Review of Classic Theravada Mindfulness of Breathing Meditation

This continues a series of reviews of the various mindfulness meditation techniques that have been cultivated in the last 100 years and are being actively taught and practiced by contemporary Western meditation teachers. During previous talks, the focus of review has been the Mahasi Sayadaw Noting practice on February 24, 2021 and the S.N. Goenka Body Scan practice on March 3, 2021. This review focuses on the practice taught by the Pa Auk Sayadaw, Bhaddanta Acinna (b. 1934), a well-respected Burmese scholar and meditation teacher.

All three of these techniques were supported by the Mahasi Sayadaw (1904-1982), who was acknowledged as a primary initiator of bringing Buddhist mindfulness meditation from the monastic to the lay practitioner world in the early and mid-20th century. The practice promoted by the Pa Auk Sayadaw follows what is called the “wet vipassana” path, samathayanika (shah-mah-tah-yah-nee-kah), while the other two cultivate the “dry vipassana” technique, suddhavipassanayanika (soo-dah-vewe-pah-suh-nah-yah-nee-kah). The Pa Auk Sayadaw practice adheres rigorously to the principles and practices often called the “Visuddhimagga” practice, which strongly emphasizes the cultivation of very high degrees of concentration/tranquility, samatha (shah-mah-tah), prior to practicing vipassana.

The ability to access jhana levels of consciousness requires certain conditions—access to a quiet, undisturbed site with circumstances conducive to long periods of uninterrupted meditation periods, and a strong commitment to cultivating exclusive attention to a primary object, in this case, the sensations of breathing. Life circumstances are also a consideration; a stressful lifestyle or conflicted personality structure won’t support high levels of concentration. The ability to achieve a level of consciousness that is not affected by the hindrances is necessary—this level of concentration is called upacara samadhi (oo-pah-chah-rah sah-mah-dee), translated as access concentration; the context of this terminology is that this level of concentration can provide a platform for accessing jhana states or for practicing jhana (Following the dry vipassana practices). The practice for cultivating jhana is as follows:

* Attention to the sensation of breathing is primarily at the rim of the nostrils or between the rim of the nostrils and the upper lip. The ability to maintain a persistent and vivid awareness of the sensation for long and uninterrupted amounts of time “disables” the hindrances. A particular area of sensation becomes vivid and focused attention on that sensation becomes enduring for long periods of time.
* The sensation of breathing becomes a “flow” experience—there is no interest in discerning the in- or out-breath and the sensation becomes even more vivid.
* A quality of imagery associated with the breath becomes apparent called the nimitta (nih-mih-tah), a signifier that consciousness is developing a mental image of the physical phenomena. This mental image is directly known without any commentary. It can appear as a distinct point of light, comparable to what would be noticed is someone at a distance held a small flashlight pointed at “the mind’s eye”. I never experienced that—my experience was two-fold: either the sensation of breathing felt like a very smooth flow of silk through the nostrils in an uninterrupted way, or a sensation during body sweep practice became very pleasantly vivid in awareness in a persistent way. The second form was what preceded my jhana experiences.
* It is important to experience equipoise regarding the nimitta experience—any excitement or urgency would degrade the quality of the nimitta and prevent the manifestation of the jhana factors.

**First Jhana Characteristics**: Attention would “fall into” a level of attention that manifested five characteristics: 1) intentionally bringing attention to the nimitta (vitakka); 2) sustaining this attention in an uninterrupted manner for long periods of time (vicara); 3) a blissful/joyful quality of interest in the experience, which can be extraordinarily pleasurable physically (piti); 4) a high level of happiness/satisfaction in the experience (sukha); 5) the focus of attention is unified, unwavering and exclusive of distractions (ekagatta), and *this attention is not focused on the breath but rather a mental image of the nimitta*.

**Second Jhana Characteristics:** The application of and sustaining of attention (vitakka and vicara) are experienced as unnecessary and attention is truly blended with the other factors of piti and sukha, which become even more vivid. The blending is even more unified and peaceful.

