WHAT, WHY, HOW

Answers to Your Questions about Buddhism, Meditation, and Living Mindfully

BHANTE GUNARATANA

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Editor's Preface

Bhante Henepola Gunaratana, Mahathera, has spent his life spreading the Buddha's teachings. Known and beloved worldwide by the affectionate nickname "Bhante G.," he was born in Sri Lanka in 1927 in the village of Henepola, was ordained as a novice monk at the age of twelve, and received full ordination at twenty.

He was invited to America in 1968 and served as the general secretary of the Buddhist Vihara Society in Washington, DC — a group he would later come to lead. He went on to earn a doctorate in philosophy from the American University. In 1985, he founded the Bhavana Society in the hills of West Virginia, a Theravada Buddhist monastery and retreat center that continues to attract retreatants from around the world.

Bhante G. is a noted Buddhist scholar and author of numerous books on Buddhist meditation practice and the Buddha's teachings. These include his classic introductory guide to meditation, *Mindfulness in Plain English*, as well as *Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness*, *The Four Foundations of Mindfulness in Plain English*, *Loving-Kindness in Plain English*, and many more. His life story is told in *Journey to Mindfulness: The Autobiography of Bhante G.*

When I think of Bhante G., I invariably envision him sitting on a maroon meditation cushion. He is seated in front of the big golden Buddha in the meditation hall at the Bhavana Society in the back hills of West Virginia. In my mind's eye, he seems larger than life, just like that oversized Buddha in the monastery and retreat center the Sri Lankan native founded in the early 1980s.

I am always surprised when we meet him in the sangha hall or monastery library at how slight his physical frame is. It is a measure of the authority, breadth, and bigheartedness of his teaching of the Dhamma that when he is in the meditation hall, the largeness of his spirit and erudition makes his physical presence seem larger, too.

Of all his books, he is perhaps best known for his remarkable primer on establishing a meditation practice, *Mindfulness in Plain English*, a book that Jon Kabat-Zinn dubbed "a masterpiece." More than two decades after its debut, it has been translated into nearly thirty languages. (On a recent visit to the Bhavana Society, Bhante G. was pleased to show me a copy of the book recently translated into Russian.)

I don't think it would be an exaggeration to suggest that that single book has perhaps guided more people to explore meditation in depth than any single Buddhist book of the last few decades.

This book is a bit different. It is an attempt to capture some of Bhante G.'s off-the-cuff style when asked questions at retreats, public events, live interviews, and questions e-mailed to him. Our hope is that this book, with its themed chapters, will be an accessible guide both for beginners coming to insight meditation and the Buddha's teachings for the first time and for experienced meditators wishing to learn deeper aspects of those teachings.

This book condenses into one volume a half-century of Bhante G.'s answers to common questions, both introductory and advanced. How do you deal with pain while meditating? How long and how often should I meditate? What is spiritual friendship and why is it important? How does one uproot the hindrances? What are the stages of jhana and how do we know we have achieved them?

Bhante G.'s wit, honesty, and learning are a delight to experience live. He is known for his plainspoken instruction and guidance on meditation and Buddhist teachings as well as a deep command of passages from the Pali canon of Buddhist scripture, which he can pull up from memory in their original Pali.

He is also known for his wit, erudition, and good humor in answering questions about Buddhism and meditation and incorporating the practice of mindfulness and meditation into busy, modern lives.

This book is an attempt to capture a portrait of him thinking and responding on his feet (and on his cushion), as he parses and presents the Buddha's teachings to an audience of dozens or an audience of one.

Throughout, he offers insights into his own personal experiences and challenges. These include his arrival in America, the attempt to ordain Buddhist nuns at the Bhavana Society, challenges faced in establishing a traditional forest monastery in the West Virginia hills, and even how he got the nickname "Bhante G." He talks about the Buddha's core teachings on meditation and spiritual practice, and responds at length to a host of questions posed to him through the years by lay followers and retreatants. Bhante G. also offers up some candid thoughts on the state of Buddhism today in the West and offers insights into how his understanding of the Buddha's teachings and his own practice have developed.

Our hope in creating this book is to offer deep yet practical insights into Buddhist practice and the spiritual life from a Buddhist monk who has lived that life both on and off the cushion for nine decades.

May all beings attain Nibbana.

Editor's Acknowledgments

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— Douglas John Imbrogno

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On Meditation

How Much Effort?

How much effort should we bring to our meditation practice? We hear the phrases "just sit" or "effortless effort" when it comes to meditating. How hard should we be trying when meditating?

When it comes to meditation, your effort should not be haphazard or blind. It's a committed effort. Before you even start, you should consider, "Is this the right moment for me to practice?"

