

Practical Vipassanā Meditation Exercises

by
The Venerable Mahāsi Sayādaw



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This is a talk by Venerable Mahāsi Sayādaw given to meditators on their induction at Mahāsi Meditation Centre, Rangoon, Burma. It was translated from Burmese by U Nyi Nyi, and edited in 1997 by Venerable Mahāsi Sayādaw.

Mental Noting

The practice of *Vipassanā* or Insight Meditation is the effort to understand correctly the nature of the mental and physical phenomena within one's own body. Physical phenomena are the things or objects that one clearly perceives around and within one. The whole of one's body constitutes a group of material qualities (*rūpa*). Mental phenomena are acts of consciousness or awareness (*nāma*). These are clearly perceived whenever things are seen, heard, smelt, tasted, touched, or thought of. We must make ourselves aware of these mental phenomena by observing them and noting thus: 'Seeing, seeing,' 'hearing, hearing,' 'smelling, smelling,' 'tasting, tasting,' 'touching, touching,' or 'thinking, thinking.'

Every time one sees, hears, smells, tastes, touches, or thinks, one should make a note of the fact. However, in the beginning of one's practice, one cannot make a note all of these events. One should, therefore, begin with noting those events which are conspicuous and easily perceivable.

With every act of breathing, the abdomen rises and falls — this movement is always evident. This is the material quality known as the element of motion (*vāyodhātu*). One should begin by noting this movement, which may be done by mentally observing the abdomen. You will find the abdomen rising when you breathe in, and falling when you breathe out. The rising should be noted mentally as 'rising,' and the falling as 'falling.' If the movement is not evident by just noting it mentally, keep touching the abdomen with the palm of your hand. Do not alter the manner of your breathing. Neither slow it down, nor make it faster. Do not breathe too vigorously, either. You will tire if you change the manner of your breathing. Breathe steadily as usual and note the rising and falling of the abdomen as they occur. Note it mentally, not verbally.

In *vipassanā* meditation, what you name or say doesn't matter. What really matters is to know or perceive. While noting the rising of

the abdomen, do so from the beginning to the end of the movement just as if you are seeing it with your eyes. Do the same with the falling movement. Note the rising movement in such a way that your awareness of it is concurrent with the movement itself. The movement and the mental awareness of it should coincide in the same way as a stone thrown hits the target. Similarly with the falling movement.

Noting Thoughts

Your mind may wander elsewhere while you are noting the abdominal movement. This must also be noted by mentally saying, 'wandering, wandering.' When this has been noted once or twice, the mind stops wandering, in which case you return to noting the rising and falling of the abdomen. If the mind reaches somewhere, note as 'reaching, reaching.' Then return to the rising and falling of the abdomen. If you imagine meeting somebody, note as 'meeting, meeting.' Then return to the rising and falling. If you imagine meeting and talking to somebody, note as 'talking, talking.'

In short, whatever thought or reflection occurs should be noted. If you imagine, note as 'imagining.' If you think, 'thinking.' If you plan, 'planning.' If you perceive, 'perceiving.' If you reflect, 'reflecting.' If you feel happy, 'happy.' If you feel bored, 'bored.' If you feel glad, 'glad.' If you feel disheartened, 'disheartened.' Noting all these acts of consciousness is called *cittānupassanā*.

Because we fail to note these acts of consciousness, we tend to identify them with a person or individual. We tend to think that it is 'I' who is imagining, thinking, planning, knowing or perceiving. We think that there is a person who, from childhood onwards, has been living and thinking. Actually, no such person exists. There are instead only these continuing and successive acts of consciousness. That is why we have to note these acts of consciousness and know them for what they are. So we have to note each and every act of consciousness as it arises. When so noted, it tends to disappear. We then return to noting the rising and falling of the abdomen.

