Insight Meditation

Handbook

Bruce Williams

Fourth Edition

September 2018

**Forward**

This handbook reflects the content of half-day Insight Meditation workshops that Crissy Hester and I have taught since the winter of 2018. We are both members of the Sandy Springs Insight Meditation group in Atlanta that meets on Wednesday evenings to meditate and listen to and discuss recorded Dharma talks. We discovered in a conversation over tea after a meeting in the fall of 2017 that we both practiced Vipassana, the body-based mindfulness practice taught by the Buddha in the Satipatthana and Anapanasati Suttas. Because these teachings were so valuable to us, we wanted to share the teachings and our meditation experience with others. With Crissy’s encouragement and support, I developed an outline for an Insight Meditation workshop based on the Suttas. This handbook grew from that effort. It is an overview of the Vipassana teachings and a practical guide on how to develop an Insight Meditation practice based on the Buddha’s instructions in the Suttas. The Handbook has four parts. The first part is a brief explanation of the Buddha’s instructions in the Satipatthana Sutta and how they relate to the Eightfold Path, the Five Skandas and the Three Characteristics of Reality. The second part is a guide to putting the Buddha’s succinct instructions into practice. The third part is a list of the resources I relied upon. The fourth part is our agenda for the half-day workshop. This Handbook may be used as preparation for the half-day workshop or as a DIY manual for those interested in developing an Insight Mediation practice on their own.

Crissy is the founder of The Whole Love (TheWholeLove.org) and teaches a variety of classes oriented to the mind, body and spirit at The Open Mind Center in Roswell, Ga. She is a student of Jonathan Foust, a teacher at the Washington Insight Meditation Community and a leading figure in body-based meditation.

I became interested in exploring the original teachings of the Buddha several years ago following the publication of Joseph Goldstein’s book “Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Awakening,” his epic tome on the Satipatthana (Four Foundations of Mindfulness) Sutta, based on a series of forty-six talks he gave at the Forest Refuge in Barre, Massachusetts. I organized a study group that met at my home once a month for a little over a year to explore the Satipatthana Sutta. Subsequently, I organized another group that examined the Anapanasati (Mindfulness of Breathing) Sutta over a period of six months. While these study groups helped me gain an understanding of the Buddha’s teachings, there was no practice involved. We glossed over the Buddha’s meditation instructions and delved into the more intellectually challenging stuff. Then, in early 2017 I re-read a short book by Will Johnson, “Breathing Through the Whole Body—The Buddha’s Instructions on Integrating Mind, Body, and Breath.” His exposition encouraged me put the instructions in the two Suttas into practice.

Using the in-breath and out-breath breath to bring awareness to sensation throughout the body and using the breath to calm the body was transformative. It opened up the wisdom aspect of the Eightfold Path.

Most people come to meditation to reduce stress, to improve concentration or for other psychotherapeutic reasons. They mostly practice following the breath to stabilize and calm the mind (samatha or “peaceful abiding.”) However, as I discovered, that is only one aspect of meditation. We hope that this handbook and our workshops will help meditators discover the path of awakening that Insight Meditation opens up.

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Atlanta, Georgia

April 4, 2018

**Insight Meditation – Discussion**

**What is Insight Meditation?**

Insight Meditation is the name given by Joseph Goldstein, Jack Kornfield and Sharon Salzberg to Vipassana, the meditation practice they learned from their teachers in India, Burma and Thailand in the 1960's and 70's. This practice was taught by the Buddha. His instructions were preserved in identical form in the foundational teachings of the Theravadan (Southeast Asian) Buddhist tradition: The Satipatthana (Four Foundations of Mindfulness) and Anapanasati (Mindfulness of Breathing) Suttas. Vipassana is usually translated as “things as they are” and training according to the Buddha’s instructions enables one to experience the true nature of reality essential to awakening.

The Buddha’s instructions for sitting Vipassana meditation can be divided into four parts: finding a suitable location and taking an upright posture; becoming aware of the breath; training to use the breath to feel sensation throughout the body; and training to use the breath to calm bodily formations.

The instructions in the Satipatthana Sutta are:

*And how is mindfulness of in- and out-breathing developed and pursued so as to bring the Four Foundations of Mindfulness to their culmination?*

*The meditator, having gone to the forest, to the shade of a tree, or to an empty building, sits down with legs folded crosswise, body held erect, and setting mindfulness to the fore, mindful he breathes in, mindful he breathes out.*

*Breathing in long, he knows, “I breathe in long.”*

*Breathing out long, he knows, “I breathe out long.”*

*Breathing in short, he knows, “I breathe in short.”*

*Breathing out short, he knows, “I breathe out short.”*

*He trains thus: “I shall breathe in experiencing the whole body,”*

*He trains thus: “I shall breathe out experiencing the whole body,”*

*He trains thus: “I shall breathe in calming the bodily formation,”*

*He trains thus: “I shall breathe out calming the bodily formation.”*

Additionally, he declares that the Satipatthana Sutta is “the direct path for the purification of beings, for the surmounting of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of dukkha and discontent, for acquiring the true method, for the realization of Nibbana.” The instructions for each of the four applications of mindfulness (body, feeling, mental formations, and phenomena) are to continuously pay bare attention to them, experience them as impermanent and not cling to anything.

