S. N. Goenka Body Scan Review

Research suggests that the two most influential teachers of contemporary Western Vipassana meditation were Mahasi Sayadaw and S. N. Goenka. The guided meditation and Dharma talk of February 24, 2021 posted on the Orlando Insight Meditation Group website, reviewed the Mahasi Sayadaw “noting” practice; these notes will review the practice of “Body Scan” or “Body Sweep” as taught by S. N. Goenka.

First, some background information about the common roots of these two ways of cultivating vipassana, insight into the three characteristics: anicca (ah-nee-chah), dukkha (do-kah) and anatta (ah-nah-tah), that is, impermanence, suffering and non-self.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a Burmese monk named Ledi Sayadaw decided to begin to teach vipassana meditation to whomever was sufficiently committed to be diligent in their practice whether they were monks or not. His decision was in reaction to the attempts of British colonial missionaries to convert Buddhists to Christianity. At the time, practicing meditation was rare among Buddhists, including monks; they mostly memorized and chanted suttas or performed rituals. There were “forest monks” who were dedicated to meditation, but they were in the minority (this is still likely the case in Myanmar; perhaps this is why there is such cultural turmoil these days in that country). Ledi Sayadaw taught what is called “dry vipassana”, that is, the cultivation of insight into the three characteristics without first cultivating jhana states of high concentration. This was a radical departure from previous doctrine.

He drew many interested practitioners to his teaching, and one of them was the Mahasi Sayadaw (1904-1982), who, perhaps under the influence of Zen practitioners, altered the focus of disciplined attention from the rim of the nostrils to the expanding and contracting of the abdomen, which was accompanied by “noting” the condition of the mind in an ongoing way. He taught that form of vipassana to many others, both monks and lay practitioners. Among his Western students were Joseph Goldstein and Sharon Salzberg, who, with Jack Kornfield, started the Insight Meditation Society.

Another of his students was a lay rice farmer named Maung Po Thet (1873-1945), who had not received any in-depth training of Buddhist doctrine but was a very dedicated meditator and teacher. Over many years, Maung Po Thet developed a different approach to vipassana which was well-received and respected by Ledi Sayadaw. As a result of this respect, he became known as Saya Thetgyi (pronounced Sa ya' taji in Burmese), which indicated his accomplishments as a teacher (Saya).

Saya Thetgyi’s practice became known as *vedanupassana* (vwey-duh-new-pah-suh-nah), which translates as *mindfulness of feelings*, which is the *Second Foundation of Mindfulness*. In the paticca samuppada (pah-tee-chah-sah-moo-pah-dah) doctrine, the cycle of karmic creation is modified beneficially when one observes feelings, pleasant or unpleasant, with dispassion and detachment. One of his students was a government official, U Ba Khin (1899-1971), who reported great benefit from this training and went on to create a retreat center in Rangoon, Burma (now Yangon, Myanmar). Because he was considered incorruptible by the newly formed Burmese government after liberation from British colonial rule, he was designated as the first Accountant General. He taught several Westerners, including my first retreat leader, Ruth Denison (1922-2015), and a wealthy Burmese Indian merchant, S. N. Goenka (1924-2013) and authorized them to teach.

Goenka found relief from what was considered an untreatable and chronic migraine condition during his first retreat led by U Ba Khin. He was so inspired he retired from the family business empire and created a very impactful vipassana movement that is now world-wide and is largely responsible for the resumption of Buddhist meditation retreats in India. I participated in, I believe, 3 10-day retreats led by his Western senior students, during which audio and video recordings of Goenka teaching were provided. The first 3 days of the retreat involved steadfast focused attention to the sensation of breathing at the rim of the nostrils to the exclusion of any other object. After that we were directed to systematically focus attention systematically on a progression of areas around the body, sensitized to whatever sensations were felt there, that is, *vedana* (vweh-duh-nah), the *feeling* of the sensation, for a period of time, less than a minute, then to move focused attention to an adjacent area. This process began at the top of the head, then moved systematically around the surface of the head, then the neck, a shoulder, an arm, down to that hand, then repeating this procedure systematically around the body to the soles of the feet.

For beginners, this thorough sweeping can be quite frustrating, as attention frequently wanders and there is seldom any sort of noticeable sensations. Even without noticeable sensation, we were urged to keep the practice of sweeping attention around the body; the intention is to activate the process of aiming attention in a focused way, then sustaining investigative attention in a sensitized, penetrating manner. This increases internal awareness and “takes up band width” of attention, reducing vulnerability to distractions which lead to craving and clinging.

My practice of this technique was spotty at first, with much frustration, as it was very hard to notice the subtle sensations that are everywhere in the body, but I continued to adhere to the practice diligently for many sittings before I could observe the subtleties of sensation that are everywhere in the body all the time. We have all experienced the tingling sensation that occurs when the hand “goes to sleep”; that sensation is everywhere, and we can train to be aware of it fairly routinely when meditating. The sensations are not as uncomfortable as when a limb goes to sleep and experiencing them in an ongoing way can be soothing and alerting for attention.

It is now my primary meditation practice. I stopped practicing with this approach some years after my last Goenka retreat but resumed it as a primary practice during my second three-month retreat in 2012. I sit for long periods of time, from one to two hours typically. After a relatively brief interval of focused attention on the breath, I can sweep generally around the body; first the entire head and neck, then both arms and hands, the torso, then both legs and feet. With this practice I can become aware of the entire body as full of vibrating sensations, rapidly shifting focus around the body. This provides a basis from which the arising and passing of thoughts becomes more evident and less demanding of allegiance. On retreats this experience leads to an awareness of consciousness that is a present-moment awareness with little or no interest in defining a body.

There is an .mp3 recording by Ayya Khema, “Guided Sweeping Meditation” at this URL: <https://dharmaseed.org/teacher/334/talk/8001/> Her training suggestions are also different from my practice. Here is the URL for the posting of a guided body sweep meditation that I posted July 10, 2020: <https://orlandoinsightpod.s3-accelerate.amazonaws.com/2020/DmeWnnWT-Guided-Whole-Body-Sweep-Meditation.mp3> I suggest you practice with these recordings in addition to the recording of the guided meditation “Guided Body Sweep Meditation” posted on March 3, 2021 just prior to the talk supported by these notes in order to build your ability to sustain the body sweep practice.