Pain and Discomfort

When you have sat meditating for a long time, sensations of stiffness and heat will arise in your body. These are to be noted carefully too. Similarly with sensations of pain and fatigue. All of

these sensations are *dukkhavedanā* (feeling of unsatisfactoriness) and noting them is *vedanānupassanā*. Failure or omission to note these sensations makes you think, “I am stiff, I am feeling hot, I am in pain. I was alright a moment ago. Now I am uneasy with these unpleasant sensations.” The identification of these sensations with the ego is mistaken. There is really no ‘I’ involved, only a succession of one new unpleasant sensation after another.

It is just like a continuous succession of new electrical impulses that light up an electric lamp. Every time unpleasant contacts are encountered in the body, unpleasant sensations arise one after another. These sensations should be carefully and intently noted, whether they are sensations of stiffness, of heat, or of pain. In the beginning of one’s meditation practice, these sensations may tend to increase and lead to a desire to change one’s posture. This desire should be noted, after which the meditator should return to noting the sensations of stiffness, heat, *etc.*

There is a saying, “Patience leads to nibbāna.” This saying is particularly relevant in meditation practice. One must be patient to meditate. If one shifts or changes one’s posture too often because one cannot bear the sensation of stiffness or heat that arises, good concentration (*samādhi*) cannot develop. If concentration cannot develop, insight cannot result and there can be no attainment of the path (*magga*), the fruit of that path (*phala*) or nibbāna. That is why patience is needed in meditation. It is mostly patience with unpleasant sensations in the body like stiffness, heat, pain and other unpleasant sensations. On the appearance of such sensations one should not immediately change one’s posture. One should continue patiently, just noting as ‘stiff, stiff’ or ‘hot, hot.’ Moderate unpleasant sensations will disappear if one notes them patiently. When concentration is strong, even intense sensations tend to disappear. One then reverts to noting the rising and falling of the abdomen.

One will, of course, have to change one’s posture if the sensations do not disappear even after noting them for a long time, or if they become unbearable. One should then begin by noting ‘wanting to change, wanting to change.’ If one raises the arm, note as ‘raising, raising.’ If one moves, note as ‘moving, moving.’ This change should be made gently and noted as ‘raising, raising,’ ‘moving, moving’ and ‘touching, touching.’

If the body sways, note 'swaying, swaying.' If you raise the foot, note 'raising, raising.' If you move it, note 'moving, moving.' If you drop it, note 'dropping, dropping.' When there is no more movement, return to noting the rising and falling of the abdomen. There must be no gaps, but continuity between a preceding act of noting and a succeeding one, between a preceding state of concentration and a succeeding one, between a preceding act of intelligence and a succeeding one. Only then will there be successive and ascending stages of maturity in the meditator's understanding. Knowledge of the path and its fruition are attained only when there is this kind of accumulated momentum. The meditative process is like that of producing fire by energetically and unremittingly rubbing two sticks of wood together to generate enough heat to make fire.

In the same way, the noting in *vipassanā* meditation should be continuous and unremitting, without any interval between acts of noting, whatever phenomena may arise. For instance, if a sensation of itchiness intervenes and the meditator desires to scratch because it is hard to bear, both the sensation and the desire to get rid of it should be noted, without immediately getting rid of the sensation by scratching.

If one perseveres, the itchiness will generally disappear, in which case one reverts to noting the rising and falling of the abdomen. If the itchiness does not disappear, one may eliminate it by scratching, but first the desire to do so should be noted. All the movements involved in the process of eliminating the itch should be noted, especially the touching, pulling and pushing, and scratching movements, eventually returning to the rising and falling of the abdomen.

Changing Your Posture

Whenever you change your posture, begin by noting your intention or desire to change, and note every movement closely, such as rising from the sitting posture, raising the arm, moving and stretching it. You should note the movements at the same time as making them. As your body sways forward, note it. As you rise, the body becomes light and rises. Focus your mind on this, you should gently note as 'rising, rising.'

