

Mahsati Meditation: Using Movement of the Body to Generate Self- Awareness

It is possible that some people who are familiar with other forms of meditation may wonder why we practice by moving our bodies. To better understand the rationale for this practice, it is helpful to first examine how a more familiar form of Theravada meditation is practiced. The most familiar form of Theravada meditation in this country is anapanasati, which begins by developing mindfulness through watching the breath. Mindfulness means attending to what is happening in the present moment in a non-evaluative manner. At the beginning, the anapanasati practitioner is attending to the body in the present moment by watching the breath. The breath anchors the practitioner in the present moment because it can only be observed in the present moment. Once a sufficient level of mindfulness and concentration has been established, the anapanasati practitioner takes the next step which involves broadening the scope of his or her awareness to include mental phenomena as well as the body. These mental phenomena include feeling states, thoughts, and emotions.

This step is referred to as the development of vipassana or insight. According to traditional Theravada practice, this is the source of wisdom. It is through clearly seeing, in a nonjudgmental way, the action of our mind in the present moment, that our perception of ourselves and the world is changed, and we become able to lay down the burden of suffering that we had been carrying around. According to Theravada tradition, it is vipassana, not the initial concentration-on-the-breath, that leads to enlightenment. For the anapanasati practitioner, the breath serves merely to anchor him or her in the present moment so that sufficient self-awareness can be developed for the practice of vipassana.

The same process is cultivated in Mahasati meditation, however, instead of the breath, Mahasati meditation uses larger movements of the body as the initial object of meditation. It is attention to the movement of the body that anchors the Mahasati practitioner in the present moment and facilitates the strengthening of self-awareness. But, the basic process is the same. Once a sufficient level of awareness has been developed, the scope of awareness is broadened to include mental phenomena. The broadening of awareness to include the mind as well as the body can be compared to adjusting the beam of a “maglight” flashlight so that the light changes from a narrow focus that only illuminates a small area, to a broader beam that sheds light on a wider area. But before the beam can be broadened, it must have a certain level of intensity or the more dispersed light will not be strong enough to allow us to see anything clearly. This is why meditation begins with awareness of the body (either through the breath or bodily movements) – it anchors us in the present moment and helps to increase the intensity of awareness so that it can eventually illuminate both mind and body when its scope is broadened.

It is also important to understand that, while Mahasati meditation is not as familiar in this country as mindfulness of breathing, it is firmly rooted in the ancient traditional teachings on meditation. One of the principle discourses on meditation that is ascribed to the Buddha is the Satipatthana Sutta. This sutta includes an admonishment to be mindful of the body, and to know when the body is moving, when it is sitting, when it is standing, when it is walking, and when it is lying down (a translation of this section of the Satipatthana Sutta is attached). Mahasati meditation is based on this foundation. While its practice is relatively new to this country, its roots go far back in time. We practice Mahasati meditation as it was taught by the great Thai meditation master Luangpor Teean, but meditation techniques of this type have been practiced for many centuries in Southeast Asia.

Some may say to themselves, if Mahasati is based on the same principles as anapanasati meditation, why not just stick with the more familiar method. The answer is that Mahasati meditation has several important benefits that make it an especially powerful way to develop the broader self-awareness necessary for the practice of vipassana. By working with grosser movements of the body, our initial awareness is less tightly focused. It is therefore easier to expand the scope of self-awareness to encompass mental phenomena as well. By being aware of the movements of the body while watching the mind, it is also easier to clearly see that the action of the body is distinct from the action of the mind, which is one of the first milestones in the development of panna or wisdom. It is also easier to carry Mahasati meditation over into our daily lives. This is because it is practiced in a more natural manner, with our eyes open and our bodies in motion. Mahasati is also advantageous in that it relies on a less tightly focused state of concentration and is therefore less likely to lead to what is referred to as an “attachment to calmness.” This is an obstacle to progress on the path that occurs when a practitioner becomes attached to the pleasant feeling of serenity that accompanies deep concentration and fails to adequately cultivate vipassana.

This being said, it is perfectly alright to practice mindfulness of breathing and Mahasati meditation side-by-side. Practitioners may find that the two methods complement each other. Awareness can be applied to the breath for a time, and then to the larger movements of the body used in Mahasati meditation. The important point is to cultivate vipassana – not allowing oneself to be seduced by the easy, but temporary, calmness that can come from meditating on the breath. Lasting calmness comes through the understanding that is gained through the insight of vipassana.

Satipatthana Sutta: The Body As Body

Here is an excerpt in which the Buddha encourages monks to be aware of the body and use the body to help develop awareness in addition to their anapanasati or mindfulness with breathing practice.

The Body As a Body

“Again, bhikkhus, when walking, a bhikkhu is aware and knows: "the body is walking"; when standing, he is aware and knows: "the body is standing"; when sitting, he is aware and knows: "the body is sitting"; when lying down, he is aware and knows: "the body is lying down"; or he is aware and knows accordingly however his body is disposed.

Again, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu is one who acts in full awareness when going forward and returning; who acts in full awareness when looking ahead and looking away; who acts in full awareness when flexing and extending his limbs; who acts in full awareness when wearing his robes and carrying his outer robe and bowl; who acts in full awareness when eating, drinking, consuming food, and tasting; who acts in full awareness when defecating and urinating; who acts in full awareness when walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, talking, and keeping silent.

In this way he abides knowing and understanding the body as a body internally, externally, and both internally and externally . . . And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world. That is how a bhikkhu abides knowing and understanding the body as a body.”

-From the "Satipatthana Sutta,"