**Meditation in the Eightfold Path**

The practice of Vipassana is part of the Eightfold Path. The Eightfold Path has three aspects: Ethical Conduct (Sila) Mental Discipline or Stable Attention (Samadhi) and Wisdom (Panna). Samadhi (in a broad sense) is a quality of mind that is collected, composed, undisturbed and unified. There are two aspects of mental discipline, Right Concentration (samadhi) and Right Mindfulness (sati). Samadhi (in a narrow sense) is characterized by one-pointedness of mind (ekaggata). It is a state in which all mental faculties are unified and directed toward an object of consciousness in the present moment. This is commonly referred to as concentration. Sati involves directing attention to an object while maintaining peripheral awareness. Sati is applied to four categories of experience: body, feelings, mind and phenomena (dhammas) through investigation of the five aggregates: form, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness. The objective is to see things clearly.

Right Concentration: To develop one-pointed concentration (Samadhi), the meditator directs attention to a chosen object, usually the breath. The emphasis is on awareness of the physical sensation of the breath at a small area of the body such as the tip of the nostrils, although the rise and fall of the abdomen is sometimes used. Focusing on the breath keeps the mind in the present moment. When thoughts arise and the meditator becomes aware that attention has wandered from the breath, he makes a mental note of it and gently returns attention to the breath. The aim is to sustain attention on the breath for longer and longer periods. As the mind becomes calmer and more peaceful, the nature of thoughts that arise changes from discursive thoughts, particularly repetitive, emotion-laden story lines, to more subtle, fragmentary thoughts, until they disappear. Flawless samadhi is sustained effortlessly. There are ten stages to the development of this state, known as samatha (peaceful abiding.)

A concentration practice that goes beyond samatha is jhana practice. The jhanas are states of mental absorption or meditative stabilization in which attention is focused on a single object, initially the breath. At the same time, the objects are reduced to single qualities that totally fill one’s awareness. A preliminary stage before first jhana is “access concentration,” the rough equivalent of samatha. At that stage, the hindrances (desire, aversion, sloth and torpor, restlessness and worry, and doubt) disappear. Each of the jhana factors (directed attention, sustained attention, meditative joy/rapture, pleasure/happiness and one- pointedness) neutralizes one of the hindrances. The first four jhanas are developed in succession with attainment and stabilization in the lower jhanas forming the foundation for the next higher jhana. Progress through the jhanas involves a diminishing of the coarser factors, which allows the subtler factors to emerge. The first four “material” jhanas are followed by four more “immaterial” jhanas.

Right mindfulness: Mindfulness (sati) has many interpretations but, in contemporary Western usage, it is usually defined as bringing one’s complete attention to the present experience on a moment-to-moment basis, without judgement, and being aware of doing so.

Mindfulness, like samadhi, involves directing attention. However, the objective is to be aware of whatever is present in consciousness. It is like focusing on something while our peripheral vision is aware of the whole field of sight. This is momentary concentration, as opposed to sustained concentration on a fixed object, as in samadhi. Attention may shift from object to object volitionally or to whatever is most prominent in our field of awareness, such as pain or a loud noise. Since awareness remains open, this is sometimes called bare attention.

In the Satipatthana Sutta, known as the Four Foundations (or Applications) of Mindfulness, mindfulness is directed toward four areas of experience: the body, feelings, mental formations and phenomena (dhammas). It is through applying mindfulness to these four areas that we are able to experience the characteristics of reality, i.e. things as they are. In the Anapanasati Sutta, the sixteen practices are divided into four parts (tetrads) that are analogs of the Four Foundations.

**Samatha/Vipassana Practice**

Samatha and Vipassana are complementary, not alternative, aspects of meditation. Both use the breath as the object of meditation. Both require right effort, i.e., persistence in avoiding and eliminating unskillful mental qualities and nurturing skillful ones in their place. Both are generated using stable attention (samadhi) and mindfulness (sati). Frequent moments of mindfulness that become continuous are samadhi.

Concentration and calming of the mind are required for Vipassana. As the thinking mind becomes quieter, self-centeredness diminishes. The solidity of “I” is undermined and the possibility of experiencing the five skandas (form, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness) as not-self, increases.

Most nine- or ten-day Vipassana retreats begin with several days of samatha training and practice. However, there is debate over what degree of concentration is required to practice Vipassana. In some traditions, it is thought that achieving first jhana or, at least access concentration, is the minimum degree. In the Insight tradition, the consensus seems to be that concentration and mindfulness can be developed together. Mindfulness of bodily sensations, feelings, thoughts and emotions, and phenomena improves concentration. Shifting attention to the whole body may be more “interesting” than one-pointedness. Over-emphasis on concentration runs the risk of getting stuck in a blissful state whereas mindfulness without concentration results in a meandering mind.

**Experiencing the Three Characteristics of Reality**

Reality has three characteristics: impermanence (anicca), suffering or the unsatisfactoriness of conditioned phenomena (dukkha) and the absence of an unchanging self (anatta). Knowing these characteristics is part of Right View, the first step on the Eightfold Path which is part of the wisdom aspect of the path. Wisdom (panna), ethical conduct (sila) and mental discipline (samadhi) are the three branches of the path leading to awakening (nibbana).

Wisdom is acquired in three ways: received wisdom from reading and teachers; intellectual wisdom from examination and reflection; and experiential wisdom based on our actual, direct living experience.

Vipassana is how experiential wisdom is gained. Vipassana is the process of seeing things as they are. By becoming aware of bodily sensations, the reality of physical form is directly experienced. Experience arises when an object comes into contact with one of the five physical senses or the mind, and consciousness is present. For instance, hearing consciousness is when sound waves come in contact with the ear and consciousness is present. It is through the senses that all phenomena, physical and mental, are experienced.

Impermanence (*anicca*). Insight starts with an understanding of impermanence-- that everything arises and passes away. It follows from this realization that what is impermanent is not a reliable basis for happiness and that clinging to what is impermanent leads to suffering. What is impermanent cannot be a stable foundation for self.