Suppose it's a busy time, the TV is blaring somewhere, people are running around. No matter how hard you try, you can't seem to do the practice. You have to understand the situation, you have to be mindful of when to sit.

But once you've chosen the place and time to practice, by all means, apply every ounce of effort to overcome laziness, drowsiness, restlessness, worry, and so on. These are very common, ordinary obstacles. In Buddhism, we call them hindrances because they hinder our progress. When hindrances arise, we shouldn't be lazy. We shouldn't think, "Well, this is just way too hard. I'm wasting my time. This stuff always comes up and blocks me when I try to meditate. I give up."

You must encourage yourself and always renew your effort at sitting. You might tell yourself, "I can do this. This is possible. I can

overcome my sleepiness, I can work with this restless mind. I see other people who have learned how to do this. I can do this myself!"

So, you must exert yourself. You must try to shake yourself awake and tell yourself, "Hey, you! Don't chicken out of this!"

As for "effortless effort," well, that's a lazy man's advice. There is no such thing as effortless effort. Things don't come to us just like air. However, laziness, drowsiness, lust, greed — they come to us very naturally! Good things often don't come to us naturally. We have them in us by our nature, but we must work hard to arouse them.

The trouble is that our mind is like water. Water always finds its way to the lowest place. In a similar way our mind tends to drag us down into the lower state of things — to base ideas, lazy practices, the easy way out.

Yet if we head that way, we'll end up going down the drain with all the rubbish in the mind! So, we must turn up the volume on our effort. We repeat the same thing, again and again and again, until we achieve it. We bring commitment to our meditation practice, in spite of whatever happens in any one sitting.

There are actually three stages of effort. In Pali the first stage is called *arambhadhatu*, which means the element of beginning. When you read an inspiring book about meditation or have an enlightening discussion with a friend or teacher on Buddhist practice, you may become enthusiastic and start meditating right away. Yet a few weeks or months later, your effort may wane. You slide right back into the same old same old. How do you avoid that?

That's where the second stage of effort comes in — *nikkamadhatu*, which essentially means proceeding with your effort. You stick to it, you work at your meditation practice with dedication and regularity. Even then, you can become lazy or may waiver in your resolve.

Then you have to play your last card. You have to give yourself a pep talk, but also be firm with yourself: "This is it! I won't budge from this cushion even if my back is killing me! OK, so I'm restless — I've seen that before. All right, now my knees hurt — I've experienced that too. I can sit through this. I can work with this. Reduce me to a skeleton and still I won't budge!"

That is the third kind of effort called *parakkama*, or valor. In the armed forces, you are encouraged to bring valor and bravery to your work. Meditators also need that kind of effort.

Sometimes people come here to the Bhavana Society with all good intentions to meditate. They book a place to stay months in advance and come for a week, or two weeks, or a month. Then a few days later they tell me, "Um, Bhante, I have to go. I forgot I had to get back because I have this job to do and . . ."

Or you may experience an inspiring meditation retreat, return home, and start practicing. Weeks or months later your resolve may waiver in establishing a daily practice. Remind yourself: You can do this. See the example of your teachers and fellow meditators. Seek out the support of sitting groups. Attend retreats regularly.

Really, it comes down to this: when you take the time to practice, when you make that commitment, stick to it with all the energy you can muster.

Metta and Meditation

Some teachers recommend generating a feeling of metta, or loving-friendliness, in advance of meditation, bringing to mind a time you were very happy or acted with compassion and then beginning with a wish for yourself, "May I be happy." Do you think this is a good practice?

I think this is a benevolent thought — that you have done something very meaningful to help people, you practice metta, and by doing so you make others happy. When you think of your actions that made others happy, you are happy. With this happy feeling you can practice meditation. I think that's a good thing and there's nothing wrong with that.

Best Meditation Object

What is the best meditation topic or object?

There are many meditation topics. But I think if you have a teacher, they would recommend you start your practice with focusing your mind on the breath. Most meditators find the breath easy to focus the mind upon for many reasons. It is readily available. It goes wherever you go. You don't have to pack it in a bag. It is right there with you. You breathe all the time, and it will be present anytime you want it. That is the subject of meditation I recommend for everybody to start with in their practice.

Then you can see feelings — the feeling of the breath, the feeling of your body, the feeling of your cushion, the feeling of the temperature in the room. "Feeling" means some sensation you experience — another very good subject of meditation.

You may then become aware of passing thoughts. Don't let your

thoughts proliferate by adding more thoughts. Just become aware of any particular thought arising, for instance, a thought of anger. You feel it. It arises in your mind. You remember a certain person, certain situations in which you had an encounter, some kind of exchange of words that triggered your resentment, your anger, which is one of the three unwholesome roots.

