

### **3. Noting: early Buddhism and the Burmese method**

February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2018

You may remember a few weeks ago when we talked about the word *mindfulness* that I said the first usage of it in the context of meditation was when an early western scholar of Buddhism used it to translate the Pali word *sati*. Well, today, as we jump into our first exploration of a specific contemplative practice, it seems like *sati* would be a good place to start.

There were many meditation practices before the Buddha made his unique discovery, and many that have arisen since. But his personal experience and early teaching of what he learned from it reflect a radically different approach that had not been known of prior, and which has become a mainstay for modern “mindfulness” meditators around the world. Meditation prior to the Buddha focused on deep, prolonged concentration, and the altered states that can be achieved through it. The Buddha’s discovery started with realizing that concentration was only a tool, not goal, and what he used that tool for changed the contemplative world.

The word *sati*, the one that T.W. Rhys Davids chose to call *mindfulness* in English, is part of the word *satipatthana*, which is the term the Buddha called his new discovery. *Patthana*, according to my Pali-English online dictionary, means “setting forth” or “putting forward.” It’s like beginning to do something that you intend to continue to do, like starting a journey. *Sati* as translated directly (not through a Buddhist lens), means an “active state of mind, fixing the mind strongly upon any subject, attention, attentiveness.” Thus, we amateurs might come to a rough literal translation something like this: “setting forth on the process of fixing the mind strongly upon something.” Or perhaps, “putting forth attentiveness.”

So that the earliest teachings that the Buddha himself gave about the technique he discovered has something to do with the activity of fixing your mind strongly on whatever it is you have decided to pay attention to, with an intention to continue that line of action.

The earliest and most authoritative written text of this teaching, the *Satipatthana Sutta* (*sutta* means a discourse, or a teaching), is quite long, and describes about a million and one different ways to pay attention to things. You can pay attention to your breath, or your body or your walking or what direction you are facing or bending, stretching, eating, even urinating. You can pay attention to all the gross parts of your body like hair and nails and phlegm and bile, or you can fix your mind on the

decaying bodies in the charnel grounds (there are nine different ways to contemplate decaying bodies). You can pay attention to the four elements of solidity, fluidity, temperature, and mobility; or whether things are pleasant or unpleasant; or to your inner state of mind: greed, lust, anger, doubt. And that's only about half of the discourse. But it's the general principle of "setting forth to fix the mind strongly upon something" that is so radically different from earlier styles of meditation, and that makes this particular technique so much more effective than many others.

And then history happened. Buddhism became more institutionalized, moved and adapted to other places and cultures, evolved into a great many schools and traditions, and the ways of fixing the mind strongly that the Buddha originally taught morphed into many other practices. These changes were all good, many improved upon what is sometimes called "dry" *satipatthana*. (By the way, there is nothing intrinsically better about the early teachings. They were just a jumping-off point for further evolution. I'm sure the Buddha would have been pleased to see his lineage of students experimenting and adapting and changing the specific techniques to suit those seeking to use it.) But the outcome is that by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, *sattipatthana*, as the Buddha taught it 2500 years ago, was pretty much a lost art.

Then early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a Buddhist monk in Burma, Jetevan Sayadaw, rediscovered it. Jetevan Sayadaw was a highly respected teacher with an inclination toward reading and deep study. (By the way, he also had an eidetic memory, and is in the 1954 Guinness Book of World Records for correctly reciting 16,000 pages of Buddhist texts). He found in the classic (but no longer strictly followed) *Satipatthana Sutta* the keys to the method the Buddha had originally practiced, and began to teach them to his students. One of those students was Mahasi Sayadaw, who took the ball and ran with it. Mahasi refined and elucidated this new-old practice, and was able to teach it much more widely than Jetevan had. Although he met with criticism early on, by his death in 1993, the "New Burmese Method," also called the "Mahasi Method," had become one of the most popular techniques in modern western Buddhism. In the age of "secular Buddhism," the Mahasi Method came to more commonly be called "Noting."

And it is "Noting" that I want to teach you this evening: a modern interpretation of the Buddha's earliest teachings.

The basic idea of noting is that you focus on the rising and falling of the abdomen as you breathe, but if any other experience arises, you notice that also. You give it a little label, quietly in the

back of your mind, to help you maintain your concentration and not get involved in the experience. So you might be noting "rising, falling, rising, falling, thinking, thinking, rising, falling." Sounds pretty simple. But the thing is, you have to note *everything* that arises in your experience, *all the time*. Here is an excerpt in Mahasi Sayadaw's own words, from his book, *Practical Vipassana Meditation Exercises*.

While occupied with the exercise of observing each of the abdominal movements, other mental activities may occur between the noting of each rising and falling. Thoughts or other mental functions, such as intentions, ideas, imaginings, are likely to occur between each mental note of *rising* and *falling*. They cannot be disregarded. A mental note must be made of each as it occurs.

If you imagine something, you must know that you have done so and make a mental note, *imagining*. If you simply think of something, mentally note, *thinking*. If you reflect, *reflecting*. If you intend to do something, *intending*. When the mind wanders from the object of meditation which is the rising and falling of the abdomen, mentally note, *wandering*. Should you imagine you are going to a certain place, note *going*. When you arrive, *arriving*. When, in your thoughts, you meet a person, note *meeting*. Should you speak to him or her, *speaking*...