Vipassana uses the in-breath and out-breath to bring awareness of physical sensations throughout the body to the conscious level. When this occurs, awareness arises that bodily sensations are ever-changing and impermanent.

The breath itself is impermanent. Each breath arises and passes away. Similarly, awareness of bodily sensations (generalized tingling or vibrations, sense of solidity, pains, itches, heartbeat, flushing, sexual arousal, stomach rumblings, etc.) come and go.

Suffering (*dukkha*). Suffering occurs when there is clinging to pleasant sensations and aversion toward unpleasant ones. In Vipassana, the meditation training is to bring bare attention to the arising and falling away of any sensations without trying to hold onto the pleasant ones and without rejecting the unpleasant ones. As equanimity replaces grasping and aversion, suffering diminishes.

Non-self (*anatta*). Equanimity leads to disidentification with bodily sensations. Bodily sensations are perceived as impersonal processes that begin and end. Pain is simply pain, not my pain. Experiencing bodily sensations as impersonal physical processes that may produce pleasant or unpleasant feelings extends to mental processes, including thoughts, emotions and consciousness. Feelings cause and condition mental processes. There is an understanding and a direct experience that anger and joy are not my anger and joy but are simply phenomena that are impermanent. With disidentification comes recognition that impermanent sensations, feelings, perceptions, thoughts and emotions are not the basis of a solid sense of self. The self is experienced as a changing process, not an unchanging thing.

**Non-self: the Five Aggregates of Clinging (Skandas)**

The self may be thought of as the totality of a person’s sense experience which manifests itself in the current moment in bodily form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness. However, all these elements are impermanent and changing. The mistaken belief in a permanent, unchanging self is based on identifying with and clinging to one or more of these five elements. These are referred to as the fives aggregates of clinging, or *skandas*.

*Form* (Rupa): The physical body and the five sense organs and their objects. Experience occurs when consciousness is present and a sense organ encounters a sense object (eye—visual object; ear—sound vibration; tongue—taste object).

*Feeling tone:* (Vedana): Quality of the sense contact. Nonverbal, non-conceptual response to contact which may be pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. Individual responses are partly based on conditioning, so they may arise from mental as well as physical contact. These responses condition craving and aversion and mental formations in general.

*Perception* (Sanna): Labels, concepts and judgements applied to phenomena. It is the capacity to conceptualize and recognize objects based on what is already known by creating meaning or constructing a model of what is going on in each moment. It is how the mind organizes the raw input from our sensory fields.

*Mental (Volitional) Formations* (Sankharas): Fully formed thoughts and emotions, arising out of perceptions. Express will and intentions. Expression may be mental, verbal or physical. Intentions and volitional actions (karma) follow from thoughts and emotions.

*Consciousness* (Vinnana): The knowing quality of mind that receives or holds the impressions at the six sense doors. It is the most basic knowing of an object before any words or perception. Awareness arising with sensory contact, e.g., ear consciousness, has the ear as its basis and a sound as its object. It also includes mental consciousness which has the mind as its basis and an idea or thought as its object. Awareness or consciousness depends on the other skandas and does not exist independently from them.

According to the Buddha, none of the skandas by themselves or in combination is permanent or unchanging. They are temporary, conditioned phenomena, i.e., they only exist in relation to other factors and are subject to change. They are empty of a permanent essence of self, individually and collectively. They are not "I." The Buddha taught that clinging to these aggregates as "I" is a delusion. Insight meditation enables us to see that the “self” is not a thing that is independent and unchanging.

Investigating each of the skandas, it becomes evident that their changing, impermanent nature cannot be a basis for an unchanging self. Their impermanent nature is a given and is not under our control. Bodies change throughout life. In fact, millions of cells die and new cells are created every minute. Humans grow, get sick, get old and die. The body is subject to causes and conditions. It starts with the union of a sperm and an egg and requires food, water and air to survive. Pleasant and unpleasant feelings come and go. Perceptions change with experience as we look at things differently. Likes become dislikes and vice versa. Thoughts, emotions, opinions and beliefs may change as situations change. Thoughts and emotions are conditioned by perceptions which are conditioned by feelings. Feelings, perceptions, thoughts and emotions are all dependent on sense consciousness, i.e. eye consciousness, ear consciousness, etc. Consciousness itself depends on contact between a sense and a sense object.

These interdependencies show that none of the skandas is independent and unchanging. Therefore, a permanent unchanging self cannot be found in form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations or consciousness.

Clinging to any of these impermanent elements cannot be the basis for lasting satisfaction. Relying on them leads to suffering. If the aggregates are impermanent and unsatisfactory, they cannot be the basis for an unchanging self. Experiencing their impermanent nature, we no longer identify with things as “I” or “mine.”

**Suffering and the End of Suffering**

How Suffering Occurs. Dukkha is the inherently unsatisfactory nature of life expressed through the six senses. Sense pleasure can only give limited fulfillment due to the unsatisfactoriness of life caused by its changing nature.

The five skandas provide a framework for understanding the process of how suffering occurs and how it can be ended. Experience begins when consciousness is present and there is contact between a sense organ and a sense object, e.g., the ear and a sound. There is a feeling tone (vedana) associated with the experience—pleasant, unpleasant or neutral.

