



by Ajahn Sumedho

1989

Sometimes we approach meditation too much from an ideal of trying to control the mind and get rid of unwanted mental states. It can become an obsession. Meditation can be just another thing we have to do; and this worldly attitude tends to affect what we are doing.

See meditation not as something for measuring yourself as a person, but as an occasion or opportunity to be mindful and be at peace with yourself and with whatever mood or state you happen to be in at this moment. Learn to be one who is at peace with the way they are, rather than someone who is trying to become something, or achieve a state that they would like to have.

That whole way of thinking is based on delusion. I remember when I started meditation in Thailand, all my ambitious and aggressive tendencies would start taking over. The way I had lived my life would affect how I would approach meditation. So I began to notice that. I began to let go of things and to accept even those tendencies, and be attentive to the way it is. The more you trust in that, then the more quickly you will understand the Dhamma, or the way out of suffering.

Notice how things affect your mind. If you have just come from your work or from your home, notice what it does to your mind. Don't criticise it – we are not here to blame or to think that there is something wrong with our profession if our mind is not tranquil and pure and serene when we come here. But notice the business of life: having to talk to people, having to answer telephones, having to type or to travel across London in the rush hour. Maybe we are having to

work with people that we don't like, in difficult, aggravating situations. Just notice - not to criticise, but just to accept, that these things do have an effect on us.

Recognise that this is the experience of consciousness and sensitivity. That is what being born as a human being amounts to, isn't it? You are born and you have to live a lifetime as a conscious being in a very sensitive form. So what impinges on you, what comes to you from the objective world, is going to affect you. It is just the way it is. There is nothing wrong with it. But then the ignorant human being takes it all personally, so we tend to make everything very personal. Its as if I should not be affected by these things that impinge on me. I should not feel anger, or aversion, or greed, or irritation and frustration, envy, jealousy, fear, anxiety. I should not be feeling these things. If I were a normal, healthy man I would not have any of these problems. If I were a normal, healthy man I would not be sensitive at all! Like a rhinoceros - with a tough hide that nothing could ever get through.

But recognise that being human, we have these extremely sensitive forms. There is nothing really wrong with you. Its just the way it is. Life is like this. We live in a society that is just the way it is. Living in London or in suburbia, or in villages or wherever, we can spend our time grumbling because it is not perfect, or there are many things that are irritating or not very nice about many aspects of our lives. But then being sensitive is like this, isn't it? Sensitivity means that, whatever it is, whether its pleasant or unpleasant, pleasurable, painful, beautiful, ugly – we are going to feel it.

And so the way out of suffering is through mindfulness. When you are truly mindful there is no self. You are not taking life's experiences from the assumption of being a person. You can try to make yourself insensitive, say you close your eyes, put ear plugs in your ears try to be totally insensitive, shut everything out - and that is one type of meditation, sensory deprivation. And if you stay that way for a while then you feel very calm because nothing is demanded of you at that time. There is no kind of harsh or stimulating, exciting, frustrating, impingement.

So if you are mindful, you have an awareness of the purity of your mind which is blissful. Your true nature, then, is blissful and serene and pure. But then, if you still have the wrong view about it, then you think, I have to have a sensory deprivation experience all the time. I cannot live in London any more. Even the Buddhist Society is too noisy!

If our peace and serenity depends upon conditions being a certain way, then we get very attached. We become enslaved, we want to control situations and then we become even more angry and upset if anything disrupts them, gets in the way of our peace. I have got to find some place, a cave. I have got to get my own sensory deprivation tank and find the ideal situation. Set up all the conditions where I can keep everything at bay so I can just abide in the blissful serenity of the purity of the mind. But then you see, that view is based on desire, isn't it? It is a self view, a desire to have that experience because you remember it, liked it and want it again.

One time on a retreat I heard some person who was having trouble swallowing. I was sitting there and that person would go gulp, gulp. They were not very loud but when you are attached to total silence, even a gulp can upset you. So I got quite irritated and wanted to throw that person out of the meditation hall. Reflecting on it, I realised that the fault was in me, not in the person.

But mindfulness and understanding the Dhamma allow you to adapt and accept life - the total life experience - without having to control it. With mindfulness you do not have to hold on to bits and pieces that you like and then feel very threatened by the possibilities of being separated from them. Right meditation allows you to be very brave and adaptable, flexible with your life and all that that implies.

We do not have all that much control, do we? Much as we would like to be able to control our lives, we recognise we really do not have that much control. Some things just get out of our control. Things happen and Mother Nature has her ways of letting us know that Mother Natures not just going to follow our desires. Then fashions and revolutions, and changing conditions,

and population problems, and airplanes, televisions, technology, pollution - how can we control it and make it so that we are not being affected by any of it, or only affected in the ways we like?

