



Introducing the Mahāsi method

by Patrick Kearney

Introduction

Our approach to insight (*vipassanā*) meditation comes to us from the great modern meditation master, Mahāsi Sayādaw. Born in 1904 in upper Burma, north of Mandalay, Mahāsi Sayādaw studied the Buddhist scriptures before taking up meditation practice under the guidance of Mingun Sayādaw, who was a pioneer in the revival of *vipassanā* meditation in Burma, and in particular the movement to teach *vipassanā* to lay people. After completing his training Mahāsi Sayādaw returned to his home monastery to teach. This monastery had a big drum, *mahā-si* in Burmese, which was beaten to summon local people to dharma teachings. *Sayādaw* means “respected teacher,” and is a title given to senior Burmese monks. So Mahāsi Sayādaw was the Big Drum Teacher. He was given this name because of the drum in his monastery, and because of his ability as a teacher: he beat the drum of the dharma, and many people responded.

When Burma became independent in 1948 the government sponsored a revival of Buddhism. Mahāsi Sayādaw was invited to be in charge of a new meditation centre in Rangoon which was developed to teach meditation practice to large numbers of people, and to lay people in particular. This is a modern innovation, as in traditional Buddhist societies meditation is generally practised only by a small clerical or renunciate elite. The meditation method associated with Mahāsi Sayādaw is a *vipassanā* (“insight” or “clarity”) method, designed specifically to allow lay people in the modern world to attain the experience of *nibbāna* (release). The Mahāsi Sāsana Yeiktha (or Mahāsi Centre, as it is generally referred to in English) now teaches thousands of students every year and has over 300 branch centres inside and outside Burma. It remains one of the most important meditation centres in the world today, and the source of one of the most influential meditation lineages in Theravāda Buddhism.

What is meditation?

Meditation is the systematic training of attention. Attention is the deliberate placing of awareness on its object. And awareness is the knowing of the object.

Awareness is the knowing of the object. Let us consider the simple act of seeing. Looking out at a view, we are aware of what is in front of us. This awareness is a fundamental *knowing*, a sense that something is present. Awareness is the presence-of something. It is not so much something in itself, but the presence-of ... something.

Awareness always has an object. If we are aware, we are aware *of something*. *What* we see is the *object* of our awareness. And this object tells us something of the depth or quality of our awareness. For example, I may be short-sighted, enjoying a

view with the aid of my glasses. If I take my glasses off, suddenly the view becomes blurred; putting them back on, it becomes sharp, clear. So even with the same object, the quality of awareness may change under different circumstances – sometimes clear, sometimes not. Sometimes something is clearly, strongly present to me; sometimes it is vaguely present to me; and sometimes, like when I turn away from the view, it is not present at all. This quality of presence is awareness, and it changes according to circumstances. And this, in turn, means it can be trained, cultivated, developed.

Attention is the deliberate placing of awareness on its object. Normal, everyday awareness is something that happens to us; meditative awareness is something that we do. For example, we might notice a painting on the wall, and even admire it briefly. But if we were studying it as part of an art course, then we would be putting a lot of energy into looking at it very carefully and distinguishing its unique characteristics. It is that quality of *effort* or *energy* that distinguishes meditative awareness from normal awareness. Normal, everyday awareness is something that happens to us; meditative awareness is something that we *deliberately* do. And effort always implies *choice* or *intention*. We choose to place our awareness on a particular object – the painting – rather than another, such as our daydreams, or the view out the window. Attention chooses a specific object to know, and then chooses to focus on it. And so, attention is the deliberate placing of awareness on its object.

Two wings of a bird

Meditation is the systematic training of attention. It implies learning and mastering some kind of method. This training can be compared to a journey which is designed to take us from confusion to clarity, from the gross to the subtle. It is like the flight of a bird, and in order to fly the bird needs two wings. One wing, no matter how strong, is not enough. These two wings of the training are serenity (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*).

Samatha means “serenity” or “calm,” and *samatha* meditation is meditation for the purpose of cultivating serenity or calm. *Vipassanā* means “insight” or “clarity,” and *vipassanā* meditation is meditation for the purpose of cultivating insight or clarity. All Buddhist meditation methods can be regarded as falling into one of these two categories. Of these two, *vipassanā* is considered by the tradition as the most important because it alone leads to awakening (*bodhi*) and *nibbāna*. However, although they are often presented as separate and independent “techniques,” *samatha* and *vipassanā* are the two ends of a single continuum. All serenity meditation has an insight aspect; all insight meditation has a serenity aspect. But they remain different, although closely related, projects. Serenity practice seeks answers to the questions: How should the mind be steadied?; How should the mind be composed?; How should the mind be unified?; How should the mind be concentrated? Insight practice seeks answers to the questions: How should things be seen?; How should things be explored?; How should things be understood?