At the feeling stage, it is just raw data. It is direct experience and is non-conceptual. When there is a reaction to the experience, vedana becomes the cause and condition for suffering. At the level of perception, there is recognition. If there is no recognition, there is investigation. Sensations are labeled or judged and experiences are fit into an existing conceptual framework. This turns pleasant and unpleasant feelings into likes and dislikes. This progresses to holding onto or wanting more of pleasant experiences (attachment or craving) and pushing away or avoiding unpleasant experiences (aversion). These manifest as thoughts and emotions (mental formations). Essentially, these mental formations are caused and conditioned by physical sensations and reactions to them. Emotions and thoughts may be momentary, arising and passing away, but when reactivity occurs repeatedly, they become habitual patterns.

Bodily formations are blockages and tensions stored in the body and are created by reactivity. Bodily formations cause and condition mental formations and are also caused and conditioned by them. For instance, when we experience an emotion, such as anger, it manifests in the body as increased blood pressure, heavy breathing and muscle tension. Bodily and mental formations reinforce each other in a vicious circle. Mental formations are referred to as sankharas, as are the resulting habitual reactive patterns. In the broadest sense, anything that is conditioned is a sankhara.

The Importance of Body Awareness. Sensations are occurring constantly throughout the body but only the most intense of them, e.g. pain, rise to consciousness most of the time. Vipassana trains the meditator how to observe sensations throughout the body at the subtlest levels. Observing sensation in the body reveals what is happening in the mind.

There is a common misconception that meditation is mainly a mental exercise that can be used to change thoughts and emotions. However, in Vipassana, awareness of the body is the key to changing thoughts and emotions. The instructions are to be aware of the body in itself, and not view it through perceptions. This is direct experience or “felt sense”-- non-conceptual, non-judgmental and without a story line. It is looking at moment-to-moment experiences as they arise and fall away. In doing so, the body is experienced as impermanent. Experience is a series of momentary events that occur when sense organs meet external objects. Everything known is through the body.

Another aspect of body-based meditation is that focusing on the body and calming bodily formations quiets the mind. Developing body awareness is the most effective way to learn to stay in the present moment.

Clinging and aversion are expressed through tension in the body. Chronic tension blocks awareness of the body. Tension in the body causes tension in the mind and fuels the internal monologue.

The body is a storehouse of all the physical and emotional events of our lives and focusing exclusively on the brain and nervous system as our “memory bank” is incomplete, at best. Memories pleasant and unpleasant are expressed in the body and will arise and fall away if they are simply noticed. However, when clinging occurs or they are pushed away, they are held in the body. Bodily formations manifest as muscle tension, anxiety, depression, pain, and various neurological and organ diseases.

The experience of Insight Meditation is that the whole body is meditating and that awareness is not localized in the head. The brain has management and memory functions but the brain and the rest of the body are not separate. Reactions begin in the body. Body sensations provide the entry point to the awareness of mental states.

The Cessation of Suffering. Calming bodily formations with the breath alleviates suffering caused by habitual reactive patterns, as reactivity is replaced by equanimity. Reactivity develops into habitual thoughts and emotions (sankharas) that are stored in the body (bodily formations). Breathing is used to direct attention toward these bodily formations without attachment or aversion as they arise and fall away. Eventually the associated mental formations (habitual thoughts and emotions) also fall away. This process leads to the end of suffering.

When breathing is used to bring awareness to the whole body, its solidity dissolves. Body and breath become one. Sensations are felt as vibrations. As bodily tensions are relaxed, the chatter in the mind slows and the mind becomes less contracted. The grip of thoughts weakens and the sense of self becomes less solid. Thoughts come and go. Clinging to them diminishes.

When using the breath to become aware of sensations in all parts of the body, initially only the strongest superficial sensations are felt. However, with practice, the deeper bodily formations – unconscious memories, suppressed emotions, and buried thoughts-- may arise. These are based on firmly established conditioning, i.e., habitual patterns. As these sensations rise to the level of consciousness, they tend to dissipate over time as equanimity replaces clinging and aversion.

The Buddha taught that thoughts and emotions are conditioned by feelings and that reacting to what is pleasant or unpleasant with clinging and aversion leads to suffering. When we respond with equanimity, feeling tone is simply noticed as it arises and passes away. At the experiential level, bringing attention to the whole body while breathing changes the holding patterns that condition thoughts and emotions. Awareness of tension and blockages arises, either generally or in specific places where they are held. As tensions are released, old mental formations wither away and new ones do not arise. The formation of new habitual patterns ceases and there is relief from suffering.

Reacting to pleasant or unpleasant feelings begins a process of mental proliferation, resulting in various mental formations, i.e. thoughts, beliefs, emotions, opinions, etc. that become identified as me or mine. To kill a weed, it needs to be cut at the root. Similarly, stopping mental proliferation needs to begin at the vedana level. Mindfulness is the key. At first, the quality of the feeling (pleasant, unpleasant or neutral) is noted but then the focus shifts to the process of feeling itself. When there is awareness of the link between pleasant feeling and greed or between unpleasant feeling and anger, for instance, it can be observed and defused if equanimity is present. Awareness is kept at the level of bare attention. Feelings are allowed to arise and fall away and there is no identification with them.

As the practice of Vipassana progresses, sensations and the feelings they produce are experienced as impermanent (anicca). They simply arise and pass away when there is no reaction to them. As equanimity grows, new sankharas do not manifest and old ones fade. There is a realization that attachment and aversion lead to suffering (dukkha). Finally, it is seen that none of the five skandas is the self, since they too are conditioned and impermanent. By disidentifying with each of them, there is awareness that there is no permanent unchanging self (anatta). What is called self is just an ever changing process. This is Vipassana—things as they are.

