



# Serene and clear: an introduction to Buddhist meditation

by Patrick Kearney

## Week six: The Mahāsī method

### Introduction

Tonight I want to introduce you the practice of *satipaṭṭhāna vipassanā* as it was taught by the late Mahāsī Sayādaw. Born in 1904 in upper Burma, north of Mandalay, Mahāsī Sayādaw studied the Buddhist scriptures before taking up meditation practice under the guidance of Mingun Sayādaw. Mingun Sayādaw was a pioneer in the revival of *vipassanā* (insight) meditation in Burma, and in particular the movement to teach *vipassanā* to lay people. After completing his training, Mahāsī Sayādaw returned to his home monastery to teach. This monastery had a big drum, *mahā-si* in Burmese, which was beaten to summon the local people to dharma teachings. *Sayā-daw* means “respected teacher,” and is a title given to senior Burmese monks. So Mahāsī Sayādaw was the Big Drum Teacher. He was given this name because of the drum in his monastery, and because of his ability as a teacher: he beat the drum of the dharma, and many people heard it.

When Burma became independent in 1948 the new government sponsored a revival of Buddhism. Mahāsī Sayādaw was invited to be in charge of a new meditation centre in Rangoon which was developed to teach meditation practice to large numbers of lay people in particular. This was an innovation, as in traditional Buddhist societies meditation is generally practised only by a small clerical or renunciate elite. The meditation method associated with Mahāsī Sayādaw is a *vipassanā* (insight or clarity) method, designed specifically to allow lay people in the modern world to attain the experience of *nibbāna*. The Mahāsī Sāsana Yeiktha (or Mahāsī Centre, as it is generally referred to in English) now teaches thousands of students every year and has over 300 branch centres inside and outside Burma. It remains one of the most important meditation centres in the world today, and the source of one of the most influential meditation lineages in Theravāda Buddhism.

### Energy, attention and concentration

The Buddha called his way to awakening the noble eightfold way, the way which has eight aspects. Of these eight aspects, three deal directly with meditation: right energy or effort (*sammā vāyāma*); right attention or mindfulness (*sammā sati*); and right concentration (*sammā samādhi*). Attention is the deliberate placing of awareness on its object. Energy is the quality of deliberation required to turn the attention to and place it on its object. And concentration is the the focusing of attention on a single object.

There are these three aspects of the meditative mind: energy; attention; concentration. We must have *balance* between these three aspects. If there is not enough energy and too much concentration, then the mind is very peaceful, still, and feeling pleasant; but heavy, dull, not knowing. We may even fall asleep. If there’s too much energy and not enough concentration, then the mind becomes tense and restless, and although we are working hard we can’t

actually penetrate the reality of our experience. We can't get below the surface of things. The mind just becomes agitated; controlled, but agitated.

Energy on the one hand and concentration on the other must be balanced; the balancing factor is attention. You can have too much energy; you can have too much concentration; you can *not* have too much attention. Attention brings energy and concentration into balance, and balance, or equanimity, opens up the whole practice. Attention balances all mental factors, all aspects of the mind - and if we have a balanced mind, we have a balanced life.

There are two other aspects of attention that we need to be familiar with. The first is the quality of immediacy - that attention always refers to what is happening *right now*. I cannot attend to what will happen in the future, nor to what did happen in the past; I can only attend to what *is* happening, right now. Secondly, attention always has an object. "I'm attentive" means "I'm attentive to *this*." Attention is specific, precise. So the factor of *aim* is essential in developing attention. When I look at something, that one specific thing is at the centre of my field of vision; it is the precise point of my focus. There is a lot going on in my peripheral vision, I know things are happening there, but I give them no attention. Attention is characterised by qualities of immediacy and precision.

## Techniques of attention

We are developing energy, attention and concentration, and to do this we give the mind something to be attentive to, calling it the primary object. We want this primary object to be something that is clear, so that we can hook on to it for periods of time; and dynamic, so that we can see change within it. For this reason Mahāsi Sayādaw instructed his students to make the breathing as sensed in the abdomen the primary object of sitting meditation. As we inhale the abdomen moves, it swells, or as they say in Burma, the abdomen "rises." As we exhale, again there is movement in the abdomen, the abdomen "falls." There is a "rising" and a "falling" movement of the abdomen. The words "rising" and "falling" are code for the actual physical sensations experienced in the body, and in particular the abdomen, when we inhale and exhale. Of course, we don't actually breathe in the abdomen. These sensations of movement are the air element (*vāyo dhātu*), which can be experienced anywhere in the body.