So serenity can also mean the calming and unifying aspect of any meditation technique; and insight can mean the clarifying, exploring, understanding aspect of any meditation technique. Often the tradition talks about meditation in terms of

the single activity of *samatha-vipassanā* (serenity-insight), because both aspects must be cultivated in a balanced way. How they are cultivated and balanced determines whether we can classify a particular method as either serenity meditation or insight meditation. The Mahāsi method is a technique of insight meditation, and is designed to develop insight (*vipassanā*) and understanding (*paññā*).

The primary object

We are systematically cultivating attention, and to do this we give the mind something to be attentive to, calling it the *primary object*. For the purposes of insight meditation, we want this primary object to be something that is clear, so that we can track it for periods of time; and dynamic, so that we can perceive change within it. For this reason Mahāsi Sayādaw instructed his students to make the breathing as sensed in the abdominal area the primary object of sitting meditation. As we inhale the abdomen moves, it swells, or “rises.” As we exhale, again there is movement in the abdomen, the abdomen “falls.” There is a “rising” and a “falling” movement of the abdomen. The words “rising” and “falling” here are code for the actual physical sensations experienced in the body, and in particular the abdominal area, when we inhale and exhale.

Why watch the breathing in the abdomen? Because for most people most of the time the sensations involved with breathing are clearest in this area. Insight (*vipassanā*) is characterised by clarity, so our basic rule is to focus on whatever is *clearest*, whatever is predominant in this moment. Secondly, focusing on the abdomen puts our awareness in the centre of the physical body, making physical sensations readily available to us. And thirdly, it gives us access to the emotional body, which is an advantage for the contemplation of what the Buddha calls *citta*, “heart,” or “mind.” Understanding our heart/mind is crucial to cultivating insight.

However, using the movements of the breath as sensed in the abdomen does not work for everyone. Some people may find the physical sensations associated with breathing to be clearest elsewhere – in the chest, or example, or at the nostrils, or moving around the body. It doesn’t really matter where these sensations occur, what is important is that we examine them where they are most clear and distinct. So use the abdomen as your primary object, but do not be locked in by it.

What’s most important is to stay with the primary object for as much as possible, especially in the early stages of the practice. Concentration (*samādhi*) is developed mostly through our relationship to the primary object. The more precisely focused we are on the primary object, and the more detail we find in it, the more concentration will strengthen. If we are casual about our relationship to the primary object we will not gain sufficient concentration for insight to arise. So focus closely on the primary object unless something else takes you away from it. Don’t spend time wondering “What am I supposed to be watching?,” or “Where should I look now?” Just come back to the primary object.

Noting & naming

In the Mahāsi lineage we often speak of “noting” the meditation object. To note something means to deliberately place our awareness on it. This in turn requires us to make a choice, now, to take our attention and place it just precisely *there*. This requires energy or effort, as well as precision. *Noting* is the action of deliberately and precisely placing our awareness on something. This action is central, for what we note, we know; what we don’t note, we don’t know.

When we look precisely at the breathing process we discover that, directly experienced, inhalation is a series of changing physical sensations – movement, pressure, tension and so on – within the body. Exhalation is a series of changing physical sensations. These sensations are what we mean by “breathing.” To develop precision in our noting we *name* these sensations, mentally sticking labels on them. While inhaling we name the experience “rising,” mentally repeating the word. While exhaling we name the experience “falling.” If a different name spontaneously arises, one which describes the sensation more appropriately, then feel free to use it, but otherwise just use “rising” and “falling.” These names assist us to develop an accurate and precise sense of *aim*, the ability to clearly distinguish *just this* as the meditation object. Aim is particularly important in insight practice, because here we are concerned with understanding the object of awareness. In this practice, clarity is central, and clarity is closely linked to aim. We can tell our attention is precisely aimed when the object becomes clear and distinct.