**How Vipassana Works – A Scientific Explanation**

The Buddhist explanation of emotions is that they originate when there is reactivity to pleasant or unpleasant feeling in the body. These reactions cause various bodily formations, according to whether the experience is liked or disliked. The reactions become embedded in the tissues in the body at the level of kalapas-- the smallest indivisible unit of matter. Reactions (at the level of perception) take the form of labeling, judging, forming opinions, etc. This process manifests at the bodily level as flushing, laughter, crying, changes respiration and heart rate, tension and a myriad of other physical changes. At the mental level, they correspond to anger, sexual arousal, depression, happiness, beliefs, opinions, etc. If these reactions become habitual, they become sankharas. Emotions, which are at the level of mental formations, become the conditioning factor for bodily formations, so sankharas form a vicious circle. Put another way, bodily and mental formations occur more or less simultaneously and are stored in both the body and the mind.

The discovery of neuropeptides, a class of chemical messengers in our bodies, has revolutionized thinking about how emotions are formed and where unconscious/subconscious memories are stored. Each cell in our body has hundreds of thousands of receptor sites that are specific to certain peptides. These fit like a lock and key. One the first neuropeptides discovered was beta-endorphin, the natural analog to opioids. It has a similar effect on body and mind. Peptides are created throughout the body. Receptor sites are also dispersed, although they tend to be concentrated in certain areas such as the limbic system in the brain—the so-called seat of emotions— the heart, and the digestive system. When we react, various peptides (like endorphin) are released and attach to their receptor sites in different parts of the body and brain, creating emotions at both the physical and mental level. They are stored at these locations and are the basis for subconscious memory. They also play a role in perception, filtering the way we see the world. The receptors form a network that connects the mind and body. If our reactions become habitual, the peptides remain attached and may accumulate. The significance of these findings is that emotions and subconscious memories are stored in the body, not just in the brain.

The traditional view on how to break the chain of sankharas is to become aware of them as they arise at the vedana stage. Instead of reacting to pleasant or unpleasant feelings, becoming equanimous with them allows them to arise and pass away. At first, new sankharas will present themselves but eventually old sankharas will come to consciousness. It is basically a LIFO – last in, first out—situation. In Insight Meditation, the prescription in the Suttas is to use the breath to become aware of the whole body and to use the breath to calm bodily formations. Mental formations cannot be extinguished directly. The chain must be broken at the bodily level.

The scientific interpretation of the effect of meditation on the emotions is that it unbinds some neuropeptides from their receptor sites and/or releases others into circulation. Breathing releases tension which begins the process. Candace Pert, the discoverer of the opioid receptor in the brain in the 1970’s also suggests that diet, body-based therapies and exercise may have a complementary effect.

**Beyond the Body**

Insight Meditation begins with mindfulness of the body since all experience is based on bodily sensations. The in-breath and the out-breath are used to focus attention on tactile sensations since the breath can be felt throughout the body. The breath can also be used to focus attention on other bodily sensations, such as hearing, seeing, taste and smell, or they can be experienced directly.

Impermanence of the body is readily understood and experienced. It follows that an impermanent body cannot be the basis for a permanent unchanging self. Suffering begins when there is reactivity to the pleasant, unpleasant or neutral feeling tone associated with bodily sensations. Equanimity keeps feelings from proliferating into mental states and the associated clinging.

Mindfulness of the body can take the meditator a long distance on the path to awakening. In fact, in one sutta, known Discourse to Bahiya, the Buddha says that direct sense experience without the mental proliferation that leads to “selfing” is the end of suffering (Nibbana).

However, in the Satipathanna Sutta, the Buddha includes other practices besides mindfulness of breathing as applications of mindfulness of the body. These are mindfulness of postures, mindfulness of activities and mindfulness of physical characteristics. There are also practices for mindfulness of feelings, mindfulness of mind and mindfulness of dhammas. The list of practices for mindfulness of dhammas is quite long: the five hindrances, the five aggregates of clinging, the six sense spheres, the seven factors of awakening, the four noble truths, and the eightfold path.

In the Anapanasati Sutta, the sixteen instructions are grouped into four sets of four (Tetrads). Mindfulness of Body is comprised of the four breathing instructions at the beginning of this section. They are followed by three sets of four instructions analogous to mindfulness of feelings, mind and dhammas. The practices in all four tetrads use the breath to direct attention in each application of mindfulness. The Sutta concludes by explaining how these practices lead naturally to the experiencing the Four Noble Truths and the Seven Factors of Enlightenment.

Investigation is a key aspect of Insight Meditation and it worthwhile exploring the full range of practices in the suttas. The practices that follow provide a base for advanced practices, particularly those in the Anapanasati Sutta that require high levels of concentration.

**Insight Meditation Practice**

The practices we develop in our Insight Meditation Workshops are based on the Buddha’s identical instructions in the Satipatthana (Four Foundations/Applications of Mindfulness) and Anapanasati (Mindfulness of Breathing) Suttas. The Buddha’s instructions are fairly brief and provide a basic outline but require elaboration to serve as a practical guide for meditators. Using the breath to bring awareness of physical sensations throughout the body is unfamiliar to most meditators and we have developed a progression of exercises to help train in this practice. We also show how to extend awareness to other senses, particularly hearing and sight.

**The Satipatthana Sutta**

The four foundations (or applications) of mindfulness are mindfulness of the body, mindfulness of feelings, mindfulness of mental formations, and mindfulness of phenomena (dhammas.) The first application of mindfulness of the body is to breathing, which constitutes the Buddha’s Vipassana meditation instructions. The Buddha’s instructions for sitting meditation can be divided into four parts: taking an upright posture; becoming aware of the breath; training to use the breath to feel sensation throughout the body; and training to use the breath to calm bodily formations. The Buddha’s instructions in the Satipatthana Sutta also include standing, walking and lying down meditation practices, and we include them in the workshop.