A meditator should behave like a weak invalid. People in normal health rise easily and quickly, or abruptly. Not so with feeble invalids,

who do so slowly and gently. The same is the case with people suffering from backache who rise gently lest the back hurts and causes pain. So also with meditators. They should make changes of posture gradually and gently; only then will mindfulness, concentration and insight be clear. Begin, therefore, with gentle and gradual movements. When rising, the meditator must do so gently like an invalid, at the same time noting as 'rising, rising.' Not only this: though the eye sees, the meditator must act as if blind. Similarly when the ear hears. While meditating, the meditator's concern is only to note. What one sees and hears are not one's concern. So whatever strange or striking things one may see or hear, one must behave as if one does not see or hear them, merely noting carefully.

Walking Meditation

When making bodily movements, the meditator should do so slowly, gently moving the arms and legs, bending or stretching them, lowering the head and raising it up. When rising from the sitting posture, one should do so gradually, noting as 'rising, rising.' When straightening up and standing, note as 'standing, standing.' When looking here and there, note as 'looking, seeing.' When walking, note the steps, whether they are taken with the right or the left foot. You must be aware of all the successive movements involved, from the raising of the foot to the dropping of it. Note each step taken, whether with the right foot or the left foot. This is the manner of noting when one walks fast.

It will be enough if you note thus when walking fast and walking some distance. When walking slowly or pacing up and down, three stages should be noted for each step: when the foot is raised, when it is pushed forward, and when it is dropped. Begin with noting the raising and dropping movements. One must be fully aware of the raising of the foot. Similarly, when the foot is dropped, one should be fully aware of the 'heavy' falling of the foot.

One must walk noting as 'raising, dropping' with each step. This noting will become easier after about two days. Then go on to noting the three movements as described above, as 'raising, pushing forward, dropping.' In the beginning, it will suffice to note one or two movements only, thus 'right step, left step' when

walking fast and 'raising, dropping' when walking slowly. If when walking thus, you want to sit down, note as 'wanting to sit down, wanting to sit down.' When actually sitting down, note attentively the 'heavy' falling of your body.

When you are seated, note the movements involved in arranging your legs and arms. When there are no such movements of the body, note the rising and falling of the abdomen. If, while noting thus, stiffness or sensation of heat arise in any part of your body, note them. Then return to 'rising, falling.' If a desire to lie down arises, note it and the movements of your legs and arms as you lie down. The raising of the arm, the moving of it, the resting of the elbow on the floor, the swaying of the body, the stretching of the legs, the listing of the body as one slowly prepares to lie down — all these movements should be noted.

To note thus as you lie down is important. In the course of this movement (that is, lying down), you can gain distinctive knowledge (*i.e.* knowledge of the path and its fruition). When concentration and insight are strong, distinctive knowledge can come at any moment. It can arise in a single 'bend' of the arm or in a single 'stretch' of the arm. That was how Venerable Ānanda became an *arahant*.

Venerable Ānanda was trying strenuously to attain *Arahantship* overnight on the eve of the First Buddhist Council. He was practising the whole night the form of *vipassanā* meditation known as *kāyaḡatāsati*, noting his steps, right and left, raising, pushing forward and dropping of the feet; noting, event by event, the mental desire to walk and the physical movements involved in walking. Although this went on until it was nearly dawn, he had not yet attained *Arahantship*. Realising that he had practised walking meditation to excess and that, in order to balance concentration and effort, he should practise meditation in the lying posture for a while, he entered his room. He sat on the bed and then lay down. While doing so and noting, 'lying, lying,' he attained *Arahantship* in an instant.

Venerable Ānanda was only a stream-winner (*sotāpanna*) before he lay down. From the stage of a stream-winner he reached the stages of a once-returner (*sakadāḡāmi*) a non-returner (*anāḡāmi*) and an *arahant* (the final stage of the path). Reaching these three successive stages of the higher path took only a moment. Remember this

example of Venerable Ānanda's attainment of *Arahantship*. Such attainment can come at any moment and need not take long.

Continuity of Practice

That is why meditators should always note diligently. One should not relax one's effort, thinking, "this little lapse should not matter much." All movements involved in lying down and arranging the arms and legs should be carefully and unremittingly noted. If there is no movement, return to noting the rising and falling of the abdomen. Even when it is getting late and time for sleep, the meditator should not stop the noting. A really serious and energetic meditator should practise mindfulness as if forgoing sleep altogether. One should go on meditating until one falls asleep. If mindfulness has the upper hand, one will not fall asleep. If, however, drowsiness is stronger, one will fall asleep.

