



Manchester
Buddhist
Centre

Introduction to Buddhism Course

Week 2



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1. The Mindfulness of Breathing practice

This week we begin to look at the mindfulness of breathing practice. In this practice we are cultivating awareness of the breathing process.

Starting with body awareness

It's really important that the starting point of the Mindfulness of Breathing is a period of body awareness, of exactly the sort that we began to look at last week. If our mindfulness is weak because we are 'living in our heads' and distracted by thoughts, we need to make a conscious effort to bring our awareness down into our body, preferably into our abdomen. Having taken up a suitable posture that is both relaxed and alert, we could spend a little while reflecting on how we are stably, safely supported by the whole mass of the Earth beneath us. We can also reflect that our upright spine is reaching up into space, encouraging feelings of spaciousness and expansiveness.

The breath emerges

From this well-established contact with your body in general, allow your breathing to come into the fore, perhaps starting with a few deliberately deep breaths. After doing this, however, you need not try to breathe in any particular way – you might consider that the breath 'breathes itself'. It comes in and goes out naturally and you don't need to change it. Remember one of the qualities of mindfulness is to be with your experience non-judgmentally, so however the breath is, that's fine. It may be long or short, shallow or deep, rough or smooth – the practice is just to notice exactly how it is.

Stage 1

You can now begin stage one of the formal practice. In this stage you allow your awareness to rest with the breathing and, as the outward breath reaches its end, you silently count 'one'. Your breath comes in again, then goes out and you count 'two'. Try to continue in this way up to a count of 'ten' then, after the subsequent breath, begin at 'one' again. Allow the breath to follow its own rhythm and try to keep the counting soft and light. Remember that counting is just an anchor in the practice that allows you to notice more fully a specific point in the breathing process (in this stage the ends of the out-breaths).

Counting and attitude

It can be interesting to notice how we are counting. What does our internal dialogue sound like? This can tell us a lot about how we are and how we are approaching the practice. For example, does the counting sound bored – are we feeling sleepy or dull; have we lost interest in the breath so that the counting has become mechanical? Alternatively, does it sound like a drill sergeant counting out press-ups – has our approach become tight and forced? Does the counting have a particular emotional sound to it – for example sad, frustrated, anxious or worried?

We can work with whatever we find in these observations. The internal sound of the counting should ideally be light, soft, kind and attentive, and this can give rise to the accompanying emotion.

Stage 2

In stage 2 the breath continues to follow its own rhythm, but we make the quite subtle change to counting at the beginning of the in-breaths. So we count 'one', breathe in and breathe out. Notice the slight gap between breaths, then count 'two', breathe in and breathe out. Again, we continue in this way all the way up to 'ten', then back to 'one'. The reason for the slight change of emphasis is that, whereas the technique for stage one has a calming, pacifying effect, placing our count at the start of the in-breath provides energy for or developing awareness of our breathing.

There are two more stages to the complete Mindfulness of Breathing, but we can complete the picture next week and just concentrate on stages 1 and 2 for now.

2. Dealing with distraction in our meditation

As soon as we embark on a meditation like the Mindfulness of Breathing we are likely to notice just how hard it can be even to count to ten! It's quite normal for most people to become quite seriously distracted even in such a short space of time. We are most usually distracted by thoughts; thoughts triggered by other thoughts, by emotions or by feelings. This is completely normal – in fact, it's only when we start meditating that we realise the scale of it, and perhaps feel that it's out of control.

Each distraction (or, rather, chain of distractions) happens when the 'scenery' – everything in our awareness *apart from* the object of our meditation becomes more interesting than the 'path' (i.e. our attempt to follow our breath). Occasionally this may be valid – we're on fire or we see something really important about our lives – but more often than not the distractions are relatively unimportant and not concerned with the present moment. Of course, you will need to see this for yourself!

Can we do anything about it?

Yes - we can try to stay aware of whatever experience unfolds, and to notice what happens even when go off the path. When we realise that this happens we can congratulate ourselves for noticing our deviation from the 'path' then simply return with a non-judgmental awareness. To put it another way, we don't 'beat ourselves up'! In fact, we can say that, every time we have recognised and responded to our distraction, we have had a small moment of insight into our own minds – so this is actually a very positive thing!