Preliminary Instructions. The instructions in the Satipatthana Sutta begin:

*The meditator, having gone to the forest, to the shade of a tree, or to an empty building, sits down with legs folded crosswise, body held erect, and setting mindfulness to the fore, mindful he breathes in, mindful he breathes out.*

In other words, the place of meditation should be quiet and removed from people and activity. These days that usually means a bedroom in the home where the meditator will not be disturbed by family members and pets and where there are no distractions. It is helpful to turn off phones and other potential interrupters.

In ancient India, people commonly sat on the ground with legs crossed in a “full lotus” position with the feet on the opposite thigh. While yoga practitioners, young people and those with naturally flexible joints may adopt this position, other postures are workable. The legs may be crossed in a “half-lotus” position, in “Burmese-style” with one foot on the opposite calf or with the feet simply tucked in. A round cushion filled with kapok or buckwheat hulls (zafu) is placed on top of a large rectangular base cushion (zabuton). Sitting on a zafu elevates the hips and relieves stress on the feet, legs and joints. A firm rectangular 18 x 13 x 6 cushion known as a Gomden serves a similar purpose. Sitting on a low bench in a kneeling position is another alternative, as is a chair with a flat seat.

Whichever support is used, its height needs to be adjusted so that there is minimum pressure on the hip, knee and ankle joints and on the feet. If there is pain in the middle back or there is pressure on the joints, it usually means that the hips need to be higher. Supporting the thighs with rolled up blankets may also help relieve pressure. Zafus and benches come in different sizes. Gomden height may be increased by placing one or more support cushions on top. If sitting on a chair, the feet should be flat on the floor. Those with short legs may need to place a cushion under their feet while those with long legs may need to place a cushion on the seat. When sitting on a cushion, chair or bench, the knees should be below the hip joints. This rolls the pelvis forward so that the weight is on the front portion of the sit bones which allows the spine to assume its natural s-shape. If the weight is on the rear of the sit bones, one is forced to break at the waist and bend forward to keep from falling over backward.

Once the body is properly supported, we focus on developing a posture that is *upright, balanced and relaxed*. This allows the meditator to sit comfortably for an extended period of time while remaining alert and energized.

*Upright:* The spine should be in its natural position with a slight arch in the lower back. The chest and upper body should not slump forward from the waist up nor should they be lifted or thrust out, as when standing at “attention.” To find the right spinal alignment, take a deep breath and extend the spine (like you are a puppet on a string), then exhale completely keeping the back straight. Be careful not to round the back and collapse into a slump.

*Balanced*: The head should be balanced on top of the spine. It should not droop forward as it does when you are nodding off nor should it fall back with the chin jutting forward. Rather, the balanced position is with the head lowered slightly so that your focus is about 4 to 6 feet in front of you when looking straight ahead. Finally, you should lean slightly forward from the hip joints, keeping your back straight, so that your weight is on the forward part of your sit bones. (To determine exactly where your hip joints are, rock forward and back, keeping your back straight, and notice where the pivot point is.) With a zafu, sit toward the front of the cushion. With a Gomden, sit in the middle and, with a chair, sit toward the front edge so that there is minimal contact with the legs. The point of balance can be found by feel. There should be no muscle tension in either the back or abdominal muscles. You can find this point by gently rocking forward and back. If you are upright and balanced, gravity will keep you there effortlessly. If you are feeling pressure on the knees, ankles or feet, or your feet or legs fall asleep, it is an indication that you may be leaning too far forward.

*Relaxed*: The shoulders should be relaxed and the upper arms held vertically at one’s sides. The lower arms may be allowed to dangle freely or bend at the elbows with the hands on the thighs or lap. Placing the hands on the thighs too close to the knees will round the shoulders and compress the chest. Make sure that the hands are not pressing or gripping. If the hands are placed on the lap with fingers touching, they should be held close to the body. Other areas to check for tension are the forehead and scalp muscles, the eyes, the jaw, the shoulder blades, the abdominals, the lower back and the anal sphincter. The jaw should be slack with teeth apart and the tongue placed lightly against the upper teeth or roof of the mouth. An essential part of relaxation is diaphragmatic or “belly” breathing. This involves relaxing the abdominal and lower back muscles to allow the diaphragm to drop on the inhalation, filling the lower part of the lungs. With an average resting respiration rate, there should be little or no rising and falling of the chest.

During meditation, it is a good idea to check all three elements of posture periodically. Rock forward and back and take a deep breath if you need to reset. Focus attention on the various places where you tend to hold tension, especially the abdominals and shoulders, and relax them. Continuous micro-adjustments will help maintain posture, making resetting largely unnecessary.

One Buddhist dogma is that the body should remain motionless. However, this often causes sensations of stiffness and soreness which dominate consciousness. If this happens, we suggest stretching in place, perhaps bending from side to side and forward and back, doing neck rolls, then returning to upright.

Once your posture is upright, balanced and relaxed, bring mindfulness to bear on the in-breath and the out-breath.

