The Mahasi Sayadaw Method

The dominant practice I was exposed to during my first several retreats at the Insight Meditation Society (IMS) was that promoted by U Pandita Sayadaw, who was an important teacher for the founders of IMS, Joseph Goldstein and Sharon Salzberg, among others. These notes reflect what I learned about this approach to the practice of mindfulness meditation. This review is in no way comprehensive but is intended to provide some information about the “dry vipassana” approach that I have discovered and practiced over the years. I will be providing other talks during which I will review other approaches to mindfulness meditation training that I have experienced--the dry vipassana approach as presented by S. N. Goenka and the Visuddhimagga (vih-soo-dee-mah-gah) jhana practice as presented by Shaila Catherine, who was trained by the Pa Auk Sayadaw of Myanmar.

Prior to the influence of Ledi Sayadaw in the late 19th century, meditation practice in Burma was primarily developed and passed from generation to generation by monks (previously the Buddhist hierarchy had abolished the initiation of nuns for centuries) and was primarily involved the cultivation of jhana states, which requires specially set up environmental conditions and long periods of intensive practice, after which one could begin vipassana practice. Ledi Sayadaw decided to teach lay people how to meditate without first having to cultivate jhana--this sort of meditation practice called *dry vipassana*. A generation later, Mahasi Sayadaw, who was a highly respected Buddhist scholar as well as an accomplished meditator, popularized this practice throughout Burma and, by extension, into other areas of Indochina. This form of meditation did not require highly developed levels of concentration before practicing vipassana. Initially this was controversial, but the reputation of Mahasi Sayadaw as a scholar of Abhidhamma (ah-bee-dah-mah) won over those who doubted the validity of the practice. Here are some concepts and practices characteristic of this approach to cultivating mindfulness:

*Dry Vipassana*: In Pali, terms for this practice is *suddha vipassana* (purified insight) and *sukkha vipassana* (“…[insight] unmoistened by tranquility meditation” [jhana]). This practice is supported by:

*Momentary Concentration*: In Pali, the term is *khanika samadhi*, the unifying stability of the constituent elements of consciousness while investigating a long sequencing in noting the transitory nature of subjective experience.

*Noting*: I couldn’t find a Pali term for noting. This is also termed *labelling*, and in practice, one “tags” a moment of awareness with a brief perceptual knowing of what is occurring in consciousness without additional commentary.

*Intention*: The Pali term here is *cetana* (cheh-tuh-nah), which is an essential fabricating component of each moment of consciousness, a “universal cetasika” (cheh-tah-see-kah). Bhikkhu Bodhi describes cetana in this way:

The Commentaries explain that cetana organizes its associated mental factors in acting upon the object. Its characteristic is the state of willing, its function is to accumulate (kamma), and its manifestation is coordination. Its proximate cause is the associated states. Just as a chief pupil recites his own lesson and also makes the other pupils recite their own lessons, so when volition starts to work on its object, it sets the associated states to do their tasks as well. Volition is the most significant mental factor in generating kamma, since it is volition that determines the ethical quality of the action.

Although this mind conditioning factor is commonly emphasized in all the meditation techniques, a strong emphasis is placed on this practice in the Mahasi Sayadaw meditation practice. A fundamental application of intention also includes ethical considerations, that is, the avoidance of harmfulness and intoxication along with the cultivation of compassion and truthfulness. This ethical foundation is also characteristic of the other meditative practices mentioned above.

With this method of practicing mindfulness of breathing meditation, one aims attention at the abdominal area and sustains attention while that area expands and contracts. This involves the intention to note briefly what is in awareness. This brief notation is momentary concentration and is to be followed by noting the next moment of awareness sequentially. When this noting process is fully developed, the ability to sustain momentary concentration creates the conditions suitable for dry vipassana to be activated with the setting aside of the Five Hindrances.

Here is a lengthy quote from *The Progress of Insight* by Mahasi Sayadaw, page 4:

Insight must, in fact, be developed by noticing, according to their specific and general characteristics, the bodily and mental processes that become evident at the six sense doors. At the beginning, however, it is difficult to follow and to notice clearly all bodily and mental processes that incessantly appear at the six sense doors. Therefore the meditator who is a beginner should first notice the perfectly distinct process of touch, perceived through the door of bodily sensitivity; because the *Visuddhimagga* says that in insight meditation one should take up what is distinct. When sitting, there occurs the bodily process of touch by way of the sitting posture and through touch sensitivity in the body. These processes of tactile sensitivity should be noticed as "Sitting \_ touching \_," and so forth, in due succession. Further, at the seated meditator's abdomen, the tactile process of bodily motion (that is, the wind, or vibratory, element) which has breathing as its condition, is perceptible continuously as the rise (expansion) and fall (contraction) of the abdomen. That too should be noticed as "rising, falling," and so forth. While the meditator is thus engaged in noticing the element of motion which impinges continuously on the door of bodily sensitivity in the abdomen, it becomes evident to him in its aspects of stiffening, of vibrating, and of pushing and pulling. Here, the aspect of stiffening shows the motion element's *characteristic nature* of supporting; the aspect of vibrating shows its *essential function* of movement; and the aspect of pushing and pulling shows its *manifestation* of impelling. Hence the meditator, noticing the tactile bodily process of rise and fall of the abdomen, accomplishes the observation of the *bodily process (rupa),* by getting to know the characteristic nature, etc., of the element of motion. Later when he has accomplished the observation of mind *(nama)* and the observation of both *body and mind (nama-rupa),* he will also come to know the *general* characteristics of the processes concerned — their impermanence, liability to suffering, and their being void of a self.

But while he is engaged in just noticing the rising and falling of the abdomen and other tactile processes, there will appear thoughts of desire, etc., feelings of pleasure, etc., or acts such as adjusting various parts of the body. At that time, these activities (of mind and body) must be noticed, too. After noticing them, he should turn again to the continuous noticing of the tactile process of the rising and falling of the abdomen, which is the basic object of mindfulness in this practice.

Sensations in the abdomen are more noticeable than those around the nose and it is assumed that persistent noting of the expansion and contraction of the abdomen is sufficient for stabilizing attention, that is, momentary concentration. Traditionally, very intimate and detailed investigation of the sensations at the nostrils in an ongoing way is necessary for the cultivation of jhana states, which the Visuddhimagga rendering of vipassana practice requires. Jhana attainment is mentioned as necessary for Awakening in the Pali Suttas, but the characteristics of jhana can be interpreted in various ways, including with the attainment of what the Mahasi Sayadaw practitioners call *vipassana jhanas*, the nature of which is beyond the scope of this talk, but you can get more information using those search terms.

The ability to string a number of noting moments of awareness together in rapid succession is sufficient to set aside the five hindrances, creating what is termed access concentration, upacara samadhi (ooh-pah-chah-rah sah-mah-dee) in Pali. Access concentration is sufficient for the effective practice of vipassana. It is said that a very accomplished practitioner of the noting process can effectively note subjective phenomena for hours at a time.

The quote above mentions nama-rupa, which is the interaction between what the body senses (rupa) and the meaning-making function of the mind (nama). A goal of the practice is to cultivate sufficient skill with momentary concentration and noting to be able to observe how the process of meaning-making occurs experientially with the intention to become clearly aware of the transitory nature of subjective experience (anicca). As momentary concentration and investigation of this momentary arising-and-passing away process matures the misperception that there is an enduring/autonomous self becomes evident. This sort of revelation validates the Three Characteristics concept of Buddhism—anicca (the transitory nature of self-state organization), dukkha (the distress and confusion that occurs as the result of craving and clinging) and anatta (the absence of an enduring/autonomous self).

The Mahasi Sayadaw practice also involves mindful walking meditation practice. The Zen traditions also practice mindful walking, a bit differently than what I was taught. The goal with this practice is to enhance one’s mindfulness regarding the intentionality of movement in the body and mind. Here are some instructions regarding this practice:

* Create a walking space 20-30 feet long, preferably one that will allow walking without shoes.
* Stand mindfully, focusing attention on the ground 4-5 feet to the front.
* Cultivate a clear intention to bring attention to the soles of the feet, careful to note how weight shifts subtly from one foot to the other or from heels to toes.
* Note the intention to lift one foot up and forward; it doesn’t matter which foot and there’s no need to passively wait until the foot “decides to move”.
* When moving forward, move somewhat slowly, but not so slowly that you lose your balance.
* When lifting the foot, note how the mind operates in that regard—perhaps attention shifts to the sensations in the lifted foot, sometimes to the increased pressure on the still-grounded foot, which also possibly wobbles with imbalance.
* Note how sensations change as your body moves forward; note the impact and pressure as the heel of the lifted foot strikes the ground, then the ball of that foot—the stretching sensations in the arch of that foot, then the pressure on the ball of the foot and how the toes touch and press into the ground.
* Note how the shape of the trailing foot changes as pressure and weight shifts to the forward foot and note the change in sensations of the trailing foot as it lifts up into the air.
* Over time and with increasingly persistent noting of the process of lifting-moving-placing the feet while moving forward, note how the process of walking becomes quite slow. When I have been practicing slow walking meditation for a while, my movements might become so slow, mindful and intentional that it might take five minutes or longer to move 30 feet!
* When attention shifts away from walking, note that movement of the mind intentionally, then intentionally refocus attention back to the practice of walking.