Why the abdomen? Because for most people most of the time the sensations involved with breathing are clearest in this area. *Vipassanā* (insight) is characterised by clarity, so our basic rule is to focus on whatever is clearest, whatever is predominant in this moment. We may find the physical sensations associated with breathing to be clearest in the abdomen, or in the chest, or moving around. It doesn't really matter where the sensations occur, what is important is that we examine them where they are most clear and distinct. So use the abdomen as your primary object, but do not be locked in by it. Focus on the abdomen when the sensations there are predominant, or when you don't know where else to look. Don't spend time wondering "What am I supposed to be looking at?," or "Where should I look now?" One of the reasons why we have this primary object is that it eliminates the need for internal discussion.

We are looking at the breathing process and discover that, directly experienced, inhalation is a series of changing physical sensations - movement, pressure, tension and so on - within the body. Exhalation is a series of changing physical sensations. These sensations are our object. To cultivate precision in our aim we name the experience we are watching, mentally sticking a label on it, just as we can indicate something we are looking at by naming it. While inhaling we use the label "rising," mentally repeating the word. While exhaling we use the label "falling." If a different name spontaneously arises, one which describes the sensation

more appropriately, then feel free to use it, but otherwise just use “rising” and “falling.” These names assist us to develop an accurate and precise sense of aim, the ability to clearly distinguish *just this* as the meditation object. This is particularly important in insight (*vipassanā*) practice, but not so important in serenity (*samatha*) practice. In serenity practice we are concerned with simply absorbing into a single object, and the quality of absorption, which indicates the predominance of concentration (*samādhi*), is central. We can tell when we are developing concentration because the object becomes subtle. In insight practice we are concerned with understanding the object, and the quality of clarity, which indicates the predominance of attention (*sati*), is central. We can tell when we are developing attention because the object becomes clear and distinct.

## Distraction

Distraction is an inevitable part of meditation, and in *vipassanā* practice we incorporate it into the practice. What is distraction? It is the unnoticed movement of attention from one object to another. We have seen that when we attend to an object, some particular phenomenon is at the centre of our attention, while other things are going on at the periphery. Distraction is not the understanding that there is stuff going on in the background, like the sound of traffic. Distraction occurs when the central focus of our attention is grabbed and taken to some other specific event. Watching the rising and falling of the abdomen we may be aware that there is some thought in the background, but that is not distraction; we know we are distracted in the moment when we realise that the thinking is now in the foreground and the rising and falling of the abdomen is either in the background or has disappeared entirely. Distraction, in other words, is just movement, and like anything else, movement can be watched. It results in a new object spontaneously arising in the mind, and this new object can be watched. So the process of distraction itself can be an object of attention. Of course, when we see distraction as it occurs, it ceases to be distraction.

Awareness can only be placed on what is happening *now*. If what is happening now is a distraction, then right now my attention *can only be* attention to this distraction itself. If I fail to realise this, and react to my distraction in order to return to my meditation later, then all I am doing is postponing my awareness. But awareness postponed is awareness denied. In the moment we know we are distracted, that very knowing is a moment of pure attention. When we know our distraction we call it the secondary object, and we examine it with the same energy, attention and concentration with which we examine the primary object, the rising and falling of the abdomen.

We call this practice “noting” the meditation object. To note the meditation object means to deliberately place our awareness on it. To deliberately place our awareness on an object requires us to make a choice, in this moment, to take our attention and place it just precisely *there*. This requires energy or effort, as well as precision. Our precision is aided by naming the object, mentally pasting a label on it: “rising;” “falling;” “thinking;” “hard;” “soft;” “wanting;” “disliking;” or whatever. This action of deliberately and precisely placing our awareness on the object is noting, and what we note, we know. What we don’t note, we don’t know.

Similarly, in walking meditation we have the same basic structure of primary and secondary object, in which we note the primary object until we realise that our attention has been taken to something else, and we then note that something else as the secondary object. In walking, the primary object is the movement of the body and the touch sensations as the foot contacts the floor. We ground ourselves in the posture, beginning with standing. Then we begin to walk to and fro along an imagined path. We begin by walking just a bit slower than normal,

so each movement is deliberate, and we keep our attention in the body, feeling both the movement of the body and the touch of the foot on the ground. We name this experience "walking."