You try to pay total attention to how you feel when anger arises in your mind. You see it is not a very pleasant feeling and then tell yourself, "Why should I allow my mind to experience this unpleasant thought, which is harmful to my peace and my health and that hurts me in many ways? It eats me up inside, it disturbs my peace, it increases my blood pressure and disturbs my sleep. I lose friends when I experience this anger all the time. I might even lose my job." You can see the many disadvantages to anger. And so you let it go. You come back to your breath and meditate upon it.

Layperson's Daily Meditation

In daily life how often should we meditate and for how long? If I am serious about committing to a meditation practice, what do you see as a minimum amount of meditation for a layperson?

I think every day — at least thirty minutes in the morning, thirty minutes in the evening — you must meditate. That is not a fixed or mandatory limit, of course. But given people's active and busy lives, that is the minimum for someone who is serious about meditation practice. I encourage meditators to try to maintain that schedule every single day without fail.

I also encourage everyone to add the one-minute hourly meditation during their daily lives. Set aside one minute of every

hour to stop and take about fifteen breaths — that's about one minute. This will add a short but regular mindfulness reminder throughout your day.

And when you have the time, you should make the effort to go on meditation retreats at a meditation center. In all these ways you will always be in touch with a regular meditation practice. The commitment to practice is important. And the opportunities for mindfulness are there every moment of the day. Even as you lie in bed at night, go to sleep keeping the mind on the breath.

As for regular sitting, it's good to get into the habit of sitting in the morning and also in the evening. In the morning it may be easier to meditate, as your senses are not yet bombarded by the day's sense stimuli. It can be quite enjoyable to get up before anyone else, to have this time for yourself. In the evening it can seem a little more difficult to meditate, especially for laypeople. The TV and computer may be blaring, your children may be fighting, and your cellphone is right there, offering endless distractions.

But after things have quieted down or if you're able to go off by yourself to a quieter place, meditating in the evening can be wonderful. After all, dealing with all the nitty-gritty problems of fast-paced contemporary life can be nerve-wracking! Yet all that stress and overstimulation can be handled more easily, more calmly, more wisely if you commit to a regular daily period in the evening when you allow the agitation from the day to settle. This will give your mind and spirit time to rest.

People often collapse when they get home and think that a good night's sleep is all they need. But while a good sleep is revitalizing to the body and mind, a good evening meditation can be far more powerful in clearing the mind of the distractions and agitations of the day.

It is also important to grow used to sitting regularly for longer lengths of time. That's because when you try to meditate, even if you're able to sit for one hour, your real, true meditation may be no more than fifteen minutes. So, as you work with your practice, work on sitting a little bit longer each time. This is another reason why it is important to go to retreats regularly and also to find a supportive sitting group in your area, where possible. These will all help you in deepening your practice.

Many people come here to the Bhavana Society and hope to maintain a regular link to the center and to the monks here. We ask them, "How much time do you spend on meditation? How frequently?" These are essential matters. The answers help us to help them.

But what if that person doesn't keep up their regular meditation practice? All of a sudden problems arise and they consult us for help. It will be hard for us to give them the necessary help — because they haven't been doing their homework!

Meditation and Relaxation

What is the goal and purpose of meditation? Is feeling relaxed and peaceful a good goal?

The purpose is to reach the highest goal of Nibbana, or enlightenment. Along the way there are various other fringe benefits. Feeling peaceful certainly will occur. Becoming relaxed will be a result along the way. These experiences should not be overlooked. But they also should not be taken as the final attainment.

We have to look for the red herrings in meditation. You know about red herrings? Originally they were used to deceive hunting

dogs because their smell is so strong the dogs would be thrown off track. Similarly, in meditation we have to look for deceptive moments and experiences.

Don't worry about miraculous attainments and powers, such as being able to read another's thoughts or astral traveling. Don't look for them. These can be red herrings. They can deceive meditators.

What you have to look for is how you get rid of certain psychic irritants in order to cleanse the mind. When the mind is clean and clear, some of these supernatural things may be possible. But they are not the goal of practice.

So, when we understand the truth — especially the Four Noble Truths — we begin to see the real path developing in our mind. When we meditate we always remember to pay attention, that we must develop our mindfulness, concentration, and equanimity.

These factors have to be developed in tranquility meditation as well as insight meditation. Cultivate your attention, sharpen your attention. Pay attention always to your experience. Develop your mindfulness and use concentration to deepen your mindfulness. And try to have equanimity, an unbiased state of mind, so you can look at your experience clearly.

Just try to stay in a balanced state of mind. Then cleansing the mind becomes easier. Buddha said cultivating the mind is possible. Otherwise, we will get lost in the jungle inside our minds.