**Third Jhana Characteristics:** The experience of piti and sukha seem to become harsh and there is an increasing awareness that a characteristic of strong tranquility, a more satisfying level of sukha, is accessible and the ekagatta factor becomes even more coherent. The flow of experience is very stable, mentally “quiet” and peaceful.

**Fourth Jhana Characteristics:** The characteristic of stability and unification becomes even stronger and sukha is replaced by equipoise, tatramajjhatata (tah-trah-muh-jah-tah-tah), which can be translated as “that quality of consciousness that is balanced/in the middle”, that is, just the right blend of alertness/quietude and fluid stability.

**The Formless Jhanas:** These are refinements of the Fourth Jhana that are extraordinarily subtle and related to purely mental characteristics— “Sphere of Infinite Space”, “Sphere of Infinite Consciousness”, “Sphere of No-Thingness” and “Sphere of Neither Perception Nor Non-Perception”

I have experienced the first four jhanas; my experience of the Fourth Jhana was like my attention was flowing very quickly and smoothly without any interest in experiencing being embodied. This gave me an insight into the Formless Jhanas as being even more subtle with a profound absence of any sort of sensation or connection to anything other than that flow experience.

It is my opinion that achieving jhana states is not necessary or worth the effort. In addition, the characteristics of the First and Second jhanas is so extraordinarily pleasurable that they present an obstacle to less interesting practices such as vipassana. It also seems to me that cultivating access concentration is quite important, as the characteristics of the Seven Awakening Factors are significantly strengthened. These factors are: Mindfulness, Investigation of Mental Phenomena, Joy/Heightened Interest, Tranquility, Concentration/Unification and Equipoise/Balance of Factors. These characteristics are the qualities of attention that advances vipassana practice.

A well-respected Thai master, Ajahn Dhammadaro, when asked about jhana and effective vipassana practice:

Once he was asked: "The Buddha talked about the need to develop mindfulness and concentration. Could you say more about concentration?"

His reply: "There are three kinds of concentration developed in meditation. Two of them are developed on the path to absorption (jhana) and these are access and full absorption concentration. Each of these is developed by fixing the mind one-pointedly on a single meditation object. Such meditations include visualization of fixed forms or colors or concentrating the mind on one particular feeling like loving-kindness. When access and absorption concentration are developed, bliss and tranquility arise, the meditator is fully absorbed in the object, and no hindrances can disturb him. This provisional eradication of defilements state free from desire, aversion and confusion lasts only so long as the meditator keeps the mind on the meditation object. As soon as the mind leaves its absorption in the object, bliss disappears, and the mind is again beset by the flow of defilements. There is additionally a danger of this fixed concentration. Since it does not generate wisdom it can lead to clinging to bliss or even misuse of the powers of concentration, thereby actually increasing defilements.

"The third kind of concentration is what is referred to in the eightfold path as right concentration or perfect concentration. This is concentration developed on a moment-to-moment basis in insight meditation. Only moment-to-moment concentration following the path of mindfulness leads to the destruction of defilements. This concentration is not developed by fixing the mind motionless to one object, but by being mindful of the changing bodily sensations, feelings, consciousness, and mind objects. When properly established in the inner body and mind, moment-to-moment concentration leads to the destruction of the rounds of rebirth. Through this concentration, we develop the ability to see clearly the five aggregates: form, feeling, perception, volition and consciousness which make up what we conventionally call men and women."

To another question: "Would you elaborate on developing moment-to-moment concentration?" Achaan Dhammadaro replied: "There are two important points to make. First is that it is through the feelings arising from contact at each of the sense doors that we must develop insight. The aggregate of form is the basis for the development of moment-to-moment concentration and the resulting wisdom. Therefore, we must be mindful of the sensation or feelings arising from contact at the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mental sense bases.

"The second important point is that continuity is the secret of the success in meditation. The meditator must strive to be mindful night and day, every moment, and thus quickly develop proper concentration and wisdom. The Buddha himself stated that if a meditator is truly mindful moment to moment for seven days and nights, he will reach full enlightenment. Therefore, the essence of insight meditation is continuous moment-to-moment mindfulness of the sensation arising from contact at all six bases."