

John Travis: An overview of practice itself. There is a word in Japanese: ‘shikantaza,’ which simply translates: ‘Just sitting.’ Ultimately the practice is just this: just sitting which we undertake. It is really a being practice, just being with the nature of experience, the nature of your mind, the nature of your heart. In many ways it is simply releasing struggle; the struggle is somewhat extra on some level. We have to, in an organized way, find ourselves in the center of our experience of this just sitting. So we will be going through instructions every morning on how to work with this just sitting.

To begin with, just to acknowledge first the earth which you are sitting on: your butt on a pillow or chair or bench; these legs or feet on the ground, and just to know that you are being held. The earth itself is not different from the body. These elements of earth, air, fire, and fire – which make us up – are also part of the earth which we are in contact with, and the air we breathe and the fire, the change of coolness, warmth, digestion and just the nature of going up on the hill there and looking out on the ocean- the water within us and the water without. In a sense, not being different than, there can be a sense of relaxation, a sense of contact and trust and just this sense of ease or relaxation which says that we are being held.

Acceptance of the cyclic or samsaric nature of body and earth.

In the beginning of this practice there is always the awareness of this energetic factor here: sitting up straight. It is the way we approach or recognize, and it is the energetic, sometimes known as the ‘arousing’ factor. By sitting up straight we acknowledge the energetics in that. Just checking- I like to start with the placement of the hands, the lumbar area, the lower back- if there is some way to tilt the pelvis forward so there is a slight curve in that lower back, and then just let the vertebrae stack on each other. Then there is the opening in the area of the chest with the shoulders pulling back slightly, the chin back slightly. Leave the eyes soft- it is not whether they are open or closed, it is just not putting any energy there; the mind is turning around on itself.

Once there is this energetic factor of sitting up straight then there is the capacity to soften. Begin with around the eyes and forehead, jaw muscles and joints, the muscles connecting the head to the neck itself, and bring attention on down the shoulders. This is a practice of when- when the mind makes contact there can be a softening, a sensitizing – the energetic factor of sitting up, just softening. Then just let that awareness move down through the arms and upper body, the belly and on down.

There is this balancing factor between the energetic factor of sitting up which keeps us alert, and this capacity to soften and relax. We are balancing between these 2.

In the morning I like to take a few deep breaths into the lower belly; expand that lower belly out. A few deep breaths and expanding all the way down into the pelvic cavity and holding the breath for just a few moments to...the capacity to bring the mind down away from its thinking, down to its contact with the body.

Then keeping the mind down and coming to the natural breath itself.

Again, many of you have trained so that you have certain areas of the breath which you find you can stay with because of stronger sensation there – but I wouldn't go there too fast. Just soften the mind and feel into the breath. Then when the mind begins to settle you can find where the mind rests, just letting the sound in the background be there as my voice is there but the attention is turned toward the breathing itself, this body breath. For today we will keep it really simple: when you go off, find that one area to bring it back and maybe to note or label “in and out,” or “rising and falling,” or expanding and contracting,” whatever way is helpful to keep the mind connected and attentive.

At this point to speak of it as foreground and background as we are putting attention on one area of the breath in the foreground and the background is other areas of breath, different body sensations which will be strong today. Later in the day there will be sleepiness or tiredness, vibration, excitement in the body. Our practice is to recognize we can let go of whatever is happening- whether it is the anxiousness or tiredness or the other sensations of breath or body, different feelings or emotions connected with the mind and the stories. The practice today is bowing to those and coming back to the breath over and over and over again, and staying alert as possible.

Things will push themselves from the background into the foreground – our practice is to bow to it: ‘thank you,’ and go back to the breath so that we can strengthen our collectiveness, concentration- which is our primary practice here.

Each day as we go along we will explore other aspects of what is in the background, how it pushes to the foreground; whether it is body or emotions or thought- Just the nature of awareness itself.

After the sit:

John Travis: This morning I'd like to talk about the practice a little and then we have a series of announcements and then Heather is going to teach walking practice.

So: Practice....why do we call it practice? I won't answer that. There is relative and absolute here. 1st I want to honor – a group of you have just come in from a 6 day retreat so there is a continuity here, all of you are, in a sense, riding on their energy – even though they were out for a few days, they are back in.

We can start off here, right away. I know the thing which is true about this is that today's a rough day. There is a lot of body stuff which goes on and tiredness, whatever, emotional stuff which has been sitting in the background sometimes comes slamming to the forefront. With that true – be kind to yourself; we have this 10 day retreat here, just settling into it.

That's one side of it: be nice. Particularly to your bodies. The second piece is- I have to say how this works. One side of it has to do with the energetic factor. It is really based on discipline, effort. It has to do with repetition and intention. That is just one side of it. The other side is the basis of our ability to not fight, not struggle with but to allow this practice to create some sense of sensitivity, the ability to listen deeply to what is going on and not to get lost. These are 2 pieces of it which we hold.