...you are likely to experience an intense feeling of fatigue, stiffness in the body or in the arms and legs. Should this happen, simply keep the knowing mind on that part of the body where such feelings occur and carry on the contemplation, noting *tired* or *stiff*... Make a mental note of the specific sensation as it occurs, such as *painful*, *aching*, *pressing*, *piercing*, *tired*, *giddy*.

...When you look at the tap or water-pot on arriving at the place where you are to take a drink, be sure to make a mental note, *looking*, *seeing*.

When you stop walking, *stopping*.  
When you stretch out the hand, *stretching*.  
When you touch the cup, *touching*.  
When you take the cup, *taking*.  
When dipping the cup into the water, *dipping*.  
When bringing the cup to the lips, *bringing*.  
When the cup touches the lips, *touching*.  
When you swallow, *swallowing*.  
When returning the cup, *returning*.

Let's try this, and see what Mahasi's Burmese Method feels like. We'll just do it for 45 seconds or so. You'll start by making a mental note as you breath: *rising, falling*. Then whatever else comes up, note that also. *Thinking. Planning. Hearing*. Maybe you hear a car, *Hearing*, and an image of a car comes to your mind. *Seeing*. Then you realize you are here, not in a car, so an image of this room arises. *Seeing. Itch. Pain. Intention. Moving. Opening eyes. Frustration. Confusion. Rising. Falling*. OK, here we go.

#### DO 45 SECONDS OF NOTING TECHNIQUE

What was that like for you? Were you able to think about other things at the same time as Noting? Did you feel concentrated? One criticism of this technique has been that it does not result in the same deep concentration that breath meditation does. This is true, but you cannot deny that you were paying complete attention, right? You *were* concentrated. It's just a different kind of concentration. The deep, relaxing, subjectively pleasant kind of concentration you experience with breath meditation is called Absorption concentration. The kind you just experienced with Noting is called Momentary concentration. The Buddha talks about these, and a couple of other kinds of concentration also. It may not feel as profound or as pleasant, but periods of continual repeated momentary meditation are exactly as effective as absorption meditation is in terms of insight and freedom. It may not always be relaxing, but it is certainly a lot harder to wander off into your thoughts when you are concentrating that hard on every experience that arises in each moment.

It's very hard work, though. You can see why some teachers have modified the Sayadaw's instructions to create a technique more usable by an average layperson. Unified Mindfulness takes the

basics of Mahasi style noting and slows it down and simplifies it. With this version of noting, you can limit the experiences you pay attention to, excluding certain types of experience so you don't have to note every single thing. Also, the labels are reduced to a few common categories, so you don't have to figure out a different word for each experience.

Here are the basic instructions for Noting and Labeling. Each instance of *noting* has two parts:

1. the moment of noticing a sensory experience (physical, mental, external or internal), and being aware that you have noticed it, and
2. soaking in to the experience, concentrating attentively on that one experience, getting to know it in detail.

An image that is helpful to me for understanding this is that of a honey bee collecting pollen. The bee flies around looking for a flower. (That's you resting your attention, and waiting no notice an experience). As soon as he spies a flower, he makes a beeline to it. (That's you noticing a sensory experience and turning your attention to it – knowing that you noticed it). The bee then crawls around inside the flower for a while, collecting pollen. (That's you soaking in, or getting to know the experience for a few seconds. Pay attention to every detail that you become aware of.) When the bee has his pollen, he flies out of the flower, and beelines it for the next. For you, after a few seconds, you let go of the object you were observing, and wait for another experience to draw your attention. Then you beeline it to that new experience, get to know it intimately for a few seconds, let go of it, and wait for another to catch your attention. Keep doing this for the duration of the meditation period, getting into an even rhythm of beelining it and collecting pollen, then beelining it and collecting pollen...

- *labeling* is an additional, optional step, in which you gently say a word in your mind to identify the type of experience. You *can* notice, be aware, and soak in without putting a label on the experience. However, using a label can help maintain concentration and clarity, and, especially at first, reduces confusion about how to do the technique. Use a casual, matter-of-fact tone of voice in your head when you label. This will help with equanimity.

## *Unified Mindfulness: A Contemplative Odyssey*

Those are the complete instructions: notice, soak, repeat. (Label if you want to.) You can choose different things to focus on, and we'll go into more detail with that at the retreat. In a moment, I'm going to lead you in a guided meditation in which we will allow ourselves to note anything that comes to our attention, but not necessarily everything. We'll boil down all kinds of experience into three categories: hearing, seeing, and feeling. This can be hearing external sounds or having internal thinking in words or music, etc. Internal seeing would be thinking in pictures, or in an awareness of a visual flavor to thoughts. Feeling externally is anything physical - heat, cold, itch, relaxation, indigestion, heartbeat. Internal feeling would be emotional sensation. So you only have to remember three labels: See, Hear, and Feel.

*So take a moment to straighten up and settle in to your posture....*