

## **The Experience of Sitting Meditation**

Buddhist meditative practice encourages us to look closely at our experience of living with a mind and a body. The ultimate goal of this practice is to develop insight into how to live an easier life. To achieve this goal we need to work on calming the mind first. This calming of the mind prepares it for the task of developing insight.

### **Samatha and Vipassana**

When explaining meditation, the terms “Samatha” and “Vipassana” are invariably used.

“Samatha” refers to practice that develops the calmness or tranquillity of the mind. To do this, an object of meditation is required for us to direct our conscious awareness to which requires concentration. In doing this, we significantly reduce the amount of habitual activity that tends to agitate the mind, and impinge on its naturally tranquil state. When the mind becomes distracted from the object of meditation, we simply bring it back as soon as we realise that we have been distracted. Over time, as we continually bring the mind back to the meditation object, we experience new levels of clarity and calm. A feeling of relief also comes as the habitual activities of thoughts and emotions decrease. When Samatha meditation is practiced more and more, deeper levels of calm are experienced as the ability to concentrate develops further.

“Vipassana” refers to practice that develops insight or wisdom. When the mind becomes distracted from the object of meditation, we let the mind stay with the distraction, with the aim of seeing the reality of the object which the mind has been distracted by. In order to do this, we use the Three Marks of Existence which allows us to see the impermanence, suffering and not-self nature of the object. In doing this, we move from an intellectual understanding into the realm of experiential understanding, allowing the wisdom to truly sink into our being and have a profound impact on the quality of our lives. We still bring the mind back to the object of meditation but, not as quickly as we would if practicing Samatha.

Although it is possible to split meditative practice into these two categories, in reality Samatha and Vipassana work together while following Buddhist meditative practice. The calmness and concentration of Samatha prepares the mind to practice Vipassana.

### **Guided Body-Scan**

During our meditation classes, we begin with a guided body-scan. We do this as a preparatory step before using our breath as our object of meditation.

The benefits of body-scanning are as follows:

- It is easier to build up concentration in graduated steps. Rather than jumping straight into using the breath as our object of meditation, we start with using the body which is a larger target.
- It allows us to develop mindfulness of posture. Mindfulness of posture is a technique which was taught by the Buddha. Buddhist practice encourages us to use mindfulness of posture while going about our day. In keeping our awareness with body postures and movements, we decrease the activity in the mind, which makes the mind calmer and more functional. Also, each and every moment of mindfulness that we have accumulates, building up our mindfulness over time.

- It prepares the body for the task of remaining relatively still during the silent sitting meditation.
- It encourages us to see and experience the body in a more immediate way, breaking through any conceptual notions of the body. In doing this we are able to see things as the way they are.

During the sitting silent meditation, we are using the act of breathing as our object of meditation. At first, we look at the air moving in and out through the nostrils or nasal cavity, the chest rising and falling, and the stomach rising and falling. Once we are comfortable with keeping our awareness with this process, we then choose just one of these areas of the body to keep our attention with. Some schools of Vipassana practice recommend using the abdomen rising and falling, while others recommend using whichever of the three areas you prefer to use. This is something for you to try for yourself. If you decide to switch areas (for example, from the nose to the abdomen), it is recommended that you maintain mindfulness during that process, that is, knowing that you are wanting to change, and then changing.

### **Distractions.**

These occur when our consciousness awareness moves from our object of meditation to an object which has come in through our sensory apparatus, ie, sight, hearing, touch, smelling, tasting or, mental movements within the realm of the mind. The most common distractions tend to come through hearing, touch and mental movements.

### **Sense Restraint.**

Once we become mindful that our attention has shifted from the breath to something else, we practice sense restraint with regard to the particular object that our attention has moved to. Sense restraint prevents us from becoming too involved with the distraction, but still allows us to see and know what the distraction is. It also breaks down our tendency to identify with the distraction, which allows us to see “not-self”. The technique used here is “mental noting”. For example, if we are distracted by a sound, we mentally note “hearing, hearing, hearing”. In doing this we are able to simply experience the process for what it is, rather than experiencing the sound as being a “problem”.

Distractions tend to also come through the sense of touch, that is, through the body. In some cases, simply noting “touching, touching, touching” will suffice, such as when we are distracted by the body touching our mat or chair. For other bodily sensations, different mental noting words are used: itching, straining, pain, etc. During our regular day, we subconsciously change our bodily posture and bodily activity whenever pain/strain occurs, or when we scratch an itch. Due to this, it can be surprising and challenging to experience the body when in sitting meditation as a light of mindfulness is being shone onto these usually subconscious bodily adjustments. Different strategies are recommended to help with this:

- Firstly, use mental noting. This can result in being able to move back to the object of meditation. In doing so, we come to understand impermanence. Once we have seen the distraction for what it is, move back to the object of meditation.
- If the distraction persists to the point where we have to make an adjustment (scratching, stretching, changing posture), then do so mindfully. If you are going to scratch an itch, then know that you are wanting to scratch an itch, that you are scratching an itch, and that the

itch has ceased to be. This same level of mindfulness is to be applied to any bodily adjustments.