When one feels sleepy, one should note as 'sleepy, sleepy,' if one's eyelids droop, as 'drooping'; if they become heavy or leaden, as 'heavy'; if the eyes smart, as 'smarting.' Noting thus, the drowsiness may pass and the eyes may become clear again. One should then note as 'clear, clear' and continue noting the rising and falling of the abdomen. However determined one may be, if real drowsiness intervenes, one does fall asleep. It is not difficult to fall asleep; in fact, it is easy. If you meditate in the lying posture, you soon become drowsy and easily fall asleep. That is why beginners should not meditate too much in the lying posture; they should meditate much more in the sitting and walking postures. However, as it grows late and becomes time for sleep, one should meditate in the lying position, noting the rising and falling movements of the abdomen. One will then naturally fall asleep.

The time one is asleep is the resting time for the meditator, but the really serious meditator should limit sleep to about four hours. This is the 'midnight time' permitted by the Buddha. Four hours sleep is quite enough. If the beginner thinks that four hours' sleep is not enough for health, one may extend it to five or six hours. Six hours' sleep is clearly enough.

When one wakes up, one should immediately resume noting. The meditator who is really intent on attaining the path and its fruition should rest from meditation only when asleep. At other

times, in all waking moments, one should be noting continually and without let up. That is why, as soon as one awakens, one should note the awakening state of mind as 'awakening, awakening.' If one cannot yet be aware of this, one should begin with noting the rising and falling of the abdomen.

If one intends to get up from the bed, one should note as 'intending to get up, intending to get up.' One should then note the movements one makes as one moves one's arms and legs. When one raises one's head and rises, one notes as 'rising, rising.' When one is seated, one notes as 'sitting, sitting.' If one makes any movements as one arranges one's arms and legs, all of these movements should also be noted. If there are no such changes, one should revert to noting the rising and falling movements of the abdomen.

Mindfulness of Daily Activities

One should note when one washes one's face and when one takes a bath. As the movements involved in these acts are rather quick, as many of them should be noted as possible. There are then the acts of dressing, of tidying up the bed, of opening and closing the door; all these should also be noted as precisely as possible.

When one has one's meal and looks at the table, one should note as 'looking, seeing, looking, seeing.' When one extends one's hand towards the food, touches it, collects it and arranges it, handles it and brings it to the mouth, bends one's head and puts the morsel into one's mouth, drops one's arm and raises one's head again, all these movements should be duly noted. (This way of noting is in accordance with the Burmese way of taking a meal. Those who use fork and spoon or chopsticks should note the movements in an appropriate manner.)

When one chews the food, one should note as 'chewing, chewing.' When one comes to know the taste of the food, one should note as 'knowing, knowing.' As one relishes the food and swallows it, as the food goes down one's throat, one should note all these events. This is how the meditator should note when taking each morsel of food. As one takes soup all the movements involved such as extending the arm, handling the spoon, scooping with it and so on, should all be noted. To note thus at meal-times is rather difficult as there are so many things to observe and note. The beginner is likely to miss several things that should be noted, but one should resolve to note them all.

One cannot, of course, help overlooking some, but as one's concentration deepens, one will be able to note all of these events precisely.

Summary

I have mentioned so many things for the meditator to note, but in brief, there are only a few things to remember. When walking fast, note as 'right step,' 'left step,' and as 'raising, dropping' when walking slowly. When sitting quietly, just note the rising and falling of the abdomen. Note the same when you are lying down, if there is nothing particular to note. While noting thus and if the mind wanders, note the acts of consciousness that arise. Then return to the rising and falling of the abdomen. Note also the sensations of stiffness, pain, aching and itchiness as they arise. Then return to the rising and falling of the abdomen. Note also, as they arise, the bending, stretching and moving of the limbs, the bending and raising of the head, the swaying and straightening of the body. Then return to the rising and falling of the abdomen.

