

SAMATHA AND VIPASSANA MEDITATION

Talk given by Ajahn Jagaro, 1988

I would like to begin this talk firstly by speaking about developing the posture for meditation. The ideal posture is one that is quite balanced, so try to sit on the floor quite straight. Keep the back straight and push the lower back forward as if something is pulling you from the chest upwards a little bit so that you are lifting yourself up. The top of the head should be towards the ceiling, keep your chin tucked in a little so that the neck is straight. The posture is something that you can work with and improve, as it is never perfect from the start.

Rather than using the cross-legged posture, try to cultivate either the half lotus or the Burmese posture for sitting meditation practice; when the knees are firmly on the floor there is greater stability and it is easier to sit for longer periods. Use a firm cushion to help push the pelvis forward, so that the belly softens and the knees drop lower. Hatha yoga exercises are helpful in building strength in the back and to help open the thighs, and make the body more flexible. You should be careful not to pull the muscles, but do try to exercise and stretch the legs.

Some people sit on a low stool, which is tilted slightly forward to straighten the back. If none of these postures are possible for you, and you must sit on a chair, choose a straight backed firm chair, and support your own back; do not lean on the back of the chair, do rest your feet firmly on the ground. Experiment with these postures to find your own limits. Work with your body to see if you can gradually cultivate a good, straight and balanced posture. The more balanced you are, the more comfortable you'll be and the easier you'll find it to sit for longer periods; however some discomfort is natural, as we are unaccustomed to sitting still for any time at all.

Working with the posture is in itself a very good meditation, especially when we feel very dull. At this time the breath is too refined an object, so take this opportunity to use the body. The body is so concrete; it feels so solid that it really grounds us and the feelings of the body are always there definite, sharp and very present. So when the mind starts getting into dull, confused states or very distracted thinking, come back to something really definite like the bodily posture. Just feel the body sitting, bring the mind within the body; fill the body with the mind. Remind yourself, whenever the mind starts to wander – just sitting. Let the mind sink back into the body. Body just sitting. Then you can begin to experiment with improving the posture. Start by putting a bit of strength into the back and neck. This is not only developing posture for its own sake but it is also disciplining the mind itself by cultivating awareness and energy in the mind. The state of the body reflects the state of the mind. When our mind is dull or lazy the body starts slumping, losing its strength and energy.

As for the natural exercise of concentration, this is what we call Samatha meditation. This meditation is good for everyone because we tend to create, think and analyse too much. Intellectually we are very active and agile but this always leads to a sense of confusion and complexity because the nature of thought and the conditioned world is very complex. We are very complicated beings and when we try to understand ourselves just by thinking it can be very confusing. One's mind seems like a jungle of thoughts, ideas, perceptions and memories. So what we really need is a firmer foundation of clarity and stability, where the mind can begin to rest and focus on being still, content in the present moment and not getting lost in thinking one thought after another. Moving away from the realm of thought and complexity, towards simplicity. That is why we practise the technique of anapanasati, the cultivation of mindfulness of the in and out breath. It is a very good technique of meditation because the breath is quite natural, it does not require any ego. The breath comes in and goes out by itself; it doesn't require us to do anything. anapanasati is quite different from breath control because it is using the natural flow of the breath. There is no contriving or constructing, making it into this or

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that, which is what we do with most other things. It is just the natural flow of the breath. Allow your mind to rest, dwell with, and get close to, the breath, which is in itself an extremely tranquil, peaceful and soothing object. Just the rhythmic flowing in and flowing out of the cooling, gentle touch of the breath.

It requires a lot of patience before our minds become used to this simple activity because we are used to exciting mental gymnastics and this is just a very simple task, observing and staying with the breath. So we must have patience and confidence in the teachings of the Buddha and in our teachers. If we have confidence it will give us the resolve to patiently bring the attention back to the breath, turning towards the breath more fully. When the mind starts running off and gets interested in something else, what does that mean? It means that we see greater value in those other things; we think they will give us more excitement, more happiness. We think thoughts of past or future plans are going to give us more happiness than staying with the breath. That's why the mind moves away from the breath: we always seek happiness.