Distraction and the secondary object

As soon as we begin meditating we are assailed by distraction, and in *vipassanā* meditation we work to incorporate distraction into the practice. What is distraction? *Distraction is the unnoticed movement of attention from one object to another.*

Attention chooses something out of the vast matrix of sense experience to focus upon, placing it at the centre of our awareness, and ignores the rest. When we attend to an object we bring it to the centre of our attention, while other things surround it. For example, I may be looking at one person in a crowded room, but I can also see the people around her, and in the periphery of my vision I might see the walls, the ceiling, and so on. The visual field extends beyond the single person on whom I choose to focus, who resides at the centre of my field of attention. So attention is always characterised by centre and periphery: the chosen object at the centre of the field of awareness, and everything else on the periphery.

The fact that I am aware of something on the periphery of awareness is not distraction. Even the fact that my attention, the central *focus* of awareness, moves from one object to another is not distraction – if I am aware of it. Distraction is the *unnoticed* movement of attention from one object to another. I am attending to breathing, squarely focused upon it, aware of a painful sensation in my leg in the background. Suddenly I realise my focus is now on the painful sensation, with the breath in the background or disappeared entirely. My focus of awareness moved from breath to painful sensation without me knowing, and I realise this only after the event. Have you noticed how we tend to “wake up” in the middle of a distraction, realising “I’m already distracted!”?

Distraction is not the awareness of something else going on besides the primary object, like the background sound of traffic. Distraction occurs when the central focus of our attention is grabbed and taken to some other specific event. Watching the rising and falling of the abdomen, we may be aware that there is some thought in the background, but that is not distraction; we know we are distracted in the moment we realise that the thinking is now in the foreground and the rising and falling of the abdomen has either retreated to the background or has disappeared entirely.

How do we respond to the fact of distraction? We could condemn it, or condemn ourselves for being distracted, but all we accomplish then is the extension of distraction. For we can only be aware of what is happening *now*. If what is happening now is a distraction, then right now I can only be aware of this distraction itself. If I fail to realise this, and react to my distraction in order to return to my meditation later, then all I am doing is postponing my awareness. But awareness postponed is awareness denied.

In the moment we know we are distracted, that very knowing is a moment of pure awareness. If we immediately choose to attend to this, now, which we call “distraction,” then we are *already* attending. We don’t need to postpone our meditation practice until we return to our primary object. Instead, we note our distraction, calling it the *secondary object*. We note the secondary object with the same energy, attention and concentration with which we note the primary object, the rising and falling of the abdomen. To summarise, *the primary object is what sustains attention over time; and the secondary object is what grabs the attention, from time to time.*

The complete instruction for the practice is: “Be attentive!” How can I be attentive all the time? I can’t. But what I can do is be attentive *now*. I can attend to anything, including the fact that I have lost my attention. To be clearly aware of my distraction is attention; it is the practice itself.

Walking

In walking meditation we have the same basic structure of primary and secondary object. We note the primary object until we realise that our attention has been taken to something else, and we then note that something else as the secondary object. When walking, the primary object is the movement of the body, and in particular the feet, and the touch sensations as the foot contacts the floor. We ground ourselves in the posture, beginning with standing. Then we begin to walk to and fro along a straight path. We begin by walking just a bit slower than normal, so each movement is deliberate, and we keep our attention in the body, feeling both the movement of the body and the touch of the foot on the ground. We name this experience “walking.”

As we settle into the walking we slow down and focus more precisely on the movement of the foot and its contact on the ground, and divide each step into two aspects: “lifting” and “placing.” “Lifting” names the experience of lifting the foot from the floor, and “placing” names the experience of dropping the foot and placing it on the floor. Slowing down even more, we focus ever more precisely on the movement and touch sensations in the foot, dividing each step into three parts:

“lifting;” “pushing;” “placing. ”Pushing” names the experience of pushing or moving the foot forwards. As the mind settles we can be more precise in our noting, for example by noting “dropping” as the foot descends, and then “touching” as the foot presses against the floor, so we have “lifting,” “pushing,” “dropping,” “placing” and “touching.” And when we notice we are distracted by something else we name that experience, making it the secondary object. When it no longer demands our attention, we return to the primary object.

In walking, don't forget posture. A common mistake among meditators is to be so focused on our feet that we cut off from the rest of the body. Body and mind then become tense, strained, and we find ourselves disliking the walking. So allow the movement of the feet and their contact with the floor to be at the centre of your focus, but maintain a sense of the whole body as the periphery. The whole body is a field of awareness, the centre of which is movement and touch. Don't lose awareness of the surrounding field.