Pain and Discomfort

While sitting in meditation, I try to keep at it when pain and discomfort arise. But after a while I feel I just have to

change my position. How do you handle pain and discomfort while trying to sit for longer periods of meditation?

Normally the first and immediate reaction to pain and discomfort is to want to change position. That can be conquered if you have a little patience and if you stay with the pain. Pain that arises in meditation is not going to kill you. But if it does kill you, well, that is the best way to die — while meditating! After all, there are a whole lot more miserable ways to go.

But you won't die. You just need to work with the pain or discomfort. When you have a pain in your back, your knee, or somewhere else while meditating, just watch it at first. Pay mindful attention to it. If you think you will lose your leg or something like that, watch even that reaction — since the way you react can intensify your perception of the pain.

As the Buddha taught, the first "dart" that you experience is the physical sensation of the pain. But the second dart is your attitude toward the pain. That second dart is optional! So, try to have a positive attitude by looking at the pain and seeing it exactly for what it is. Try just sitting with the pain without immediately shifting your position. Say to yourself, "Let me sit with this pain and see how it increases and what happens after that."

You will be surprised as you pay careful attention to the pain. It seems to increase in volume and intensity. It increases until it reaches its painful climax — then it breaks down and even disappears. It becomes a neutral sensation. It becomes weak and blurred. Then your mind is able to return its focus to the breath.

If you stay with that neutral feeling, it turns into a pleasant feeling. As you watch that pleasant feeling, it turns into a neutral

feeling again. That neutral feeling may again turn into the unpleasant feeling of discomfort. So it goes, in a cycle like that. Try to see this whole cycle of pain and your reaction to it ebbing and flowing throughout your meditation.

Suppose you are sitting and after thirty minutes you start to experience a lot of pain. If you tolerate the pain for five or ten minutes with this wholesome, positive attitude, you will see the pain or discomfort change into neutral and then pleasant feelings. Then it may become unpleasant for a while. Then it's neutral again. When you come to that neutral feeling a second time, you have spent perhaps forty-five minutes meditating.

Through such effort, you can overcome the immediate desire when encountering discomfort to shift away from it. Sitting through these cycles of pain and discomfort, seeing how the mind reacts, can be a very powerful experience. In this way, you can really get to deeper levels of meditation.

The trouble is that many people don't have a lot of patience, or they have not developed it enough. This difficulty is always coming up in meditation practice for them. I just advise them to stay with the pain and see the whole cycle.

Certainly, if you feel you really need to, you can mindfully shift your position. Or get up quietly and do standing meditation for a while, and then return to sitting. Working with pain and discomfort in meditation can offer deep insights into how our minds work.

Plus, as you learn to sit longer, your body will grow used to the posture, and discomfort will not be such a big issue. Please don't get discouraged when you have discomfort as you sit. That is a part of the deal. Accept it and work with it.

Beginning Buddhism

You've been teaching beginning students a long time. What advice might you have for a person newly interested in Buddhism?

People who are interested in Buddhism must first pick up the right books, especially Theravada books. As I am a Theravada monk, somebody might think I am prejudiced. Surely, I am prejudiced. But I don't condemn other sects and say other sects don't have many wonderful things to teach.

But Theravada Buddhism is the oldest branch of Buddhism; therefore, if somebody wants to learn about Buddhism, first they must learn Theravada Buddhism.

I must tell you a little story I heard about a famous Tibetan teacher. One very cold winter night he called his students together, maybe sixty or seventy of them, from the grounds of the center they were all at. According to the story, in the middle of the night he woke up his bodyguard and asked him to gather the students. They all came to the big meditation hall and were sitting there, trembling from the cold.

This teacher came about a half-hour later and sat down. Everybody was silent. They all were waiting. They thought he was going to make a very serious announcement. Very serious! He sat down and waited for another fifteen minutes. Finally he lifted one finger and said, "Don't forget Theravada Buddhism! Now, go and sleep."

To make this one statement, he created this scene! That means even a Mahayana Buddhist sees the significance of Theravada Buddhism. So, I would say if somebody wants to learn Buddhism, first they must pick up good Theravada books and good

translations of the Buddha's teachings.

There are many beautiful translations, especially Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation of the Majjhima Nikaya, Samyutta Nikaya, Anguttara Nikaya, and Sutta Nipata. He also has written some very good books on the Digha Nikaya and separately published one book titled *The Buddha's Teaching in His Own Words*. People should read first at least one of these books to gain the background and grounding for the practice.

And when it comes to meditation, they must also pick up meditation books that give clear instructions on meditation. I don't want to pinpoint any particular books, but the instructions must be easy to follow.

Second, they must choose a teacher who teaches in a clear, comprehensive language. By associating with that person, they will learn very sincerely. While learning, they must practice. Practice, practice, and practice! Then they will see how these meditation instructions work very well. The person will come to have a good knowledge of meditation through experience.