Awareness of Breathing: Long and Short Breaths

The first two sections are instructions on bringing mindfulness to the breath itself. The instructions to the monks are:

*Breathing in long, he knows, “I breathe in long.”*

*Breathing out long, he knows, “I breathe out long.”*

*Breathing in short, he knows, “I breathe in short.”*

*Breathing out short, he knows, “I breathe out short.”*

A breath that is long in duration requires a deep inhalation in which the upper and lower lung cavities fill with air. The rib cage expands and the diaphragm drops. On the exhalation, the rib cage contracts and the abdominal muscles relax. In the short breath, the abdominal muscles and lower back muscles relax on the inhalation, allowing the diaphragm to drop. There is little or no movement in the rib cage and little bodily tension. This is different from a short, shallow breath confined to the upper chest. In that case, the inhalation expands and lifts the rib cage, tightens the abdominal muscles, increases the heart rate, and creates bodily tension. In the exhalation, the rib cage subsides, the abdominals relax only slightly and tension decreases marginally. In life, shallow, rapid breathing of his type occurs in a state of panic.

Getting to know the breath requires relaxation. As the body relaxes, oxygen requirements decrease and the breath becomes shallower. There is little or no expansion and contraction of the chest and the rise and fall of the diaphragm produces movement in the abdomen, i.e. “belly breathing.”

In any breath, there are noticeable changes in sensation during a full breath cycle. For many people, the inhalation may feel energizing. There is fullness or tension at the top of the breath and relaxation or letting go on the exhalation. There is a pause at the bottom of the breath before the cycle begins again. Pay attention to where you feel the breath—on the upper lip, at the tip of the nostrils, in the nasal passages, in the throat, in the chest or the abdomen. This initial stage of insight meditation is simply being aware of the sensation of breathing. The mindfulness aspect is that we are aware that we are aware of the breath. If attention wanders, acknowledge it and come back to the breath. You will find that bare attention to the breath makes it calmer.

Experiencing the Whole Body

The next instruction to the monks is:

*He trains thus: “I shall breathe in experiencing the whole body,”*

*He trains thus: “I shall breathe out experiencing the whole body,”*

The shift from awareness to training implies a more conscious effort. Using breathing to experience sensation in the whole body takes concentration, relaxation and practice. Becoming aware of bodily sensations changes the sensations and is the entry point to changing perceptions, thoughts and emotions. The approach that we use in training to experience the whole body begins with moving the attention from one part of the body to another in small steps, aka body scanning. We follow the tradition of starting at the head.

Begin by bringing your attention to the crown of the head. Inhale and exhale several times. On the inhalation, you may experience a sensation of energizing or expansion and on the exhalation you may experience a sensation of release or relaxation, or simply a tingling sensation on both the inhalation and exhalation.

Move your attention every one to four breaths in a systematic way down the front of your head: forehead, temples, eyes, nose and nasal passages, cheeks, jaw, teeth, tongue, and throat. Return to the crown of the head and work your way down your scalp, ears and neck. Go inside your head if you can. Continue across the shoulders and down the arms, bringing attention to the skin, muscles, bones, joints and tendons. Feel the volume of your hands, the palm and back of the hand, and the fingers—either all five at once or individually. From there, return to the throat, and go down the front of the torso. You will undoubtedly feel the heart as it beats and the expansion and contraction of the ribs, lungs and abdomen as you breathe. The stomach and digestive tract are also easy to feel, especially if they are signaling satiation, hunger or distress. Becoming aware of other internal organs takes time. End the frontal scan with the genitals. Return to the base of the neck and feel the shoulder blades, upper back, spine, kidneys, lower back and anus. From there, go to the pelvis, hip joints, thighs, knees, calves, ankles, feet and toes. Once you have reached your toes, reverse the scan and go back up to the head, if you have time. Remember to stay with each part of the body for one to four breaths. It is important to use bare attention. Keep moving. Do not linger at areas where there are pleasant sensations that you want to hold on to or unpleasant sensations that you wish would go away. By the same token, do not skip over dead spots or painful sensations. Eventually, equanimity will replace clinging to pleasant and aversion to unpleasant sensations.

The Buddha’s instructions are not explicit but many Insight teachers interpret experiencing the whole body to mean experiencing the whole body at once. Having brought awareness to the body parts sequentially, we approach experiencing awareness in the parts of the body simultaneously through an exercise known as “breathing in the six directions.”

Sensation in the torso is felt readily when we breathe, since it expands and contracts on each breath. In this exercise, begin by using inhalation and exhalation to experience sensation in the front of the chest and abdomen. This can be done all at once or by starting at the throat and adding sections one at a time. Then go to the back and experience the expansion and contraction while still experiencing sensation in the front of the body. Next, add the sides from the arm pits to the hips. Finally, experience the lengthening and shortening of the spine with each breath. Think of the sensation in the chest and abdomen as a balloon that expands in all directions when inhaling and contracts when exhaling.

At this point, you may begin to feel sensation as waves of energy that ripple outward from the center of the body or as a general tingling or vibration. Once you can experience sensation throughout the chest and abdomen, you can extend awareness to the arms, the head and the legs and feet until you experience the whole body at once. Often when a body part is added to the awareness of sensation, awareness of another part is lost. If that happens, go back and add it back in. Head to toe experience of sensation takes concentration, relaxation and practice. Experiencing sensation in the lower extremities may be difficult even for experienced meditators. Expect to have “good” days and “bad” days. If you are having trouble concentrating or relaxing, go back to body scans or simple breath awareness—your “anchor”.

Calming Bodily Formation

The instructions in the fourth verse take the training another step.

*He trains thus: “I shall breathe in calming the bodily formation,”*

*He trains thus: “I shall breathe out calming the bodily formation.”*

Bodily formations are the tensions, blockages and unconscious memories that are held in the body. Reactivity creates mental formations, i.e., perceptions, thoughts, beliefs and emotions, as well as physical reactions, i.e., changes in blood pressure, digestion, muscle contraction, skin flushing, etc. Habitual patterns of reactivity (sankharas) become embedded in the cells in the body.