- PAIN!!!! Pain can range from mild discomfort to sharp pain. While experiencing pain, we tend to ask ourselves “is this causing permanent damage?”. In most cases, there is no risk of any permanent damage. Some meditation teachers refer to this as “magic pain” as it disappears as soon as we get up from sitting meditation. If the sensation persists, it is recommended to investigate the sensation deeply. To do this, we try to locate precisely where the painful sensation is occurring in the body (bone, muscle, tendon, skin). Also, is the sensation stationary or moving? Is it pulsing? Does it come and go? In doing this we are dropping the concept of pain to see what the sensation actually is. From here, we move back to the object of meditation. PLEASE NOTE: If the pain is a result of previous injury or historical condition (or simply becomes unbearable), then act cautiously, make the required adjustment and return to the object of meditation.

Distractions which come through the mind faculty are also to be noted. Here we are breaking down our tendency to identify with everything that rises up in the mind. The most obvious way in which this subconscious identification tendency impacts on our lives is through emotional states. For example, when anger arises in the mind, we have a strong tendency to immediately become angry. Through using this noting technique, we are able to see anger as just being “anger” rather than jumping into the state of “I’m angry”. In reality, is “anger” worth claiming as ours? Through mental noting, we are giving ourselves a choice to act wholesomely or unwholesomely, liberating ourselves from the subconscious habit of blindly identifying with every emotional state that rises up in the mind. We do not have to be dictated to by movements in the mind. This is a profoundly life-changing technique to practice and develop and is to be applied to all mental phenomena that rise up in the mind. Here are some helpful mental noting words: anger, happiness, sadness, boredom, tiredness, restlessness, planning, remembering, fantasising, imagining. Once we have come to know the distraction for what it is, simply move back to the object of meditation.

### **Contact!**

Simply looking at the distraction in terms of “contact” can be very helpful if we feel ourselves becoming lost. For example, if a sound has become unsettling, look at the experience in terms of: sound, ear drum, consciousness. There examples are:

- thought, mind, consciousness;
- memory, mind, consciousness;
- emotion, mind, consciousness;
- touching, body, consciousness;
- strain, body, consciousness.

In reality, our life experience is just a series of contact moments.

Due to the nature of our weekly classes, there are no strict requirements with regards to the balance between Samatha and Vipassana while in sitting meditation. It is not a problem if you choose to practice straight Samatha during a sitting. More often than not, it is usual to lean towards Samatha in the beginning of a sitting, to establish the level of calm required to make Vipassana possible. Looking at our practice in terms of Samatha and Vipassana can help us to monitor our sitting experience. At long Vipassana retreats, the first day or so is spent just practicing Samatha to get the

mind in shape for the task of Vipassana. It is up to you to find your own way with this. Sometimes the mind can be in a calm state from the very beginning, other times it may be more challenging to stay with the object of meditation long enough to establish calm. This is normal. The important thing is that we maintain mindfulness. When things aren't happening as we think they should be, it means that we have some kind of expectation present. Disappointment and frustration tend to rise up during these times. In these moments we simply use mental noting and then return to the object of meditation.

### **Expectation**

Expectation leads to seriousness or heaviness. The untrained mind tends to colour our experience of life in a very persistent way. Sometimes expectation is very strong and obvious, while at other times it may be less obvious. When practicing regular sitting meditation, the untrained mind will build up its own storyline. If a particular sitting is easy and we feel like we are making some kind of progress, the untrained mind will build up expectations about how the next sitting will be. The storyline here is that we will improve with each sitting over time – this is a false assumption of the way things are. In reality, sitting meditation isn't like that. So mindfulness of expectation helps us to practice in a more beneficial way, leading us towards accepting what is happening in each moment, rather than becoming agitated by how the way things are simply because the way things are aren't following the fabricated expectation storyline that the untrained mind has created.

A good antidote to expectation is to develop the habit of treating each time you sit as if its the first time that you have ever sat in meditation. It is also helpful to develop an association between stress and expectation. If we become aware of stress or tension or seriousness coming into our practice, we can use this as an alarm bell reminding to look into any underlying expectations. Over time, the expectation habit will be uprooted.