So establish your confidence in this teaching and then focus your attention on the breath. Just turn towards it and sustain your attention, be with it, be completely contented. If we become really concentrated, this causes the mind to become joyous and happy, and the body to feel rapture and bliss. This is happiness far greater than what we can derive from the sensory world. It's a very good thing to keep in mind. It gives us the incentive and the ability to resolve, each time we sit in meditation, to really turn towards the breath, incline towards it, be satisfied with it, knowing that the mind will be happy. Isn't that what we all want?

Now when we begin it is quite difficult. The breath is difficult to find and to be with; you can't force the mind or strangle the stray thoughts. You have to be very, very patient and very alert. It is not a mechanical exercise. Notice the mind being with the breath, and then notice the mind moving away to something else, notice and then bring the attention back to the breath. Knowing at least that this is an inhalation and this is an exhalation. When images, dialogues and memories arise, begin to cut through them. It's like cutting your way through a jungle made of thoughts, images, words, memories and plans. Keep coming back to the reality of the breath. The breath is something, which is now, which is definite. The breath comes in, this is an inhalation, and you know that. The breath goes out, this is an exhalation, and you know that. Then begin to know and incline towards the beginning and the end of the breath more clearly. Know the beginning of the inhalation, know the end of the inhalation. Know the beginning of and the end of the exhalation.

So you are disciplining the mind by using a physical object, because this object is now. It's a reality. There is nothing complex about the breath it is very simple. As the mind begins to clear a little you notice that the imagery and the internal noise begin to diminish. Then it is a matter of focussing more closely on the breath; inclining towards it is all you can really do. Allow the mind to sink into the breath, to touch it, to get as close as you can to it and the more you do that the greater the concentration and tranquillity will be.

You can read all sorts of books on how to practise mindfulness of breathing but it is just something you have to find your own way with, and experiment with. Regular practice is very important because the skill is cultivated through repetition, learning from each meditation period. Sometimes you are peaceful, sometimes restless, but just keep going. Tranquillity meditation is quite simple, it simplifies the mind and focuses the attention.

It is the same with walking meditation. Use the touch of the feet or the movement of the legs as your focus of attention. It is a very concrete thing with a beginning and an end to focus on. Begin to simplify, to move away from the world of thinking, projecting and complexity to the world of now, this moment, this body. Walking just one step at a time. Training the mind gently and firmly requires awareness and patience. If we have expectations and no patience we will soon become disheartened. The Buddha said that it is easier to go into battle single handed against a thousand enemies armed to the teeth and to conquer them a thousand times than it is to conquer one's own mind. It's not that difficult, but the Buddha did want to stress that it is a difficult thing to do. It requires a great deal of patience.

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To develop this foundation of concentration and clarity is important as it gives emotional stability and the ability to cut through all the doubt, foolishness and obsessiveness of the mind. When the mind is centred and in a state of clarity and stillness it is a very powerful and useful tool. The Buddha said that a well-trained mind is the most useful thing and the untrained mind the most dangerous thing to have. An untrained mind causes a lot of trouble to oneself and others, so begin by dedicating quite a lot of time and patience to the cultivation of concentration. Develop a good foundation in concentration by practising, sharpening the attention, and repeating this practice of tranquillity meditation in the morning and at night.