With practice, we should find that meditating regularly generates more mindfulness and more concentrated awareness.

3. The Principles of Buddhist Ethics

Buddhist morality is based on the law of karma. Karma generally means action, but specifically an action that has an ethical dimension. In other words, karma is concerned with our **intentions**, so we can say that Buddhist ethics are the 'ethics of intention'. It's very important to recognise that there are various other sorts of actions that also have consequences. For example, being exposed to a virus can cause us to become ill, but this is unlikely to have anything to do with our intentions or way we exercise them. Buddhist thinking often uses the notion of **conditionality** to describe the whole, hugely complex area of 'cause and effect'. We'll have more to say about this idea later in the course, but the important thing to understand, for now, is that the law of karma is only one aspect of the wider law of conditionality.

In considering how karma affects us, we can simply say that an ethical action (in other words, one carried out as the expression of ethical intentions) is one that results in happiness, for oneself and for others. An unethical action is one that results in suffering – put simply, **actions have consequences**.

There are three kinds of ethical action, according to Buddhist thought – physical action, speech, and acts of the mind. The relevance of the last of these is that an ethical thought will result in happiness, while an unethical thought will result in suffering. Wishing someone well, for example, makes us feel happy, and we'll probably do things to try to help that person. If we wish harm to someone, however, such a state of mind is an unpleasant one, and if we act from that state, we'll cause suffering.

The mind is in fact the most important of the three kinds of action, because our physical actions and our speech are expressions of our mental states. One of the most famous Buddhist books, the Dhammapada, begins with the words:

Experiences are preceded by mind, led by mind, and produced by mind. If one speaks or acts with an impure mind, suffering follows even as the cartwheel follows the ox (drawing the cart).

Experiences are preceded by mind, led by mind, and produced by mind. If one speaks or acts with a pure mind, happiness follows like a shadow that never departs.

Buddhism doesn't speak in absolute terms of good and bad, but in terms of **skilful** and **unskilful** actions. This means that our actions are not judged to be good or bad (much less still wicked or evil) but only relatively skilful or unskilful. This also means that with practice we can become more and more skilled in action.

4. The 'Three Roots' of Unskilful Behaviour

There are three roots of unskilful behaviour – **greed, hatred and ignorance**. All unskilful mental states grow from these roots, so it's important to understand them. They are unskilful because when we act from these states of mind we suffer, or we cause others to suffer.

1. **Greed** is the desire for experiences and possessions that you don't need for your continued well-being and happiness. Hunger is not greed, but is a natural bodily function that lets you know that you need to eat. If we didn't obey the feeling of hunger we would eventually die. The same is true for thirst. We also experience desires for communication, beauty, truth and freedom, which are all, according to Buddhism, healthy desires that don't result in suffering. Greed is a response to feeling of inner emptiness, and we often try to 'fill' this emptiness with new possessions or experiences such as food, drink and sex. Greed is unskilful, not because it's evil or wicked, but simply because it leads to suffering.
2. **Hatred** is an attitude of hostility towards others, often because they obstruct the gratification of our greed. Sometimes we feel hatred towards someone or something that threatens our well-being in some way. Whatever the reason for our hostility, it tends to make the situation worse, causing more suffering.
3. **Ignorance** is the sum total of our deluded beliefs – beliefs that cause suffering when acted on. For example, the belief that happiness will be achieved if we can somehow get everything we want, or that our best interests are served by 'looking after number one'. Such beliefs cause suffering, again, not because they are evil, but because they are based on a mistaken notion of reality.

The opposites of these three unskilful roots are (1) contentment and generosity; (2) friendliness and kindness; and (3) awareness. When we act from these states we bring about happiness, both for ourselves and for others.

5. Homework

To meditate 6 out of 7 times a week.

Alternate (a) body awareness and (b) Mindfulness of Breathing, stages 1 and 2.