As one goes on noting thus, one will be able to note more and more of these events. In the beginning, as the mind wanders here and there, one may miss many things, but one should not be disheartened. Every beginner encounters the same difficulty, but as one becomes more skilled, one becomes aware of every act of mind-wandering until, eventually, the mind does not wander any more. The mind is then riveted onto the object of its attention, the act of mindfulness becoming almost simultaneous with the object of its attention. In other words, the rising of the abdomen becomes concurrent with the act of noting it, and similarly with the falling of the abdomen.

The Arising of Insight

The physical object of attention and the mental act of noting occur as a pair. There is in this occurrence no person or individual involved, only the physical object and the mental act of noting it, occurring in tandem. The meditator will, in time, actually and personally experience these occurrences. While noting the rising and falling of the abdomen one will come to distinguish the rising of the abdomen as physical phenomenon and the mental act of noting it as mental phenomenon; similarly with the falling of

the abdomen. Thus the meditator will distinctly realise the simultaneous occurrence in pairs of these psycho-physical phenomena.

With every act of noting, the meditator will come to know clearly that there are only this material quality which is the object of awareness or attention and the mental quality that makes a note of it. This discriminating knowledge is called analytical knowledge of mind and matter (*nāmarūpa-pariccheda-ñāṇa*), which is the beginning of insight knowledge (*vipassanā-ñāṇa*). It is important to gain this knowledge correctly. This will be succeeded, as the meditator continues, by knowledge by discerning conditionality (*paccaya-pariggaha-ñāṇa*).

As one goes on noting, one will see for oneself that what arises passes away after a short while. Ordinary people assume that both the material and mental phenomena persist throughout life, that is, from youth to adulthood. In fact, that is not so. There is no phenomenon that lasts for ever. All phenomena arise and pass away so rapidly that they do not last even for the twinkling of an eye. One will come to know this personally as one goes on noting. One will then become convinced of the impermanency of all such phenomena. Such conviction is called *aniccānupassanā-ñāṇa*.

This knowledge will be succeeded by *dukkhānupassanā-ñāṇa*, which realises that all this impermanency is suffering. The meditator is also likely to encounter all kinds of hardship in the body, which is just an aggregate of suffering. This is also *dukkhānupassanā-ñāṇa*. Next, the meditator will become convinced that all these psycho-physical phenomena are occurring of their own accord, following nobody's will and subject to nobody's control. They constitute no individual or ego-entity. This realisation is *anattānupassanā-ñāṇa*.

When, as one continues meditating, one comes to realise firmly that all these phenomena are *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anatta*, one will attain nibbāna. All the former Buddhas, Arahants and Ariyas realised nibbāna by following this very path. All meditating meditators should recognize that they themselves are now on this *satipaṭṭhāna* path, in fulfilment of their wish for attainment of knowledge of the path, its fruition and nibbāna, following the ripening of their perfections (*pāramī*). They should feel glad at the prospect of experiencing the noble kind of tranquillity brought about by concentration and the supramundane knowledge or wisdom experienced by the Buddhas, Arahants and Ariyas, which they themselves have never expe-

rienced before. It will not be very long before they experience this knowledge for themselves. In fact, it may be within a month or twenty days of meditation practice. Those whose perfections are exceptional may have these experiences within seven days.

One should therefore be content in the faith that one will attain these insights in the time specified above, and that one will be freed of personality-belief and doubt, and thus saved from the danger of rebirth in the lower worlds. One should continue one's meditation practice optimistically with this faith.

May you all be able to practise meditation well and quickly attain that nibbāna which the Buddhas, Arahants and Ariyas have experienced!

Appendix

Below is a concise excerpted translation from the Pāli of the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta* accompanied by a commentary from the author, Mahāsi Sayādaw. This is offered as an expanded aid in this meditation technique, a reference to the source from which all *Satipaṭṭhāna* meditation arose, the words of the Buddha.