Ultimate Aim of Meditation

Are we trying to empty the mind when meditating? What is the ultimate aim of meditating?

Sometimes people think insight meditation is just sitting on a cushion doing nothing. This is *not* mind-emptying meditation! This is *mindfulness* meditation. There is more to it than just sitting there. After all, you can devote 100 percent of your attention to what you are doing and still not gain any insight. A cat or a tiger pays total attention to its prey but doesn't gain an iota of insight about anything. Why? All they have is simple concentration as

they focus intently on their prey in their minds.

But in insight meditation we pay total attention with mindfulness. We work on gaining the ability to look at everything that arises with the clearest state of mind — without greed, hatred, or delusion.

That is not how we normally pay attention to things. Usually our minds are obsessed or distracted by some variation of greed or desire for things or a rejection of things. We feel annoyance, dislike, or dissatisfaction with our current state. We want to be someplace else, anyplace other than where we are. Or there is ignorance about what is really going on around us and inside us.

But when we start to pay mindful attention to our moment-to-moment experience, we learn to see the mind's restlessness and distraction, its illusions and desires, more keenly. That is where letting go comes in.

Very often you hear about "letting go of things." Sometimes meditators become confused by this phrase. We must remember what is meant. We learn to let go of those things that are harmful to our practice, but we keep those things that are beneficial.

What is harmful to us? Greedy thoughts are harmful. Hateful thoughts. Jealousy, fear, worry, confusion — we must train ourselves to abandon these states by cultivating their opposites. When we have mindful reflection, what do we see? What do we gain? We gain clear comprehension.

Clear comprehension or clear understanding of the purpose, according to the Buddha, means we understand our aim. It means that we meditate not just to gain a little relaxation or to temporarily feel good. Those are certainly nice byproducts of

meditation practice. But the ultimate aim of practicing meditation is the purification of our being. We aim at no less than overcoming suffering, treading the path that leads to liberation, and finally attaining that liberation. Our mind and body are our laboratory for this effort.

In the Four Foundations of Mindfulness the Buddha repeated something so many times that it is like a chorus: "This body is not something to cling to. This body exists for me to gain knowledge and insight." That is really what we are doing in meditation practice — not just blanking out.

Samatha and Vipassana

I am interested in your thoughts about a certain way of viewing meditation: that samatha meditation with a primary object of the breath is preparation for vipassana, a type of meditation that technically has no primary object and in which everything is the object. I wonder if you think there's a place in the meditative journey where a meditation that focuses on a primary object becomes something to put aside in favor of seeing the three characteristics in everything that arises?

There seems to be some confusion in the question itself. We must understand the difference between samatha and vipassana meditation. Samatha meditation — *samatha* is the Pali word, in Sanskrit it is *shamatha* — means calming and making the mind peaceful to gain concentration. That is the meditation system we use to gain deep concentration, culminating in attainment of what is called *jhanas*.

To gain that state of concentration, we need one single object to

focus the mind. So selecting one single object to focus the mind to gain concentration is samatha meditation.

For vipassana meditation any subject is acceptable. Anything — your body, feelings, perceptions, sounds, sights, tastes, whatever. We can use anything to gain insight. That is called mindfulness practice. Anything we focus our mind on is clearly marked with the three characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and selflessness. Therefore, vipassana meditation can use any subject, while samatha meditation uses only one subject at a time.

Having said this, which of these two do we practice first? In your question you say samatha meditation is to be practiced to prepare for vipassana. To some extent that is true, because some people are very good at gaining concentration. It is easy for them. At other times, or for a different person, they cannot gain concentration that easily or quickly. For that time, for that person, practice vipassana first.

There are four ways actually. You can practice samatha first and then vipassana. The other method is to practice vipassana first, then samatha. The third method is practicing the two parallel to each other. The fourth method is to just inwardly settle your mind. That is neither samatha or vipassana but a combination of both.

Practicing concentration meditation, the mind becomes calm, peaceful, and relaxed. Once you gain concentration, you don't stop there. You use vipassana to deepen your understanding. When these combine together you can see things more clearly. As the Buddha said, the concentrated mind can see things exactly as they are.

So, if somebody likes to practice tranquility or concentration meditation because they have good powers of concentration, then

that is fine for them. But he or she should not stop there. The person must then go to vipassana meditation.

Good and Bad Meditation

Do you have good and bad meditation sessions? If so, what is the difference?

Actually, when you practice mindfulness there is no difference. There is no "good" meditation or "bad" meditation. Why? No matter how "bad" we think our meditation is going, we can use those so-called bad experiences as the object of our mindfulness, right then and there.