Watching the mind

When we incorporate distraction into our practice, we find ourselves deep in the contemplation of *citta*, “mind” or “heart.” For the Buddha, “mind” indicates all non-physical experience, including emotions and thoughts. It is important to understand that contemplating mind does not mean becoming lost in the *content* of mind. Our focus in the practice is the *process* of mind. If I realise that I'm daydreaming or obsessing about something, I am not interested in what the daydream or obsession is about. That is irrelevant. What I am interested in is simply the fact of daydreaming or of obsession. This is the process of the arising, manifestation and cessation of the experience, and my relationship to that process.

The mind functions like a television broadcasting an endless stream of soap operas, all of them fascinating because all of them star “*me*.” And of course none of these stories ever come to an end. The mind is always throwing up images, like a fire throws up sparks, and our attention moves in to capture any one of these and immediately turn it into a narrative. Normally we ourselves are the central character of each of these narratives, and despite that fact that they often contradict each other, for as long as they are playing themselves out we believe them. These narratives define our world for us. They provide us with our sense of identity, as they are either about me or, if they are about others, they are about others from the perspective of me and my concerns. Always the central reference point is “me.” While it is natural for the mind to generate thoughts, when we habitually *identify* with thoughts we generate a relentless self-obsession which becomes the main source of our suffering.

To cut through these narratives and obsessions we make them the object of meditation. So when there is thinking that pulls us away from our primary object, just name the experience – “thinking,” “thinking” – and watch the fact of thinking. “Dreaming,” “dreaming.” An emotion will come, a feeling will arise. Identify it, know it, and name it. “Boredom;” “worry;” “sorrow;” “pleasure;” “anticipation;” whatever it is. Experience fully, without judgement, whatever is happening. What does it feel like to be caught up in thinking? Is there any tension in the body? Is there any tension in the mind? Don't take anything for granted, but investigate. Do

not investigate by thinking about it, creating a new narrative to make sense of the old one. We simply watch non-physical events, now, with penetrating attention, or we watch physical events, now, with penetrating attention. Whatever is happening *now*, that's what we note. The objects of attention change; the stream of attention itself remains continuous.

Continuity of attention

This point is central: *it doesn't matter what the object of attention is; what matters is the continuity of attention.* We can be attending to anything, and the meditation will work. When we are not attending, the meditation is not working. It is, however, generally easier to watch physical experiences, because they are fairly gross and obvious. They stick around for a while. The mind is incredibly slippery and fast. It's very difficult to catch. We are also much more likely to identify with the mind. If a thought arises we see it as *my* thought; if a feeling arises we see it as *my* feeling; and we get caught up with them, investing them with an importance they don't have. While we also identify with physical sensations, they tend not to be so gripping. In the early stages of the practice, or when concentration and attention are relatively weak, it's better to stay in the body as much as possible.

Pain, for example, is very interesting, partly because it compels our attention, and partly because as we watch pain, it breaks up into both physical sensation and a mental response to physical sensation, the response of "I don't like this." Both of these can be investigated. When watching pain avoid naming it as "pain," because this name already contains a judgement about the experience. Be neutral, objective and precise in naming. What exactly is the sensation? "Heat;" "pressure;" "sharpness;" "throbbing." When we examine some aspect of experience, we must be clear about what aspect we are examining. When we watch physical sensation, just sensation; when we watch a mental response of aversion, of "I don't like this," just "dislike;" "aversion." Attention is precise; it is attention to this specific experience and not any other.

In brief, we are investigating body and mind as they present themselves from moment to moment; body and mind as they present themselves, *now*. Our central reference point is the primary object. We keep coming back to the primary object when we are in any doubt about what's happening, or if we don't know if we're doing it right, or if we have any questions about what we should be attending to. We stay centred on the primary object, allowing the mind to settle on and unify around it. But sometimes the mind is distracted, dragged away from the primary object. Whenever attention is taken somewhere else, as soon as we wake up to this fact we acknowledge that experience as the secondary object: "thinking;" "seeing;" "touching;" "feeling;" "hard;" "soft;" whatever it is. And in both cases, whether it's the primary object or a secondary object, I'm really looking at it closely. I want to know what it is. What *exactly* is this? Don't take anything for granted. Our practice requires an absolute refusal to take anything for granted, and this refusal requires an uncompromising openness to what is happening now, whatever is happening now.