What is the purpose of concentrating the mind? Is it just to experience a blissful state? Obviously there is more to it than that. In Buddhism we say that concentration is only one part; there is also morality and wisdom. Wisdom is the most important, but not in the sense of knowledge. It's not what we can hear from someone else, read in a book or think out ourselves, but wisdom in the sense of really understanding the nature of experience. This is why it is so important to have a well-trained mind, sharp and clear, with the ability to be collected and look directly at the experience. A clear mind can look so directly, intensely and so penetratingly that we can see through experience and see it for what it really is. What is the quality of mind that we need for reflection? It is the mind that is still, empty, but fully awake; what we call "bare awareness". We practise Samatha meditation so we can bring the mind into this state of calmness and stillness. When we sit meditation and concentrate on the breath, even if we let go of the breath, we can just be still and when the mind is silent there is this knowing, this awareness of the present. Now it is good if we can stabilize that awareness even if we start with only a few moments. Venerable Ajahn Sumedho says, "To listen to the silence of the mind". So what Samatha meditation does is to give stability to the mind so that we can stay in that alert state of knowing and emptiness for longer and longer periods.

The Buddha said that this thing I call "me" is made up of the body, feeling, perceptions, concepts and consciousness. These are the five aggregates that make up a human being. These are the things that we are attached to and that we take to be who we are. These are the things that cause our problems; we have to reflect on and observe them more closely in order to see them for what they are. How do we do this insight meditation with reflection? We objectify what is in consciousness and then observe its nature. Take the body for example. We can be aware of the body just sitting. If the mind is quite still we can be aware of the posture, the nature of the body, before we start labelling it or making anything of it. Then there are the sensations of the body, especially when they become very strong. If there is pain, we can make it an object of our awareness. Stop thinking about it as being this or that, just experience the sensation, see if we can stay with it. What is the sensation actually like? Is it really you? Is it constant? What makes it pain rather than pleasure? Why is the mind shrinking away from it? What happens if we stay and abide calmly with it? Try turning towards the sensation in order to understand its nature a bit more and reflect on it.

The important thing is not just to react to every situation. For example when there is an itch on your leg, you can scratch it and it's gone, but you haven't learnt anything because you are acting mechanically out of aversion and desire. There is no freedom there. I am not saying that it is wrong to scratch but I am talking about insight, about freeing the mind from the power of instinct, aversion and desire. If you have knee pain and you decide to go to sleep rather than sit meditation that is not bad, wrong or immoral in any way but there is no effort, patience or reflection on that which is difficult to reflect on. There is no seeing, and this is why it is very valuable to sometimes do that which is difficult for us, in order to cultivate spiritual qualities and to develop wisdom.

Sometimes we can feel very tired during meditation and the body begins to slump. What is that feeling of tiredness in the body? Notice what it feels like instead of just reacting, giving in to it. Instead of just feeling tired and laying down, stay and begin to observe. See the nature of this state of the body, the lack of energy, and if you stay with it you may also see it passing away.

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Venerable Ajahn Cha used to say that Vipassana, insight meditation, had three signs: impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and non-self. This practice of Vipassana means to continually reflect on these three signs, make them your point of reference. The easiest of the three signs is impermanence, the process of change. It requires a lot of patience; normally we see the arising but we don't bother to hang around to wait for the passing away, especially if it is something unpleasant. For example we may get into a restless state, the mind is agitated and the body doesn't want to sit still. If this arises during your sitting, stay with it, don't give up and walk away. Be aware, objectify and observe the restless state, get to know it, and have the patience to stay around and observe its impermanent nature. It is within the capacity of everyone to see the passing away of things, just ordinary things like restlessness, sleepiness or a little bit of pain. Make them fully conscious in your mind, and stay with them to see the beginning and the end, the arising and cessation: impermanence.

Impermanence is a very good subject to meditate on. We can observe it in the body, in its various states of energy, pain, dullness and calm. We can observe it in the mind – the mental states of restlessness, dullness, peacefulness, calm and joy. Notice all these changing impermanent states of body and mind, just as they are. Objectify them. Reflect on what comes into the field of consciousness, whether that may be body, feeling, perceptions, conceptions or moods. See them all as objects. Stay with them and see them arising and passing away. Know that what you see cannot be "you" because it is coming and going, cannot be "yours" because you cannot make it stay forever. Thus, clearly seeing impermanence will help us see non-self and unsatisfactoriness – they are actually three sides of the same thing.

