



Frequently Asked Meditation Questions

Here is a list of questions about the meditation practice I teach that get asked frequently enough to warrant inclusion in such a list. I'll try to add more as I think of them (I'm sure there's lots I've missed). Suggestions are welcome, via comments on this page.

Noting

Why isn't it enough to just be aware of the phenomena that arise without noting them?

More important than “what is enough” is an answer to the question “what is better?” It may be “enough” to just be aware of a phenomenon, but it is certainly better to apply mindfulness to it, which is defined in this tradition as the grasping of the object as it is – a quality that may or may not be present in ordinary awareness. The real question is, without reminding oneself of the objective nature of the phenomenon (i.e. noting), how can one be sure one is observing the phenomenon objectively?

It is common for a new meditator to have a natural disinclination to note; it is more comfortable, certainly, to allow one's awareness to stand unimpeded than to exercise the mind in the precision of identifying the object. The question of which is better is obviously debatable but one should not let one's prejudice be the deciding factor either way.

The essential quality of insight meditation is sati (loosely translated as mindfulness). Sati means to remember, recollect or remind oneself of something. According to the Visuddhimagga, its proximate cause is thirasaññā, “firm recognition”. Whereas recognition (saññā) is present in ordinary experience, noting is understood to augment and stabilize this recognition, preventing the mind from wavering in its objective observation.

While it may not be as comfortable or “natural” to remind oneself of the nature of the object in this way, noting understood to be more reliably objective. The simple exercise of producing an objective label for the object is enough to completely prevent any alternative judgement or extrapolation of the object. Put in another way, it is

inevitable that the mind will give rise to some sort of label for every experience anyway; the noting is just a means of insuring that the label is objective.

If one experiences aversion or doubt about the technique, it is enough to note these as well, since they are undeniably hindrances to meditation practice whereas noting is not. If one is able to overcome one's aversion and doubt by noting "disliking, disliking" or "doubting, doubting", it can be assured that one will become comfortable with and see the benefit in the noting technique for oneself. If one is unable to do so, one is welcome to seek out other techniques in other traditions.

When many phenomena are present, which phenomenon should one note?

One should acknowledge what is most prevalent in one's field of awareness; which object one notes is far less important than the mere fact that one is noting. It is not necessary to try to catch every phenomenon, as the noting is just a means of cultivating objectivity. If one tries to note every phenomenon that arises, one will become overwhelmed, unable to maintain objective observation. Noting should therefore be used to augment one's ordinary perception at a rate that is comfortable and consistent, no more frequent than once per second.

For how long should one note a single phenomenon?

A distinction is made here between unwholesome, unwholesome-triggering, and neutral phenomena. In the case of unwholesome phenomena such as liking, disliking, worry, fear, doubt, etc., one should note them until they go away. In the case of unwholesome-triggering phenomena like pain, pleasure, or any object one finds interesting, exciting, fearsome, or otherwise productive of judgement of any kind, one should note them for as long as the mind remains interested or until they disappear of their own accord, whichever comes first. In the case of neutral phenomena, noting two or three times, as in "seeing, seeing" or "hearing, hearing" is usually enough.

What should one do if one can't find a name for an arisen phenomenon?

In most cases, either "knowing" or "feeling" is accurate enough to create objective awareness of any phenomenon that is not easily categorizable (e.g. seeing, hearing, etc.).

What should one do when a phenomenon is so brief one is only aware of it after it has already disappeared?

Since at that moment there is a knowledge of the disappearance, noting "knowing, knowing" is enough to prevent any uncertainty or judgement about the deceased object.

In the case of emotion, is it okay to just note "feeling" or is it better to label the specific emotion?

Emotions are complex entities; they generally contain a fleeting mental component and a more lasting physical effect. It is important to separate these two aspects in order to clearly see the reality of the experience; anxiety, for example, exists only momentarily in the mind but seems to persist due to the physical reactions triggered by it. The actual emotion, such as anxiety, disliking, liking, fear, worry, etc. should be noted by name for the brief moment that it arises; the physical aspect of each should be distinguished as being simply "feeling" or in certain cases "pain", "pleasure", or "calm".

Walking Meditation

Is it necessary to note every phenomenon that occurs during walking meditation?

No. Given the dynamic nature of walking meditation, it can actually be a hindrance to try to note everything while in motion. A general rule of thumb is to ignore small disturbances like fleeting thoughts, sounds, or sensations, simply bringing the mind back to focus on the foot without interrupting the movements of the body, and if the disturbance is significant enough to keep the mind away from the foot, to stop, bring the feet together (noting “stopping, stopping”), and note the phenomenon in the standing position until it either goes away or the mind loses interest, after which one can resume the walking as normal.

Should the eyes be open or closed during walking meditation?

The eyes should be open during walking meditation to maintain balance. The mind should, however, be with the feet, not the eyes.

Is walking meditation necessary?

No, there is no specific posture that is necessary in meditation; walking meditation is a means of keeping the body in shape, as well as cultivating effort to balance strong concentration or drowsiness. If one is unable to practice walking meditation properly due to poor balance or leg injuries, it is recommended to use a cane or stationary object (wall, railing, table, etc.) to balance oneself, noting the movements of the stabilizing hand as well. If one is unable to practice walking meditation at all, one can improvise by performing whatever bodily movements one is capable of (moving one’s legs, wheeling a wheelchair, etc.) for the purpose of keeping the body healthy and cultivating effort while maintaining mindfulness.