Practice and awakening

Why are we training in this specialised technique? Meditation is the systematic training of attention. The result of this training is that we begin to see what we normally miss. Buddhism is a wisdom tradition, which means the Buddha begins with the assumption that human beings are deluded. Delusion, in turn, means that while we *think* we know what is happening, in fact we don't. We are energetically creating suffering, confident as we do so that we are marching toward happiness. To see things correctly – to “know and see realistically,” as the Buddha puts it – requires that we first deconstruct our habitual wrong way of seeing. We are continually forming and constructing ourselves and our world, and in our confusion construct a world in which we and others suffer unnecessarily. By deconstructing our normal world we see how we create suffering for ourselves and others, and we can then create space within which we can act more skilfully.

What happens, for example, when someone upsets me and I react? In my habitual, taken for granted blindness I automatically see the situation in terms of “you” out there and “me” in here, a situation in which we both play a role in my narrative in which “you” do something you should not and “I” am unjustly injured. In other words, having failed to note this situation as it arises and ceases, I identify with it. That which I fail to note, I am.

“I am” the central character in my narrative. “I am” is this solid sense of someone living in this body and mind, someone whose attention is directed “out there” to others and the world in which we all live, someone who acts and is acted upon. But when we look closely, when we note the mind-body process, we can find no aspect of our experience which we can identify with as “I” or “mine.” To the degree that we see and understand this, we can be free; to the degree that we fail to see and understand this, we are necessarily bound. For we are bound by what controls us, and we are controlled by what we don't see.

But when we are used to watching the flow of experience, something changes. We see this situation break up into its component parts, and we see how these parts come together to form what we usually take for granted as something solid and independent of us. We develop a new relationship to this situation, now, seeing it as conditioned and conditioning process. I can step back, like an actor, and both participate in and simultaneously watch the unfolding scene. When I have this kind of view, I have some space between me and my reactions. I can see anger as just anger, and can allow it to arise and cease dependent upon conditions, without automatically reacting according to my habitual patterns.

We do the practice in order to attain something we don't yet have, some kind of awakening to a situation better than this. The practice is what we *do*; awakening is what happens as the *result* of what we do. But when we go deeper into this matter, we find it is not so dualistic. In the practice we see what is really going on; in our daily lives we act, from moment to moment, day to day and year to year. At a fundamental level, seeing and action cannot be separated. Seeing guides action; action expresses seeing. At the centre of this relationship lies the power of ingrained habit.

Acting habitually, we act out of our confusion, blindly identifying with our fears, desires and obsessions, creating continued situations of pain. According to Buddhist

psychology, our blind, confused actions are based on choice: we act blindly and habitually, because we *choose* to act in this way. The work of practice is to cut through habit by consciously watching what we take for granted, and so normally miss; the work of awakening is to cut through habit by acting out of the space that seeing creates. This awakened action is the expression of freedom. Freedom always involves free choice, so awakening always involves awakened choices. But just as we can choose to act in an awakened way, so we can always choose to act in a blind, habitual way. The choice is ours, and we must make that choice now.

Both practice and awakening manifest now. If we are to attend to this present experience, we can only attend now; if we are to respond wisely to this present moment, we can only respond now. Practice cannot be postponed. We cannot do it tomorrow or the next second; we can only do it now. Awakening cannot be postponed. We cannot awaken tomorrow or the next second; we can only do it now. If we practice now in the hope of one day being awakened, then we are simply denying both practice and awakening; we are denying responsibility for our own experience.

Confusion arises in this moment, so attention must arise in this moment, and our free choice must arise in this moment. Attention cuts through the fog of confusion, and does it now. Whether awakened or deluded, meditating or not meditating, there is no avoiding choice. There is no ultimate state where we will find ourselves no longer having to make choices – no longer having to take responsibility for our situation.

It is not a question of time, of either practice or awakening happening some time in the future. Attention happens now. Awakening happens now. Attention and awakening can *only* happen now. The question is, are we open to practice-awakening? Or are we determined to remain stuck in rigidity of mind, clinging to habit, and refuse to be open to this moment, now? Right now, we are making choices, and we must make choices. Our choices may be based on confusion, or they may be based on clarity, but we cannot avoid making choices, and every choice we make is an expression of either confusion or awakening.