Techniques of Meditation

The *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta* states:

- “And moreover, monks, a monk, when he is walking, is aware of it thus: ‘I walk’; or when he is standing, or sitting, or lying down, he is aware thereof.”
- “And moreover, monks, a monk, when he departs, or returns, when he looks at or looks away from, when he bends or stretches (his limbs), when he puts on the lower robe, the upper robe, or takes the bowl, when he is eating, drinking, chewing, savouring, or when he is obeying the calls of nature — he is aware of what he is doing. In going, standing, sitting, sleeping, watching, talking, or keeping silence, he knows what he is doing.”
- “And moreover, monks, a monk reflects upon this very body, however it be placed or disposed, with respect to the four elements.”
- “Herein, monks, when affected by a feeling of pleasure, a monk is aware of it as ‘I feel a pleasurable feeling.’ Likewise, he is aware when affected by a painful feeling.”

- “Herein, monks, if a monk has a lustful thought, he is aware that it is so, or if the thought is free from lust, is aware that it is so. Herein, monks, when a monk is aware of sensual desire he reflects ‘I have sensual desire.’”

In accordance with these teachings of the Buddha, it has been stated in colloquial language thus: “rising” while the abdomen is rising; “falling” while the abdomen is falling; “bending” while the limbs are bending; “stretching” while the limbs are stretching; “wandering” while the mind is wandering; “thinking”, “reflecting”, or “knowing” while one is so engaged; “feeling stiff, hot,” or “in pain” while one feels so; “walking, standing, sitting,” or “lying” while one is so doing. Here it should be noted that walking and so on are stated in common words instead of “being aware of the inner wind element manifesting itself in the movement of the limbs,” as is stated in the Pāḷi texts.

Rising and Falling Movement of the Abdomen

It is quite in agreement with the Buddha’s teachings to contemplate on the rising and falling movements of the abdomen. Such rising and falling is a physical process (*rūpa*) caused by the pressure of the wind element. The wind element is included in the material group of the five aggregates (*khandhā*); in the tactile object of the twelve sense bases (*āyatana*); in the body impression of the eighteen elements (*dhātu*); in the wind element of the four material elements (*mahābhūta*); in the truth of suffering of the four noble truths (*sacca*). The material aggregate, a tactile object, a body impression and the truth of suffering are certainly objects for insight contemplation. Surely they are not otherwise.

The rising and falling movement of the abdomen is therefore a proper object for contemplation, and while so contemplating, being aware that it is but a movement of the wind element, subject to the laws of impermanence, suffering and insubstantiality, is quite in agreement with the Buddha’s discourses on the aggregates (*khandha*), the sense bases (*āyatana*), the elements (*dhātu*), and the Noble Truths (*sacca*). While the abdomen is rising and falling, the pressure and movement experienced thereby is a manifestation of the wind element which is tactile, and perceiving that rightly as such is quite in accordance with what the Buddha taught as briefly shown below.

- “Apply your mind thoroughly, monks, to body and regard it in its true nature as impermanent.”
- “Monks, when a monk sees the body which is impermanent, as impermanent, this view of his is right view.”
- “Herein, monks, a monk reflects: ‘Such is material form, such is its genesis, such its passing away.’”
- “Apply your minds thoroughly, monks, to the tactile objects and regard their true nature as impermanent.”
- “Monks, when a monk sees tactile objects which are impermanent, this view of his is right view. However, by fully knowing and comprehending, by detaching himself from and abandoning the tactile objects, one is capable of extinguishing ill.”
- “In him who knows and sees tactile objects as impermanent, ignorance vanishes and knowledge arises.”
- “Herein, monks, a monk is aware of the organ of touch and tangibles.”
- “Whatever is an internal element of motion, and whatever is an external element of motion, just these are the element of motion. By means of perfect intuitive wisdom it should be seen of this as it really is, thus: ‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.’”

Thus the contemplation of the rising and the falling movement of the abdomen is in accord with the above discourses and also with the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (*Dhātumanasikārapabba* — section on attention to the elements), Again, the wind element that causes the movement and pressure of the abdomen, comprised in the group of materiality, is the truth of suffering.