As we settle into the walking, we slow down and focus more precisely on the movement of the foot and its contact on the ground, and divide the walk into two aspects: "left;" "right." Slowing down even more, we focus ever more precisely on the movement and touch sensations in the foot, dividing each step into three parts: "lifting;" "pushing;" "placing." "Lifting" names the experience of lifting the foot from the floor; "pushing" names the experience of pushing the foot forwards; and "placing" names the experience of dropping the foot and placing it on the floor. As we notice we are distracted by something else we name that experience, making it the secondary object. When it no longer demands our attention, we return to the primary object.

The complete instruction for the practice is: "Be attentive!" How can I be attentive all the time? I can't. But what I can do is be attentive *now*. I can attend to anything, including the fact that I have lost my attention. To be clearly aware of my distraction is attention; it is the practice itself.

## Content and process

Note that as I investigate my distractions I am not watching the *content* of mind; what I am watching is the *process* of mind - remembering that in Buddhism, "mind" includes all non-physical experience, emotions as well as thoughts. If I realise that I'm daydreaming or obsessing about something, I am not interested in what the daydream is about. That is completely and utterly irrelevant. What I am interested in is simply the fact of daydreaming, the process of the arising, manifestation and cessation of daydreaming.

We have seen how the mind is continually creating narratives, all of which star *me* as the central character, and how we are endlessly fascinated by these narratives; how, indeed, our identification with these narratives create who we think we are. To cut through these narratives we make the flow of thought itself the object. So when there is thinking, just name the experience - "thinking; thinking" - and watch the fact of thinking. "Dreaming; dreaming." An emotion will come, a feeling will arise. Identify it, know it, and name it. "Boredom;" "worry;" "sorrow;" "pleasure;" "anticipation;" whatever it is. Watch it. Know what it is. Feel it, taste it, investigate its nature. Do not investigate by thinking about it, creating a new narrative to make sense of the old one. The investigation of the mind is simply watching non-physical events, now, with penetrating attention. The investigation of the body is simply watching physical sensations, now, with penetrating attention. Whatever is happening *now*, that's what I'm looking at. The objects of attention change; attention itself remains continuous.

This point is central: *it doesn't matter what the object of attention is; what matters is the continuity of attention*. We can be watching anything, and the meditation will work. When we are not watching, the meditation is not working. It is, however, generally easier to watch physical experiences, because they are fairly gross and obvious. They stick around for a while. The mind is incredibly slippery, incredibly fast. It's very difficult to catch. We are, in addition, much more likely to identify with the mind. If a thought arises we see it as *my* thought; if a feeling arises we see it as *my* feeling; and we get caught up with them. While we also identify with physical sensations, they tend to be not so gripping. In the early stages of the practice, or when concentration and attention are relatively weak, it's better to stay in the body as much as possible.

Pain, for example, is very interesting, partly because it compels our attention, and partly because if we watch pain, it breaks up. We can see both the physical sensation and the mental response to the physical sensation, the response of "I don't like this." Both of these can be investigated. When watching pain avoid naming it as "pain," because this name already contains a judgement about the experience. Be neutral, objective and precise in naming. What exactly is the sensation? "Heat;" "pressure;" "sharpness;" "throbbing." But when we examine some aspect of experience, we must be clear about what aspect we are examining. When we watch physical sensation, just sensation; when we watch the mental response of aversion, of "I don't like this," just "dislike; dislike;" "aversion; aversion." Attention is precise; it is attention to this specific experience and not any other.

In brief, we are investigating the body and mind as they manifest from moment to moment; the body and mind as they manifest, *now*. In sitting, our central reference point is the breath. We keep coming back to the breath when we are in any doubt about what's happening, or if we don't know if we're doing it right, or if we have any questions about what we should be attending to. Whenever the mind goes somewhere else, as soon as I know that the mind has gone I identify and attend to that experience: "thinking;" "seeing;" "touching;" "feeling;" "hard;" "soft;" whatever it is. And in both cases, whether it's the breath as primary object, or whether it's anything else as secondary object, I'm really looking at it closely. I want to know what it is. What *exactly* is this? Don't take anything for granted. Our practice requires an absolute refusal to take anything for granted, and this refusal requires an uncompromising openness to what is happening now, whatever is happening now.

