

3. Basic Instructions

Thursday, 23rd January, 2019

“A monk abides contemplating the body (feelings, mind, dhammas), diligent, clearly knowing and mindful, free from desires and discontent in regard to the world.”

Today we are going to look at this phrase at the beginning of the *Satipatthana* which describes how we are to approach this path. This instruction comes before the detailed discussion of techniques, so should be applied to every one of the 53 techniques. Indeed, any meditation practice would be well done in this manner.

Let's explore what each of these characteristics involves.

Diligence. Anālayo is clear that the word in Pali, *ātāpī*, is refers to the idea of “energy” or “effort,” and is interchangeable with the more common *virya* that appears in other parts of the Pali Canon. *Ātāpī* though, is an odd choice of words for the Buddha. It is related to the word that was used to talk about ascetic austerity practices, such as extreme fasting or self-mortification and the like. Before his enlightenment, the man who would become the Buddha had tried these practices and gone to greater extremes than anyone, but found they they did not lead to awakening. He then gave up these physical rigours and turned to training the mind. It was at through his mental training that he finally realized enlightenment. (It should be noted that the Buddha did not reject physical asceticism entirely. He just rejected it as a path to freedom from suffering.)

What the Buddha went on to teach for the rest of his 80 years could be described as mental asceticism. He taught that we should cleanse all unwholesome states from our minds. This was to be done through the exertion of effort in cultivating wholesome mind states and rooting out unwholesome ones. That the Buddha here should talk about effort or energy using a word that connotes asceticism and austerity perhaps speaks to the seriousness for the application of such effort. Austerity of the mind should be cultivated with as much rigor and, indeed, to such an extreme degree, as physical austerity is

practiced by the wandering ascetics. Or perhaps he was just poking a little fun at the ascetics, who considered him to have gone soft.

Whatever his reason for choosing that word, it is clear from comparative studies of other texts (see Anālayo) that it was synonymous with *virya*, the word translated as “diligence” in the 10 Most Excellent Practices. And we know something about this kind of diligence. (You can listen to my two talks about it on my website if you want to know more than what I’m saying here.) Other English words that are sometimes used instead of diligence include “energy” and “effort.” *Ātāpī* and *virya* both are words with more meaning than can fit into a single English word. It is my belief that *diligence* is more a process than an attitude, and it works like this: Energy arises within us (physically or mentally). We use that energy to do something. This using of energy is *effort*. Appropriate effort, which is effort that is balanced, sustained, and committed, is *diligence*. The characteristic of diligence, then, includes being aware of your energy levels and expending energy within your limits; choosing appropriate activities on which to expend that energy (effort), and then maintaining a constant awareness of these two balances, and continuing with determined commitment until you reach your goal.

In relation specifically to practicing the *Satipatthana*, *diligence* would mean committing to continue the practice with a balanced, appropriate level of effort applied to these various techniques.

Clearly knowing. *Clearly knowing* is something that I often mention in guided meditations, when I talk about “knowing that you know.” There’s *knowing* as in “I know I’m breathing,” and there’s *knowing* as in “I am feeling the sensations of breathing even as I breathe, and am aware of what these sensations feel like.” *Clear knowing* is the direct experience or gut-level understanding of something observed.

Notice that *clearly knowing* goes along with *mindfulness*. One is clearly knowing *and* mindful. The structure of this sentence implies that the two together define a single aspect of meditative approach. *Clearly knowing* is necessary for the processing and understanding of what one is being mindful of. Let’s look at *mindfulness* now to see how these two work together.

Mindfulness. *Sati*, translated as *mindfulness*, in and of itself is a rather dry and distant faculty. As we all know, it is the act of being aware of the present moment, but it is nothing more than this. It is presence of mind, as opposed to being absent-minded. It does not imply insight or wisdom or understanding of what one is aware of. It does not necessarily lead to anything further, such as judgement or action.