Why do we think a meditation session is a bad one? Maybe it's because the mind is wandering. Or it's full of worries and fear, distracted and agitated by anger, tension, lust, or restlessness. But in fact, these are the actual materials we have to use in meditation. These are called mental objects.

During a bad meditation session, if some really unpleasant feelings or distracted states arise, then use them, then and there, as the object of your meditation. If anger at your spouse or your boss arises, examine it. Don't do anything. Learn to watch the anger without getting carried away by it. Don't let it obsess you. Try to be aloof around it. Be mindful of the focus of your mind at that second, noting, "This is anger. This is how anger is! This is what it does. It disturbs my peacefulness. I can feel my heart beat faster."

As soon as anger arises in the mind, marching orders go out to the heart: "Get that heartbeat racing! Elevate that blood pressure!" We can see this connection, we can see this happening. So, we just keep watching, watching. As the seconds and minutes pass, the anger, the fear, the anxiety, the lustful thoughts that have come to

dominate our attention slowly subside. Perhaps not very quickly. It may take a while. But they will if we watch it from start to finish. This process of mindful observation of mental objects is part and parcel of what we do during meditation. So how can it be "bad"?

And when you say "good meditation," what do you mean by "good"? Perhaps your mind is not so busy. Yet maybe a good meditation lulls you to sleep. Someone might say, "Ah, now *that's* a good meditation." That is not good meditation! That is bad meditation.

If you do feel sleepy, by the way, just watch that sleepiness, too. And do something to rouse your energy, to wake you up and get rid of your drowsiness. Take three deep breaths and hold them to oxygenate the blood. Do standing meditation to wake your body up from its drowsiness. Even that situation, if we handle it mindfully, is not bad meditation.

So, I would not say there is good meditation and bad meditation. It all depends on how we handle each moment. If we handle a moment mindfully, any situation is a good meditation.

The Lotus Posture

Should I try to meditate in the lotus posture? Is it important?

When it comes to posture, if I say one thing is important or better, other people who cannot do that position may feel bad about their own posture. Since you asked the question, I must say, yes, the lotus position is the *best* posture. Once you sit in lotus posture, you see how steady your body is, how easy it is for you to breathe, how easily you gain concentration.

In walking meditation some of us emphasize the movement of our feet and coordinating with the breath, noticing the movement and the feeling we have when we walk slowly. That part is emphasized.

But there is another part of walking meditation — that is the mental state. While walking we must understand every part of our body is moving. Every part! In walking meditation all the aggregates — our bodies, our feelings, our perception, our volitional formations, our thinking and consciousness — all these five aggregates are involved. Every aggregate is changing at every fraction of a second when we walk.

It is a more dynamic meditation than sitting meditation. In sitting meditation the body is relatively still, but the mind is working very hard. In walking meditation the mind and body both are working in cooperation with each other. They have to cooperate.

So, when we walk in silence we focus our mind not on just one aggregate. Instead, we focus on all of them working together simultaneously. Awareness of that simultaneous movement of every aggregate, the changing nature of every aggregate, is a very good meditation.

That is why the Buddha used these four postures. They are akin to the four wheels of a vehicle. When you balance your vehicle, you have to balance all four wheels. So, sitting, standing, walking, and lying down, all these four postures can be used equally for vipassana meditation because in all these postures the same thing is happening.

MEDITATING OUTDOORS

I have been meditating outside. It occurred to me that when meditating outside things in nature — animals,

insects — they often come to you. What are your thoughts about the benefits of meditating in nature?

Well, at the very least you get a lot of oxygen from the trees! You merge with nature when you meditate outside. You know, in the Buddha's life, he was born under a tree and he attained enlightenment under a tree and passed away under trees. And whenever he gave his followers instruction on meditation, his bhikkhus and bhikkhunis, or monks and nuns, he would say, "Bhikkhus! There are trees. Sit under them and meditate!"

When we are very peaceful, the trees that surround us — although they don't have feelings like ours — somehow receive the peaceful vibrations from us, and we feel the peaceful vibrations out in nature. So, practicing outside is a very compassionate and meaningful way to practice.

Misunderstanding Meditation

Meditation is taught in different ways by different Buddhist schools. Then there is the lay mindfulness movement in the West. Can you talk about the differences among these ways of teaching meditation?

Meditation is the heart of Buddhist teachings in all of the sects. Whether it is Mahayana, Theravada, Vajrayana — in all sects the practice of meditation is emphasized.

Though it has become a very popular subject, there also is a great deal of misunderstanding about meditation. Either it is overly simplified or it is made very difficult to practice.

When it is simplified, people become so complacent and don't take it seriously. Some people think they just need to be aware of what

is happening around them. So you don't have to do anything, just be as you are. Go with the flow. Take it easy. Don't worry, don't make effort! It's your nature. You don't have to worry. You are enlightened, but you just don't know. That is one way of looking at meditation.

