



# bodhi tree

FOREST MONASTERY AND RETREAT CENTRE

## **Orientation to the Practice – Ven. Pannyavaro**

### **Adjusting to the Retreat Situation**

Whether this is a first time experience of Vipassana meditation or you are a meditator who has experience in this mode of practice, every meditator at the beginning of a retreat will need to make some adjustment to the retreat situation - at least in having to settle down and get into the rhythm of the practice. First, let us look how one relates to a retreat situation and the way to adjust to the retreat environment, before the basic instructions and the framework that puts the practice into its context are given.

### **Self-regulatory Approach**

This is not a group practice. There are only a few formal group sittings sessions - but no orchestrated practice. The walking and sitting meditation sessions are done individually to allow you to go at your own pace. As this is essentially a self-regulatory practice, it is necessary that you learn how to manage yourself in the practice so that you can make your own adjustments as you go along with the help of the teacher. In order to self-manage the practice it requires that you have a thorough understanding of what you are doing as far as techniques and strategies go.

For the practice to stay on track, it is important that the teacher and the student work together in tandem. To this end, formal interviews are held where the student reports his or her practice. The teacher needs to be a technician of Vipassana meditation with travel experience, whose role is to instruct, inspire and guide the meditator. Yet even when you go along with a guide you still have to do your own work, which in this case is quite demanding, as the practice requires honesty, patience, and above all, persistence.

### **Follow the Vipassana method given for this retreat**

It is possible you are doing or have done some other meditation method using fixed concentration such as focusing on the breathing or the chanting of “buddho”; or perhaps you are following another Vipassana technique. If so, while we respect other methods, it is important that participants at this retreat follow the instruction as given so as not to create confusion. Of course, we are creatures of habit, so it will take some time to get established in a new method so you have to be patient in the change over – but during this retreat please follow the method and the detailed instructions as given.

## **Putting Aside Unfinished Business**

At the beginning of the retreat, there can be a lot of busyness of an ongoing nature in the mind that is brought into the retreat. Perhaps there is some 'unfinished business' you have not dealt with, especially if it is of an emotional nature such as a problem in a relationship. So at the start of a retreat, it is useful to make a resolution to put aside as much as possible all outside business for the duration of the retreat. This will help you to settle and minimize the disturbances these preoccupations have on the mind.

## **Be Gentle with Yourself**

Be gentle with yourself as perhaps you are carrying a sleep-debt or an accumulation of stress. Most people, at least initially and up to two to three days, will experience some sleepiness and restlessness at the beginning of a retreat. If you allow for that, and without reacting too much to it, you will soon find yourself settling down into the routine of the retreat. So allow for a settling-in period as you recuperate and allow the mind to settle down somewhat. Then you will be more able to focus your attention on what is happening in your own mind-body in the present moment and in good time as the practice matures you will be able to experience the naturally 'silent mind'.

## **Changing the Focus**

In everyday life we are naturally focused and preoccupied with the external world of people, places and things and our thoughts and reactions to this external world. What needs to happen is the change in one's focus from the sensory world with its external focus to an inner exploration of our own mind-body experience. In the retreat situation, as the mind settles down, there is a switch to investigating the processes of the mind and body from a state of receptivity. Although the switch of focus will naturally happen in the course of the retreat, it is useful to intentionally change the focus of the attention from the external to internal by inhibiting the wanderings at the sense doors such as seeing, hearing, etc. In this way, the attention is refocused to introspect or see into one's own subjective mind and body experience.

## **Relating to your Experience**

Notice how you are relating to your experience. Check whether you are evaluating or judging the practice. Try to have no expectations, just let it unfold. Right or skillful attitude is one of acceptance of whatever conditions and mind states arise, whether they are good, bad or indifferent. Monitor your thinking, mind states, emotions and feelings as much as possible without reacting to them. This acceptance and non-reactive awareness of whatever you are experiencing will develop the maturity factor of equanimity.

## **Maintaining the Intensity**

It is essential to maintain the intensity of the practice without straining. Steady and sustained application is needed in noting or maintaining attentiveness in all areas of practice: during sitting, walking and detailed awareness of activities throughout the day. But be careful not to over-exert yourself thereby creating stress, as it is not possible to be one hundred percent at all times. One has to go with one's natural rhythms and one's energy cycles. A balanced effort is required that needs to be as continuous as possible, as it creates the momentum that builds up the awareness which deepens the practice.

## **Getting Around in the Retreat Environment**

Use the whole of the retreat environment as your practice arena. Don't confine the practice just to the formal sitting in the meditation hall. Take a more holistic approach. It is all about staying watchful and attentive as much as possible in the total retreat environment: in the bathroom, dining room, sleeping place, and as you travel from place to place. Start by being more deliberate in your movements and actions as you move around the retreat. This will help you to slow down and to settle. It is recommended that as the meditator moves around the retreat centre, one keeps the eyes restrained – no sightseeing, no verbal or non-verbal communication. This helps to maintain your concentration and supports your fellow retreatants' practice.

## **How to Act during an Intensive Retreat**

Act like an invalid

During practice, a meditator needs to move slowly and take extra care while making body movements just like an invalid or like a person who is suffering from severe back pain. A person with a chronic back problem must always be cautious and move slowly just to avoid pain. In the same way, a meditator should try to keep to slow and deliberate movements in all actions. While it is not a slow motion exercise, *per se*, slowing down in intensive meditation is necessary to help to establish moment-to-moment awareness. If you are still operating in top gear, bring the mind to low gear and be patient with the change of speed until you are able to slow down and function in low gear at all times.

Act like a blind person

It is advisable for a meditator to behave as a blind person during the course of the training. A person without restraint will be constantly scanning around to look at external things that randomly take his or her attention. Therefore, it is not possible to obtain a steady and calm state of mind. On the other hand, a blind person behaves in a composed manner, sitting quietly with downcast eyes. One never turns in any direction to look at things because, of course, being blind one cannot see them. This composed manner of a blind person is worth imitating. A meditator should not go sightseeing! Stay focused on the

meditation object without exception. If a visual object happens to take one's attention, then make a mental note of it immediately, as "seeing", "seeing", then return to the meditation object.

#### Act like a deaf person

It is necessary for a meditator to also act like a deaf person. Ordinarily as soon as a person hears a sound, one turns around and look in the direction from where the sound came or one turn's towards the person who spoke and makes a reply. A deaf person on the other hand behaves in a composed manner. They do not respond to any sound or conversation because they never hear them. In the same way, a meditator should not respond to any sound or any unimportant talk, nor should he or she deliberately listen to any talk. If one happens to hear any sound or speech, one should immediately note "hearing", hearing", then return to the meditation object. The meditator should be so intent on the practice that they could be mistaken for a deaf person.

In brief, act like a Vipassana meditator – careful and alert, patient, restrained, with no distracting communication, relaxed, self-monitoring, eager, accepting conditions, inquisitive, diligent, detached sensually, and equanimous.

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