This practice of insight meditation comes from a very passive state, not a dull state of mind but an alert, reflective mind. A mind that is very clear, no longer chasing or fighting experiences, but sticking around to see the beginning and the passing away of that which is in the field of consciousness, that which is being experienced. Please consider this very carefully because this is really what insight meditation is. The technique is not insight meditation. Some people say if you do this technique it's insight and if you do that technique it is not. That is all rather silly. It is not the object or the technique that makes it insight meditation. What makes it insight meditation is this passive, alert, clear state of mind that reflects its presence to see the beginning and the end, the arising and the passing away of the present object of experience. See its impermanence whether or not that object is the breath. Concentration of the breath can be insight meditation if you see the beginning and the end of each on our breath; not just thinking about it but really knowing it, experiencing it, seeing it clearly arising and passing. The Buddha said that to have insight doesn't mean to have insight into one particular thing. You can have insight into any thought, any mood, they are all Sankhara: conditioned phenomena, mortal conditions. They all have the nature of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and non-self. Make the object fully clear in the conscious mind and then with a passive, awake, alert mind, be present and see its beginning and its end. This is the practice of insight meditation.

Try to do this more and more in your lives, not only when you meditate. Begin to notice the day, for example. It has a beginning, then it changes and we call it night. Notice the changing colours and light and how it will change into day again. Watch the changing seasons and the weather; be continually aware of change.

The Buddha said that to do good things and to give generously is a wonderful, meritorious thing to do. To have confidence and faith in virtue and to live a virtuous life based on morality is even more meritorious. To cultivate the mind of loving-kindness is even more meritorious still. However, to be aware of impermanence even for the snap of a finger is even greater merit because to be truly aware of impermanence brings about insight. So take an interest in noticing change, notice the arising and passing away of all conditioned phenomena with the mind in a Passive state of alertness, knowing, bare awareness.

In Forest Monasteries we just do what is being done at that time, we follow the routine of the monastery. We become passive mentally and physically but with an alert mind we watch the changing phenomena. Everything is changing within you and around you. When food is offered we receive it with gratitude. We are not choosing any more, just surrendering to the present. If aversion or desire arise, we observe it and see it

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passing away. In the lay life, too, this is a very good reflection. I encourage you to really cultivate this passive, awake, alert state of mind, objectifying experience to see the beginning and the passing away. Instead of running about trying to control and change everything, try to notice the natural change that happens. We are usually so busy trying to control and shape everything we don't notice or really appreciate impermanence. If we have an unpleasant sensation, we try and avoid it. If we feel tired, we lie down and go to sleep. If we feel hungry, we eat. We keep trying to control situations, to avoid the unpleasant and chase after the pleasant, and that is why impermanence never becomes truly clear to us. So in meditation we try to stay with what is happening now and learn from it. We are training ourselves to become patient, humble and willing to stay around to see the arising and passing away, to notice the changes. It's the same with good health and sickness, strength and weakness. Stop chasing after and getting away from the changing conditions, stay around and use them for reflection.

Practise tranquillity meditation as much as you can to develop a strong foundation. The stable mind can stop thinking, can stop going on and on. Begin to abide in stillness and clarity. You can stay with the breath or stay with bare awareness, silently and fully awake. The more you can do that the more you can do reflecting on the changing phenomena we normally think of as "me". See them all as objects, stay with them and see their arising and passing away. The more we see impermanence the clearer unsatisfactoriness and non-self become, and the clearer we see that all conditioned phenomena are impermanent. So really reflect on that, because the more we see that the more we begin to incline towards a peaceful mind, the mind that is empty, contented, and still, no longer clinging onto any mortal condition. We are all very fortunate to have this opportunity to practise.