The relative practice – I'll get the absolute later – the relative practice is very important. It is the fact that we start with having a simple object to train the mind to come back to. That's where we start. Eventually we are going to expand that from the breath to the body, from the body to the different reactions, say – the things which move us, the emotions; and then the thinking mind, the thinking itself, and ultimately the nature of our minds, and the non-defensive of the heart when fear is not there. Non-defensiveness. That is the relative practice we have to work through here. Each morning we will add a piece....I was going to say – are we adding or are we going to subtract a piece? Because there is also, in another part of this – we are trying to deconstruct how we hold things. Because it is so based on a narcissistic view of things; a self perpetuated delusion and we have to untangle that in some way but it isn't that we can go directly at it, we have to actually go through this relative practice of dropping down below on some level, and it opens itself up; it is not something we do, it is something which, through a series of exercises we create the ground for the nature of how the mind operates without getting lost in the thoughts but the whole itself. Hopefully that makes sense to you.

It is a big project because what we are talking about here is to wake up. When it comes to that, I don't really care about being nice, OK? Because it is too big a thing. How you get there is being nice – a dichotomy there. We are here to wake up. We can't get there through our desire and our competitive mind. We have to get there through our ability to...it is basically to be sensitive enough to listen. To listen to an operating system and that operating system is not based on 'my view of things' but rather is an organic thing which we all are...mine is the same as yours so we are all connected in that way, through these operating systems. So – to get how the operating system works – to see it clearly is also to let go of it. Otherwise we are just walking around in these wonderful trances, believing in our stories.

So, I'll keep hitting on this one, cause it is a hard thing to disentangle. We are kind of self involved on how it works. It is really just one piece at a time, that is why this is called insight practice- little pieces of it build on each other until...I guess the word is 'Surrender.'

I don't mean, someone asked: "Do you mean 'white flag?'" I don't mean that at all. That comes out of winning and losing. What we are talking about here is a deep, deep acceptance of the nature of the mind and the truth of your heart.

That's the pep talk this morning.

Heather Sunderberg: It is often good to mention, at the beginning of a retreat – often people have questions about, in this Dhamma hall about the practice of bowing. You notice some people bowing when they come in, some people bow when they come out, some people bow to their cushion, some people bow at the end of their meditation, some people don't bow at all...and it's all *fine*. This is American insight meditation, so what it means is: if you feel called to offer a bow, at any of those points as a gesture of respect for your own practice, for the tradition, for the Buddha – it is a wonderful thing to do. In the course of 20 years of practice, myself, I've done everything from bowing at everything which moves and somethings which don't, to not bowing at all. So – as you wish.

Walking meditation instructions:

As a reminder: the walking meditation is an equally important posture for awakening and for practice as the sitting is. Some people don't love it as much but it kinda grows on you after a while.

I would highly encourage you to take a walk if you like to walk – after them meals, or in one of the so-called 'break times,' or less formal times – but to really commit to yourself, not to us but to yourself – to do the whole walking period every time.

I always check if I need a to use the bathroom at the beginning and the end, and think about if I need to wash my socks during walking meditation. I figure it is the 1st day of the retreat- my socks are clean- use the whole time, every time if you can.

Since we aren't 'taking a walk,' it is choosing a spot which maybe uplifts your mind – so, a beautiful place, if you can find, to walk. We are walking somewhere between 20 and 30 paces. That may change somewhere during the course of the retreat. You might find that 30 paces is more spacious and grounding at the beginning of the retreat and as you slow down more and more during the course of the retreat you may find: 'Oh, it is just 20 paces...it is just 15.' You'll find your own way with that. And you'll also find your own way with the pace. The recommendation is that we begin a walking period somewhat less than ordinary walking pace – it is a reminder that we are not just walking – that there is a particular intention and attention to this walking which is different than the walking we do in our ordinary life. It may be just slower than normal pace, and then, as the period progresses, as the retreat progresses, it may slow down quite a bit until you find yourself at the place where each lifting of the foot is its own precious movement and all that space through which the foot moves and then – 'uh' contact with the ground- 'placing.' Then it shifts, there is another lifting, placing and it is quite slow.

It is not required. We have different physical abilities which make it so that kind of slow never actually brings the attention and presence we are intending to cultivate. That's fine. Using these labels or mental notes can be really helpful. At the beginning, when you are moving faster, it might just be 'step, step, step.' I like the label: 'right, left, right, left,' because then when I put my left foot down and say 'right,' I have just woken up to what is going on – 'OK, I was away but I'm already back.'"

“Turning, turning,” the whole process of turning is a beautiful expression of being fully present with transition. We can stop at the end of the path if we like. Some of us close our eyes at that point, bringing the attention back into the body. Othertimes it is a letting in of the eye sense door and taking in the beauty of this natural space, and allowing that to bring joy and gratitude and uplift the mind. That is very helpful for noticing any aversion or boredom – any kind of struggle with the walking practice. The transition, being present with that, and then beginning: ‘lifting...’

Those are the basic instructions. The most important non-conventional instruction is: enjoy your walking meditation. Do it in a way which brings contentment and enjoyment – when it is possible – it doesn’t have to be a struggle for: “I must enjoy.” But, when possible, and then that sense of enjoyment comes back with us when we sit. The contentment and enjoyment settles into a more focused concentration when we are sitting and expands into a more wide lens focus when we are walking through the course of the day.