind to bear on a

single object of attention. It implies steadiness and stability. This provides the foundation for penetrating awareness and the insight that comes from that awareness.