



bodhi tree
FOREST MONASTERY AND RETREAT CENTRE

Questions and Responses – Ven. Pannyavaro

There are three areas of difficulties that most meditators experience when first doing the practice - especially at the start of a retreat: incessant thinking, disinclination or inability to handle pain, and sleepiness, which I've mostly dealt with in the accompanying booklet "Difficulties Facing Meditators and How to Work with Them".

In addition to the explanation to the difficulties facing meditators, here are some commonly asked questions – often on practical issues - by new students, and my responses to them. I hope they can help to clarify and elaborate on the practice as a standardised set of instructions is usually given to beginners, which needs then to be explain further to the individual meditator as they practice.

Q: How long should I sit for?

R: The length of a practice session varies according to the individual's capacity, but eventually most practitioners can manage up to an hour's formal sitting session, which is then alternated with an hour's walking meditation. The sitting and walking sessions combined in this way it helps to keep the overall practice in balance. Of course, you could extend the time to say another half hour or more and you'll be encouraged to do so by your teacher.

Q: Can I keep my eyes open during sitting meditation?

R: Well, in some Zen traditions is it possible but as the sitting meditation practice in Vipassana meditation is primarily an introspective practice ones eyes should be keep closed in order to focus on the introspective aspect of the practice.

Q: How will we know when a sitting session ends - will there be bells?

R: The only bells you will hear will be for the morning wakeup call and for meals times. There is no signal for the end of a sitting session. There is a clock in the hall or use your personal clock if you wish, although you will soon see that we have our own 'internal clock' that regulates your sitting time.

Q: I'm very tired. It just has been so busy lately at work. Can I sleep in for the first session tomorrow before breakfast?

R: By all means, if you are really exhausted then just rest. There is a rest period scheduled after lunch. There is no compulsion to follow the posted schedule – with the exception of meal times. Essentially you pace yourself in this practice with the guidance of the teacher.

Q: I have a back problem and can't sit crossed legged for very long. Can I use a chair?

R: Yes, of course. Chairs are available in the meditation hall for people who can't manage - for whatever reason – the formal crossed legged sitting posture. Also there are kneeling benches available, which will help you at the floor level. The classic crossed legged posture on the floor is the preferred sitting position as it is the most stable, but it takes some time to adjust to.

Q: I know this is a silent retreat, but if I need something – like I run out of toothpaste or have some other need who do I ask?

R: Don't worry if you have any shopping needs leave a note for the manager or kitchen staff. Above all don't break the spirit of the silence retreat by making verbal or even non-verbal contact with other meditators. If you need to speak for whatever reason, please feel free to come and see the teacher, no problem. Please don't feel intimidated by the formality of the practice. The retreat etiquette and structure is designed to support and protect everybody involved. You'll soon get accustomed to the routine of the retreat, which will allow you to settle into the flow of the practice. We are here to support you.

Q: I listened to your evening talk and I found that there was too much material and ideas to take in all at once – is it okay then to take notes?

R: Most certainly, I would encourage you to take brief notes during the talks or even to record your meditation experience as an aid to clarify and retain what has been taught, as long as you don't get carried away and end up writing your autobiography.

Q: I can't find the 'rise and fall' primary object at all. What can I do?

R: While a lot of meditators seem to get by with finding the 'rise and fall' movement of the abdomen with just a directive to focus on the 'rise and fall' - many like yourself have problems. If that is so, you need to know the 'how'. First, you need to work from the gross to the subtle. If you try to access the subtle, which here is the movement of the air in the abdomen, there is a tendency for it to contract to become tense. So you start with the predominate sitting 'touch point' – such as the buttocks' pressure on the cushion – and focus on this 'touch

point' until it is well defined, i.e. some quality is felt such as pressure, hardness, etc. Now, together with this 'touch point' there is the 'knowing of' it, i.e. the 'consciousness of'. So there it is a 'pairing' i.e. the touch and the knowing of it. Then you're ready to find the natural unforced movement of the 'rise and fall' from the sitting touch point. Know that the 'rise and fall' is not a breathing exercise, while the breathing is the cause it is the effect i.e. the movement of the air in the abdomen which is focused on. Having found the movement of the air in the abdomen expanding – rising – and the air leaving – falling –, then be careful not to interfere or manipulate this natural movement – just be mindful of it without straining.

Q: How long should I stay on the 'rise and fall'?

R: There is no set time. Beginners are inclined to assume that one should stay with the just the 'rise and fall', to do so would default to a fixed concentration mode. What is characteristic of the Mahasi Sayadaw's technique is that there is a primary object, i.e. the rise and fall movement of the air in the abdomen – that is the air element - and everything else becomes secondary objects such as thinking, sleepiness, body sensations, etc. So while the main focus is the 'rise and fall', when another object takes your attention away from the 'rise and fall' then you must acknowledge it and until it passes, and then return to the primary object.

Q: What if there is nothing much happening in the sitting - so I'm bored - what do I do then?

R: If seemingly there is nothing happening or the mind has become dull, you might check whether you've just lost your focus on the abdomen movement, if so then try to re-establish it; or perhaps it is because one's 'mindfulness' is still weak or hasn't developed much. In that case, then the formal walking practice and mindfulness exercises in one's daily activities will help to invigorate your mindfulness. But on no account should you allow yourself to sit without a focus as it is important to remain 'engaged'. Be careful to remember to be checking your mind states – especially calm, passive states as this is when you are inclined to lose your focus and therefore your alertness.

Q: What do I do if I get sleepy during sitting meditation?

R: You might find that sleepiness during meditation is simply that you are tired, that there is a 'sleep debt'. So go to sleep – literally, take a nap. Part of meditating is to tune in to your body, and sometimes what we discover when we tune in is that we are exhausted, having run out of energy. So tune in, and if you need to go to sleep, take a nap and then re-engage the practice when you have got the rest that you need. If you find that your body is not actually tired but that you keep nodding off anyway, you can try intensifying alertness by opening your

eyes quite widely for a period of time and noticing how that shifts your energy. You can also try some simple alternate nostril breathing (breathing in and out vigorously first through one nostril and then the other, using a finger to close the alternate nostril as you do so). This is a yogic technique for increasing the flow of energy throughout the body. As a last resort get up and do some brisk walking meditation.

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