If we spend our lives trying to control everything, then we just increase the suffering. Even if we should get a measure of control over things, what we want, were still going to be like me with the person gulping in the meditation hall; getting very angry when the neighbour turns on the radio too loud, or the airplane flies low, or the fire engine goes by.

Now one thing to recognise: when you have a body you have to live with it for a lifetime. And these bodies are conscious and sensitive forms. This is just the way it is, what being born means. Bodies: they grow up, then they start getting old. And then there is old age, and then sicknesses, disease - this is a part of our human experience. And then death. We have to accept the death and separation of loved ones. This happens to all of us. Most of us will see our parents die, or even our children, or spouse or friends, loved ones. Part of all human experience is the experience of being separated from the loved.

By knowing the way it is, then you find yourself quite capable of accepting life and not being depressed and bewildered by the way life happens to be. Once you understand it and you see it in the right way then you are not going to create any wrong views about it. You are not going to add to it with fears, and desires, and bitterness, and resentments and blame. We have the ability to accept the way life happens to us as individual beings. Even though we are terribly sensitive, we are also tough survivors in this universe.

You look at where human beings manage to live, like Eskimos up in the Arctic and people in deserts. In the most uninviting places on this planet there is usually human habitation; when forced to we can survive anywhere.

Understanding Dhamma allows us also to have a fearless attitude. We begin to realise that we can accept whatever happens. There is really nothing to be afraid of. Then you can let go of life, you can follow it because you are not expecting anything out of it, and you are not trying to control it: You have the wisdom, the mindfulness, the ability to roll with the flow rather than to be drowned by the tidal waves of life.

Learn to take the time to be silent and listen to yourself. Just use the breathing and the body, just the natural rhythm, the feeling, the way your body feels now. Put your attention onto the body, because the body is a condition in nature. Its not really you. Its not my breathing any more, its not personal; you breathe even if you are crazy, or sick - and if you are asleep you are still breathing. The body breathes. From birth to death it will be breathing. So breath is something that we use as an object to focus on, to turn to. If we think too much, our thoughts get very convoluted and complicated; but if we bring attention just to the ordinary breathing of the body at this moment, at that moment you are actually not thinking – you are attentive to a natural rhythm.

Then you might start making problems out of it: Oh, I cant concentrate on my breath, blah, blah, blah.... Then it becomes me again trying to be mindful of my breath. But actually in any one moment where you are just with the breath, there is no self. Your self will arise when you start thinking. When you are not thinking there is no self and when you are mindful then the thought is not coming from the wrong view that: I am a self. Thought then can be a way of reflection, a way of focusing attention on Dhamma rather than creating problems, criticism, and anxiety, about myself and humanity.

Just contemplate, when you get angry you have to think, don't you? If you stop thinking, the anger will go away. **To be angry you have to think:** He said that to me, how dare he. That dirty so and so! But if you should stop thinking and just use the breath, eventually that feeling of the body that comes with anger will fade out and then there is no anger. So if you feel angry, just reflect on what it feels like as a physical feeling. Its the same with any mood: contemplate, reflect on the mood that you are in. Just work with it - not to analyse it or criticise it, but merely to reflect on it how it is.

Sometimes people say: I get very confused when I meditate. How can I get rid of confusion? Wanting to get rid of confusion is the problem. Being confused and not wanting it is just creating confusion.

So what does confusion feel like? Some of the more stimulating passions that we can have are quite obvious. What we tend to not pay any attention to, or dismiss, are the more subtle states like slight confusion, or hesitation, or doubt, insecurity and anxiety. And, of course, one side of us just wants to get rid of it, just stomp it out. How do I get rid of it? If I meditate, how can I get rid of my fears, anxiety?

With the right understanding, we see that the very desire to get rid of is suffering. We can bear with the feeling of insecurity if we know what it is, and that it changes, its impermanent. So more and more you begin to feel confident in just being aware and mindful rather than trying to develop your practice in order to become an enlightened person. The assumption is that right now you are not enlightened, you have got a lot of problems, you have got to change your life, you have got to make yourself different. You are not good enough the way you are right now, so you have to meditate and hopefully sometime in the future you will become something that you would like to become.

If you never see the delusion of that way of thinking, then it just carries on. You never really become what you should be. No matter how much effort you put into your meditations, after years of trying to become enlightened, you always feel like a failure because you have still got the wrong attitude about it all.

[source: amaravati.org](http://amaravati.org)