This presence of mind enables one to be aware of what is going on, but what the mind then does with this information is something other than mindfulness. Mindfulness can lead to unskillful actions if the information gained from simple awareness is used improperly or misunderstood. This is why *clearly knowing* is an auxiliary to *mindfulness*. When doing this practice, one must do it with presence of mind, and then attending to what one is aware of with clear knowing. Mindfulness in itself does not guarantee clear knowing or insight.

Understanding this, we can see that mindfulness in itself is not an activity. It is aware but does not interfere. It cannot interfere because it is not an action. It is a state of being. (Interestingly, it is also connected with *remembering*, in that being clearly aware of the present moment makes the establishment of the memory of that moment firmer. Mindfulness of the present moment also facilitates the recollection of memories. This will come into play a little later in the year.) It is worth noting that nowhere in the *Satipatthana* is the meditator instructed to act on what is observed. Even when we get to the hindrances, for example, the instructions are that if scatteredness (distraction) arises, one observes it, but does not attempt to escape from it. As soon as one tries to act on what is being observed, the objective, non-interfering attitude is lost. This is not to say that one never takes action on what one observes. This is the very reason to have mindfulness: to be able to see things as they really are, without overlaying experience with habits and stories and judgements, *so that* you will be able to make wise decisions about what actions to take. That might mean that you become aware of the mind state of anger through mindfulness, and can then choose to apply lovingkindness to the situation in order to ease the anger and avoid inappropriate reactions. But the basic instruction here is about being aware, not about acting on what you are aware of.

The instructions so far are to commit to appropriate effort to maintain this practice, and then to be aware of what is present with clear, direct experience of that of which we are aware, but without taking any further action in regard to what is presently experienced.

Freedom from desires and discontent in regard to the world. Does “desire and discontent” sound a little bit like “grasping and aversion” to you? At first glance, this might seem to be saying that we have to have achieved a state of freedom from suffering before we can practice the path that leads to freedom from suffering. Obviously this cannot be the case, so what does this actually mean?

I think this phrase refers to equanimity. What is equanimity, but the ability to experience something without the compulsion to grasp onto it or to push it away? A high degree of equanimity suggests an ability to let go of desires and discontent with ease. In fact, one could make the argument that enlightenment – freedom from suffering – boils down to perfect equanimity.

But again, we are not being told that we must be free of suffering in order to take the path that leads to freedom from suffering. We are being encouraged to apply as much equanimity as we can to whatever it is we are aware of at the moment.

Just as we are instructed to be diligent, but cannot be expected to never lapse in our commitment, just as we are told to have clear knowing, but cannot be expected to be able to know at the beginning as clearly as someone who has been practicing for decades, just as we are instructed to be present-minded, but cannot be expected never to doze off or get lost in thoughts, so we are instructed to practice with equanimity, but are not expected to be able to have perfect equanimity from the beginning or uninterrupted equanimity for the duration of our meditative lives.

These are ideals to aim toward, skills which develop as we practice, capabilities that will wax and wane with the circumstances of each moment, but will ultimately be established as habitual ways of being. We intend to practice in this way without striving or struggling with it. We keep it in mind and develop these attitudes as habits.

And when we become confused or distressed or ungrounded in the midst of the details of the instructions that follow, we can return to these initial instructions to get back on track.

Once again, what are these initial instructions? To commit to appropriate effort to maintain this practice, and then to be aware of what is present with clear, direct experience of that of which we are aware, but without taking any further action in regard to what is presently experienced, and to do so with as much equanimity as possible, neither grasping nor fighting that which we observe.

With these basic instructions, the text then leads us into the first of the 53 techniques, saying, essentially “do the following technique with the approach defined above.”

Next week, we’ll start looking at the various paths. But whether or not you join us for the rest of the year as we study these different techniques, you can still apply these basic instructions to whatever your practice entails. Whether you are following your breath or reciting a mantra or doing loving kindness – whatever you are doing – see if you can do it with diligence, clearly knowing and mindfully, and with equanimity in regards to to world.