However, that is not actually what we learn in the Buddha's teachings from the scriptures. Maybe some individuals come up with various ideas just to throw around very catchy phrases. I think that is too simple.

There is another way of looking at meditation that can become almost impossible to follow. That is, an analytical system. You keep analyzing, analyzing, analyzing. This approach breaks it down to very nitty-gritty details that go on and on as if meditation is something like microbiology.

When we look at the Buddha's suttas, we don't see that kind of a detailed system. We have to look at the Buddha's suttas for guidance.

Unfortunately, that is the very thing that people don't want to look at! They don't want to study; they simply want to meditate without knowing the Buddha's guidelines. If we try to meditate, we will get bewildered and confused and we won't know what we are doing. And that is what has happened to so many people. This is why I always quote the Buddha's suttas on meditation and always refer people to them.

Meditation Progress

How do we know we are making progress in meditation?

This is a very common question because people don't know what

they are doing. They follow this system, then that system, this teacher's instruction, then that teacher's method.

They spend many hours sitting on cushions and counting their cushion hours. How many hours, how many days? How many retreats have I gone to? They go from retreat to retreat. If they hear that in such and such a place there's a good meditation teacher, they say, "Let's go there!" And then they hear there's another teacher — "Let's go there!"

They keep window-shopping. You might call it meditation window-shopping. Yet when they look at themselves, they find themselves at the same place. They have gained nothing. They never look where they are supposed to look. They never do what they're supposed to do. One doesn't have to go that far to practice meditation. Buddha has laid down the plan. And they just ignore that.

When we try to explain meditation from the Buddha's own words, they say, "Who cares about that! Tell me what you know, what you have experienced!" But we only know what we experience by following the system. If we don't follow a method, we cannot tell what we've experienced.

Buddha asked us to look at our own mind. That is exactly what we are *not* doing. In order to see how far we have developed in our meditation, we must look at our mind.

Hearing the Heart

During meditation I can hear my heartbeat, and it competes with my breath during meditation. What should I do to overcome this?

If you hear or feel your heartbeat while breathing, you just pay attention. You don't have to divide your attention between the breath and the heartbeat. You let your breath be almost automatic. You just let it go — in and out — because it is happening anyway. Then, when you feel the heartbeat, it is something you don't normally experience all the time. But the breath is going on all the time. So let that breath continue in its natural rhythm. And when the heartbeat arises, you pay attention to the heartbeat — don't try to divide your attention.

When you do not feel the heartbeat, then the breath becomes prominent. In anapanasati meditation, you become aware of any sensation that arises as it arises. For instance, joy. Feeling joy, you breathe in, and feeling joy, you breathe out. So you feel the joy while you are breathing in, you feel the joy while you are breathing out. The attention is on the joy, and the breath is moving in and out, because it's a constant object. Since it is repeating itself, it doesn't need any attention — it goes on and on. But joy is not going on all the time. It is something you have not noticed before. And suddenly you experience joy.

Pay attention to the things you experience anew. That is not a hindrance, don't try to overcome it.

Pain while Meditating

Can the pain we experience in our legs and backs while sitting help us to understand the noble truth of dukkha?

Just feeling physical aches and pains itself does not explain dukkha or unsatisfactoriness. We experience dukkha in our own minds. Physical sensations will not go away even if you attain enlightenment. Even arahants have pain, even the Buddha

When you do it several times, your mind gets so tired of counting — it is so boring! You lose your count, and then you think, "I was counting and what happened? Where was I when my mind started wandering?" Then you remember it started wandering when you were at six and you wonder whether you should go from six to seven or six to five. You get confused! Then you start all over again.

In this way you make your mind very tired. When the mind is tired, it cannot wander anymore. Then, start focusing the mind on the breath. This seems to work for some people — it may not for everybody. But try it and see if it works for you.

Another way to deal with the wandering mind is to say, "If you want to wander, I will provide an object to focus on." Then you focus your attention on the thirty-two parts of the body. Memorize them and go from the crown of the head to toes, focusing the mind on each part. Say, "Head hair is impermanent, unsatisfactory, and selfless. Body hair is impermanent, unsatisfactory, and selfless. The nails are impermanent, unsatisfactory, and selfless," and so forth.

Say also, "This is not mine, this is not I, this is not myself." You focus your mind on each of the thirty-two body parts using these six sentences. See what will happen.

The mind is so agitated and excited that it wanders. So give it a subject! And at the same time you learn something meaningful. You gain insight into your own body. All the notions about the body will slowly fade away. This is really a mindfulness practice. There are six sentences for each body part. Head hair, for instance, is impermanent, unsatisfactory, and selfless. Plus, head hair "is not mine, it is not I, this is not myself."

