



Introduction to Buddhism Course

Week 3



1. More about the Mindfulness of Breathing

Last week we began to look at the mindfulness of breathing meditation, and practised the first two out of its four stages. This week we shall look at stages 3 and 4 for the first time – there will be plenty of opportunities to practice the whole of the Mindfulness of Breathing in the remainder of the course.

Stage 3

In this stage we simply let go of the counting, as it has served its purpose. Left alone with our breath, we try to experience all aspects of it from the point of view of the body. It's not just the obvious parts of the body, like the lungs and the rib cage, that are breathing – try to notice the much more subtle effects of the breath in places like your back, legs or even fingers! As ever, if you find that your awareness has risen up to things that are happening in your head, make an effort to bring it down again, into the breathing body.

Stage 4

In the last stage we work to refine the focus of our attention and to make it more sensitive. Typically, we can do this by paying attention to the subtle sensation at the point at which the breath first enters the body (perhaps at the tip of your nose or the upper lip). It may seem difficult to hold this more subtle awareness – the key is to stay with it in the context of a well-established background awareness of the whole body, steady and reassuringly solid.

As well as remembering not to force the breathing, it is also important to realise that we are not trying to block out sounds or blank our mind. We can't stop our sensory awareness or thoughts, but we can try not to let them occupy the centre of our awareness, leaving plenty of room for our attention to our breathing. Although the breath is the focus of the practice, to which we return again and again, this doesn't exclude the rest of our experience. At times we may find ourselves with other things like sounds, thoughts, feelings, emotions and images. This is entirely natural - we can just note their presence, then gently come back to the awareness of the breath.

Finishing the practice

To end the practice you could stop making any effort and just sit with your experiences as they come and go. Allow your awareness to move slowly

outwards - pay attention to the sounds outside and experience the weight of the body. As you finally bring the meditation to a close, try to resolve to carry into the rest of your life any awareness that you have cultivated during the practice. If possible, don't rush into anything immediately after the meditation.

2. The practicalities of Buddhist ethics

As we saw last week, the law of karma states that skilful actions lead to beneficial results for both oneself and others, while unskilful acts lead to suffering. In a way that's all we need to know. However, life can obviously be complex and it's not always easy to know the skilful thing to do in every situation. It's important to recognise that Buddhism in no way lays out laws that we must obey. After all, no laws could possibly fit all the ethical complexities that we might find ourselves in (we discussed some examples of these last week).

However, the Buddhist tradition does provide us with a practical ethical framework. This is quite different from a set of laws, but it does serve to remind us of those areas of behaviour in which we can easily find ourselves acting unskilfully or (to take the opposite view) where we can positively undertake to try to be more skilful. The Five Precepts can be regarded as 'training principles', which are stated in both negative and positive forms (in the following section, the positive forms are set out in *italics*). Notice that the emphasis is on your own voluntary choice, as suggested by the repeated phrase "I undertake...".

3. The Five Precepts

1. I undertake to abstain from harming living beings.

With deeds of loving-kindness, I purify my body.

2. I undertake to abstain from taking the not-given.

With open-handed generosity, I purify my body.

3. I undertake to abstain from sexual misconduct,

With stillness, simplicity and contentment, I purify my body.

4. I undertake to abstain from false speech.

With truthful communication, I purify my speech.

5. I undertake to abstain from taking intoxicants.

With mindfulness clear and radiant, I purify my mind.

The **first precept** encapsulates them all – if you're practising the first precept then you're practising all of the precepts. The basis of Buddhist ethics is non-harm, in both the physical and the psychological senses. It's worth noting here that many Buddhists choose to be vegetarians as part of their commitment to

this precept – this obviously suggests that we can also consider whether or not we choose to support harmful actions done by others.

The **second precept** includes stealing, but also includes the more subtle act of taking things that are not freely given, such as taking up other people's time and energy against their wishes. This is a common area where we can easily act unskillfully!

Because the area of sexual relationships is one in which our emotions can be very strong, the Buddha devoted the **third precept** to it. It's the first precept applied to the sexual arena. At the more obvious extreme, it's very unskillful to commit rape or to be unfaithful to our regular partner. However, we can also consider the more subtle ways in which we might allow our sexual behaviour to cause harm, for example by being over-possessive or deliberately exploiting our partner. The positive emphasis of 'stillness, simplicity and contentment' reminds us how sexual desire can cause the opposite qualities to arise – we might describe these as anxiety, complications in our lives and craving.

The **fourth precept** recognises that Buddhists try to find and then live by the truth, so to tell lies – even small ones – would be to go against that commitment. Not telling the truth causes confusion and mistrust because it undermines human relations. Of course the truth is sometimes painful to hear so we also need to speak with kindness and at an appropriate time. The 'speech precept' is one that many people find particularly demanding, because human communications are so often complex and unskillful remarks often 'slip out' because we haven't stopped to think about their consequences!

The principle behind the **fifth precept** is awareness. Intoxicants tend to make us less aware, which blurs our ethical sense – it's easier to break the other precepts when we're intoxicated. Obviously alcohol and recreational drugs are included here but so are more subtle intoxicants, such as the beauty of another person or even oneself (if you happen to be beautiful!), and intoxication with youth (if you're young). By the way, many Buddhists avoid alcohol completely, but there's obviously no prohibition. It's up to you, as for all the other precepts, to examine the consequences of your actions – in this case, the effect of the intoxicants you use and the extent to which they cause you to act less skilfully.

4. Conventional and natural morality

Buddhism draws a distinction between **natural** and **conventional morality**. Natural morality arises from the universal psychology of the human mind: if we act from a skilful intention we are likely to move towards happiness, for both ourselves and others. Conversely, our failures to act skilfully will have more or less harmful outcomes, causing some degree of suffering for ourselves or others. The five precepts are based on natural morality.

On the other hand, conventional morality is the morality of a particular society, whether that's a family, a tribe, a country or a culture. Sometimes the ethics of a society are in good fit with natural morality, but sometimes they're not. For instance, most societies condone violence in specific circumstances, such as in war or in revenge. According to Buddhism though, acts of violence are always unskillful, in that they always lead to suffering. The Buddha once said "Hatred does not cease by hatred; hatred only ceases by non-hatred [or friendliness]. This is a universal law."

Also, conventional morality is upheld by civil laws. The fact that governments constantly need to make more and more laws is a reflection of how difficult it is to fit conventional morality to all the complex situations of human society. What's more, there are always plenty of examples of people being judged to have broken the law, without obviously having caused anybody harm, or in the course of trying to defend a broader moral principle. In the latter case, that principle may well be closer to natural morality than the fixed law is ever able to be. We need to remember that ethics can be very complex affairs, so we need to 'stay on our toes' and be prepared to apply as much awareness as we can to our actions, with the help of guidelines like the Five Precepts.

5. Homework

To meditate 6 out of 7 times a week. You could alternate (a) the Body Scan and (b) the Mindfulness of Breathing, stages 1 to 4.

Try to look out for some examples, in your own life, where you can be guided by the Five Precepts. Consider the consequences of your various choices in these examples, and see whether you can identify the most skillful course of action. You might consider giving a brief summary of your investigation and conclusions at next week's class!