## Practice and awakening

Why are we training in this specialised technique? We began our course by saying that meditation is the systematic training of attention. The result this training is that we begin to see what we normally miss. Buddhism is a wisdom tradition, which means that the Buddha assumes that while we think we know what is happening, in fact we don't. We are energetically creating suffering, confident as we do so that we are marching toward happiness. To see things correctly - to "know and see things as they are," as the Buddha put it - requires that we first deconstruct our habitual wrong way of seeing. We are continually forming and constructing ourselves and our world, and in our confusion we construct a world in which we and others suffer unnecessarily. By deconstructing our normal world we see how we create suffering for ourselves and others, and create space within which we can act more skilfully.

What happens, for example, when someone upsets me and I react? In my habitual, taken for granted blindness I automatically see the situation in terms of "you" out there and "me" in here, a situation in which we both play a role in my narrative in which "you" do something you should not and "I" am unjustly injured. In other words, having failed to note this situation as it arises and ceases, I identify with it. That which I fail to note, I am. "I am" the central character in my narrative; "I am" is this solid sense of someone living in this body and mind, someone whose attention is directed "out there" to others and the world in which we all live, someone who acts and is acted upon. But when we look closely, when we note the mind-body process, we can find no aspect of our experience which we can identify with as "I" or "mine." To the degree that we see and understand this, we can be free; to the degree that we fail to see and understand this, we are necessarily bound. For we are bound by what controls us, and we are controlled by what we don't see.

But when we are used to watching the flow of experience, something changes. We see this situation break up into its component parts, and how these parts come together to form what we usually take for granted as something solid and independent of us. We develop a new

relationship to this situation, seeing it as conditioned and conditioning process. It is like I can step back, like an actor, and both participate in and simultaneously watch the unfolding scene. When I have this kind of view, then I have some space between me and my reactions. I can see anger as just anger, and can allow it to arise and cease according to conditions without automatically reacting according to my habitual patterns.

We do the practice in order to attain something, some kind of awakening. The practice is what we *do*; awakening is what happens as the *result* of what we do. But when we go deeper into this matter, we find it is not so dualistic. In the practice we see what is really going on; in our daily lives we act, from moment to moment, day to day and year to year. At a fundamental level, seeing and acting cannot be separated. Seeing guides action; action expresses seeing. At the centre of this relationship lies the power of ingrained habit. Acting habitually, we act out of our confusion, blindly identifying with our fears, desires and obsessions, creating continued situations of pain. According to Buddhist psychology, all our blind, confused actions are based on choice: we act blindly and habitually, but this is because we *choose* to act in this way. The work of practice is to cut through ingrained habit by consciously watching what we take for granted, and so normally miss; the work of awakening is to cut through ingrained habit by acting out of the space that seeing creates. This awakened action is the expression of freedom. Freedom always involves free choice, so awakening always involves making awakened choices. But just as we can choose to act in an awakened way, so we can always choose to act in a blind, habitual way. The choice is ours, and we must make that choice now.

This fact is central: both practice and awakening manifest now. If we are to attend to this present experience, we can only attend now; if we are to respond wisely to this present moment, we can only respond now. Practice cannot be postponed. We cannot do it tomorrow or the next second; we can only do it now. Awakening cannot be postponed. We cannot awaken tomorrow or the next second; we can only do it now. If we practice now in the hope of one day being awakened, then we are simply denying both practice and awakening; we are denying responsibility for our own experience.

Confusion arises in this moment, so attention must arise in this moment, and our free choice must arise in this moment. The path factor of right attention cuts through the fog of confusion, and does it now. The path factor of right intention directs our action towards the goal of love and compassion, and does it now. Whether awakened or deluded, meditating or not meditating, there is no avoiding choice. There is no ultimate state where we will find ourselves no longer having to make choices - no longer having to take responsibility for our situation.

It is not a question of time, of either practice or awakening happening some time in the future. Attention happens now. Insight happens now. Attention and insight can *only* happen now. The question is, are we open to practice-awakening? Or are we determined to remain stuck in rigidity of mind, clinging to habit, and refuse to be open to this moment, now? Right now, we are making choices, and we must make choices. Our choices may be based on confusion, or they may be based on clarity, but we cannot avoid making choices, and every choice we make is an expression of either confusion or awakening.