You may say your hair is yours. But if it is yours, you should be able to do anything you want with your hair aside from cutting, washing, and shampooing it. But as you age, can you stop your hair from turning gray and falling out? Can you control that? No.

Therefore, head hair is not yours, along with body hair, teeth, nails, and the other parts of the body. For every part of the body we focus our mind on we can use these six sentences as a way of analyzing the thirty-two body parts as described by the Buddha. And the wandering mind will learn something. That's a good meditation.

Breath as an Agent

Insight meditation instructions recommend letting distracting mental formations arise and fall away, and to simply return one's awareness to the breath. How does a meditator gain insight regarding aggregates and mental formations if anything other than the breath is to be seen as a distraction and allowed to fall away?

Actually a meditator gains insight and wisdom not just by focusing the mind on the breath. The breath is used at the beginning, and through the breath we can notice various types of things in our mind and body. This is a very big subject, and sometimes I hesitate to start talking about it, as I can go overboard since the subject is very deep and profound. Talking about it is difficult.

But we start with the breath and through the breath we can see impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and selflessness, of our body, feelings, perceptions, thoughts, and consciousness. These are what we call the Five Aggregates. These are all we have.

The breath is called a body conditioner. When we breathe in and

out, oxygen is distributed through our blood circulation to keep our cells alive and to keep the body functioning. Unlike all the kinds of conditioners you might buy at the store, the Buddha talked about the real conditioner that conditions our living. This is the breath.

And then we have thoughts, feeling, perceptions, and consciousness, and all these are constantly and consistently changing. When we start with the breath, the breath shows this sign of change because the breath is constantly changing, bringing in new oxygen to replace the old air in the body.

It is changing all the time. Therefore, everything else is impermanence. Everything in the universe is impermanent, and because of impermanence, things can exist. Nothing can exist if things are not impermanent.

Friends, impermanence is the only thing that keeps us alive. If we understand impermanence exactly as it is, then we reach a permanent state. We can see this through the breath.

Therefore, we use the breath as an agent, and through that our mind opens to see impermanence and to free ourselves from attachment. To gain insight we use the breath, the body, feelings, perceptions, and so forth.

Light Show

During today's talk you mentioned that seeing a light or brightness that comes by itself is dangerous. Why is that?

Because it confuses the meditator. The meditator thinks, "Oh! I am going to attain jhanas!" As soon as you sit for ten minutes, a bright light appears. "Oh, I am done! I have attained jhanas!" That very

light can confuse you.

But if the light arises through the development of mind, and through overcoming hindrances just before gaining concentration, that is not dangerous, because you have prepared your mind to accept it.

As for the light that appears all of a sudden for no reason, you don't know how you got it and so you get confused. That is the danger.

Sensations during Meditation

During most meditation sessions, I feel a throbbing between my eyebrows. It is not painful, although it makes it harder to be aware of my breath at my nostrils. Should I pay any special attention to this throbbing?

If you feel throbbing between your eyebrows, if it is very strong and significant, pay attention but relax. Don't get upset. This can be interpreted as a headache or something else. Don't do anything else, just keep paying attention to it and relax your mind. Don't be afraid of the sensation. It will disappear.

Handling Joy and Bliss

How should we deal with joy and bliss when they arise during meditation?

When you have feelings of joy and bliss, watch them mindfully and see how they rise, peak, and pass away just like any other feelings or emotions. No feelings stay still. Feeling arises when there is contact. When the senses and sensory objects come together, then feeling arises. Feeling cannot arise on its own without any contact.

don't remember whether to go from one to six or six to one! Right?

Just start all over again from the beginning. And then go to ten again. When you come down, the mind wanders again. The mind does not stay on the counting. Then you realize, "Ah! I lost the counting again!" So you start all over again.

When you do this exercise many, many times, then your wandering mind will stay on the breath. And that will help you overcome your restless, monkey mind.

The Doubting Meditator

How do we deal with doubt arising in meditation?

The Pali word for doubt is *vicikiccha*. The cure for the hindrance of doubt is trust. You've got to trust your own practice, number one. Look at yourself. You have overcome other hindrances like restlessness and worry. That gives you confidence that you can do it.

You are not hopeless, you are not helpless. You are a person who can do something. The very fact that you came to practice indicates that you have a wonderful intention. That gives you strength that you have achieved something from meditation. Your own personal experience gives you confidence.

Then you begin to trust the Dhamma because it is this Dhamma that brought you to this practice. It gives you this self-confidence. And then you have a deeper confidence in the Buddha who introduced the Dhamma. Your doubt gradually dies away and disappears.

Meditation and Mantras

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