Sitting Meditation

Why do we focus on the abdomen?

The abdomen is an obvious example of a physical phenomenon; it is the element of motion (vayo dhatu) as described in Buddhist texts. Whereas “mindfulness of breathing” (ānāpānasati) is technically considered tranquillity (samatha) meditation, “analysis of the elements” (catudhātuvavatthāna) is considered to be the basis of insight meditation. This is because, while the elements are experienced directly, the breath itself is a concept. For this reason, though watching the abdomen can be thought of as mindfulness of breathing in a way, it differs from watching in and out breathing in an important regard: the latter often leads to tranquillity rather than directly to insight into the nature of reality, while the former is set firmly in ultimate reality and thus conducive to insight into the nature of reality.

What to do if the mind continuously returns to a more familiar object of meditation (e.g. the tip of the nose or upper lip)?

Noting the sensations caused by the breath at any part of the body is not at all wrong; insight can be cultivated

based on any real experience. The abdomen is favoured because of its gross nature, as opposed to the subtle sensations that occur around the mouth (which therefore favour tranquillity meditation). Since this tradition has developed specific techniques based on the abdomen, we ask meditators coming to our centre to use it as their primary object. If such meditators are accustomed to using another object of meditation, they should note sensations that arise based on that meditation when the mind returns there, for example “hot”, “cold”, “feeling”, or even “knowing” (that the mind has returned there) at the nose or mouth until the mind becomes disinterested, whereupon one should return to the abdomen and continue noting as usual.

Why should one return to the abdomen rather than moving from one object to another as they arise?

It is not intrinsically wrong to note one object after another randomly; in practice, however, this tends to lead to a sense of anticipation, waiting for the next object to arise, which is detrimental to objective awareness. The meditator is therefore instructed to note one object until it disappears, then return to the abdomen until another object takes one’s attention. Because the movements of the abdomen are reliably present, they provide a good base from which to observe the present reality at all times.

What if one is unable to perceive the rising and falling motion of the abdomen?

It is common for new meditators, especially those who are exceptionally tense in body and mind, to have difficulty breathing naturally. Such meditators should rest assured that with practice the body and mind will relax sufficiently to allow ordinary observation of the movements of the abdomen. In the meantime, it may help to place a hand on the abdomen during meditation to familiarize oneself with the movements. If even this doesn’t work, one can begin by practicing meditation in the lying position, wherein the movements should be clearly discernible.

In ordinary cases where the movements of the abdomen are temporarily indiscernible, one may note “sitting, sitting” instead.

What should one do when there is nothing to note?

It is common for meditators to encounter states of quiet wherein there is no awareness of the abdomen or any other experience besides a sense of calm, quiet, or emptiness. Though such states may seem to be outside of ordinary meditation practice, they are no different from any other phenomenon and should therefore be noted as any other, as in “quiet, quiet”, “calm, calm” or “empty, empty” until they disappear. If there is any liking or wanting in regards to such states, one should note that as “liking, liking” or “wanting, wanting”.

Miscellaneous

How does one know if one is progressing in the practice?

Progress is a tricky thing; in one sense, the whole idea of progress is misleading. Where are you trying to progress to? What are you trying to achieve? Progress in meditation is about giving up and letting go, not becoming and taking on new constructs. Any concern that you aren’t getting anything out of meditation should be noted objectively and discarded. Nonetheless, there are certain signs of “progress” that one can look for as

reassurance that the meditation is of benefit.

The first sign of progress in meditation is understanding; simply understanding how your mind works is enough to trigger the chain reaction of letting go, since all phenomena are in truth unworthy of being clung to. Any understanding you gain about your mind, even the understanding that it is a chaotic mess, is therefore a sign of progress.

Further, the ability to suffer through emotions without acting on them – e.g. liking but not clinging, wanting but not seeking out, angry but not causing harm, etc. – is a sign of an ability to be objective, even in the face of unwholesomeness. Even better is the ability to not give rise to liking or disliking at all, simply experiencing reality as it is – happiness as happiness, pain as pain, calm as calm, seeing as seeing, etc. If one is able to experience reality in this way, even some of the time, this is a sign of progress.

Finally, changes in one’s views, thoughts, and habits are the ultimate test of whether one is truly progressing on the path. Is one still given to strong views and opinions? Does one still give rise to the same negative, oppressive, or clinging thoughts as before? Are one’s addictive and reactive habits still in full force? If the answer to any of these is no, then this is a sign of long-term benefits of meditation. Of course, none of these will disappear overnight; it might seem that even after prolonged meditation, the same views, thoughts, and habits still arise, since any long-term change effected by the meditation will be, of necessity, gradual. Still, one should be able to detect a reduced intensity to all negative qualities if one is persistent in the meditation practice.

One Comment



Bond Keevil

October 6, 2016 at 1:35 am

How about “How can I deal with a serious emotional problem?” You know people panicking because they overwhelmed by fear, grief, anger, addiction, etc. Not all that frequent I guess but its all I can think of.

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