Breathing while being aware of the body may reveal these holding patterns, especially those that manifest as muscle tightness, headaches, or other kinds of discomfort and pain. However, emotions embedded in our tissues may not rise to the conscious level. In either case, bringing attention to the various parts of the body while breathing releases tension, thus calming the bodily formations. Since mental formations are caused and conditioned by bodily formations, emotions such as anger and depression will also diminish. As this happens, become aware of the interconnectedness among breath, body, and mind. Each has an effect on the other. Eventually sankharas (habitual patterns) fade away.

Experiencing the whole body using the in-breath and out-breath let the waves of sensation bring awareness to the ways tensions are held in the body. There may be tightness in the face, shoulders, abdomen or other places. Just give bare attention to the tensions. Be aware whether the sensations are pleasant, unpleasant or neutral but do not react to them by wishing that they would go away if they are unpleasant or trying to sustain them if they are pleasant. Becoming equanimous with sensations is the key to eliminating habitual patterns. Notice that, as bodily formations are calmed, so are mental formations.

It may be helpful to let attention roam from one area of the body to another to become aware of subtle places of holding, but do not go searching for them. Try moving attention from one energy center in the body to another. The traditional chakras correspond to areas of the body that have concentrations of neuropeptide receptors, the storehouses of our emotions and unconscious memories. The locations of the chakras are 1) the first three vertebrae, the bladder and the colon, 2) the area between the pubic bone and the navel, 3) the area from the navel to the breastbone, 4) the heart, 5) the throat and mouth, 6) the point between the two eyebrows, commonly referred to as the “third eye,” and 7) at the crown of the head. Move from one chakra to the next with equanimity.

If there is ordinary discomfort or pain, perhaps due to an injury, Vipassana can be used to change the experience by bringing bare attention to the affected area of the body during a body scan. Becoming equanimous with the sensation instead of reacting to it will change the perception of it. As the saying goes, “pain is inevitable, suffering is optional.”

**Hearing as the Object of Meditation**

Both the Satipatthana and Anapanasati Suttas instruct on how to use the in-breath and the out-breath to experience tactile sensations in the body. However, we can also meditate using the other senses as objects of meditation. Hearing, seeing, taste and smell may be used as objects. Hearing is perhaps the easiest of the other senses to use, since most, if not all, the sources of sound are external to the body. The ultimate objective of insight meditation is to directly experience reality in terms of impermanence, suffering and non-self. Sounds tend to come and go and change frequency, amplitude and timbre. Suffering occurs when clinging to pleasant sounds and feeling aversion to unpleasant sounds. Sounds are not readily identified sounds as self, making disidentification easy. In this meditation, use either environmental sounds (bird songs, wind, ticking clocks, traffic) or recorded sounds such as music, and the silence between sounds, as the objects of meditation. As you breathe, bring attention to sounds without reacting to them or labeling them. Simply notice how they arise, change and fade away.

**Standing, Walking and Lying Down Postures**

We touch on the other three meditation positions besides sitting, i.e. standing, walking and lying down. Many of the sitting posture principles apply. The four types of meditation reflect the way the body is used in everyday life. Meditation is not restricted to sitting on a cushion. Meditation can be practiced when walking down the street or lying in bed.

Standing Meditation. In standing meditation, the spine is aligned in its natural position so that gravity is used to keep us upright and balanced, allowing us to relax. Be sure the head is balanced on the top of the spine and weight is equally distributed between the balls and heels of the feet. This will put the hips directly under the spine. Most people (especially those who wear shoes with heels) put more weight on the balls of their feet. This forces the hips forward and the shoulders back, so that they need to push the head forward to achieve balance. This so-called “swayback” position takes muscle tension to maintain balance. Standing in an upright, balanced position allows the muscles to relax since gravity is doing all the work. Let the shoulders hang and use belly breathing. If you normally stand in the swayback position, you will initially feel like you are going to fall over backward until you get used to standing upright. The object of attention in standing meditation is to experience balance and relaxation and the pressure on the balls and heels of the feet on the ground as gravity keeps you erect. In the upright, balanced and relaxed position, you will feel a certain lightness. Using a full length mirror is helpful in evaluating standing posture.

The static standing position may be difficult to maintain. Like a tree or a tall building, movement is natural. Try intentionally shifting your weight forward and back, feeling the pressure on the ground shift from the heel to the ball of the foot, then lean from left to right, feeling the pressure shift from one foot to the other. You might even let one foot come off the ground. Doing this will build awareness of the force of gravity on the body. As in sitting meditation, use the in-breath and the out-breath to feel sensation throughout the body and to calm bodily formations.

Walking Meditation. Walking meditation has taken on many forms over the centuries but the basic instruction is to maintain the balanced posture of standing meditation and walk normally at a slow pace. The meditator is conscious of the walking process: lifting and placing one foot in front of the other, with the heel making contact, then shifting weight to the forward foot and rolling the weight from heel to toe. As the weight shifts, the heel of the other foot comes up, ready to start the next step. Some meditators hesitate at that point while others maintain a fluid pace. In either case, the object of attention is the physical process of walking and the sensations of changing weight from one foot to another. In the Insight tradition, walking is done in a straight line of 15 to 30 feet. At the end of the line, stop and stand for a few moments, then slowly turn and walk back along the same path. The hands may be allowed to hang at the sides or clasped together and held against the body with the forearms parallel to the ground. Some prefer to clasp the hands behind the back. As in standing meditation, there is a sensation of lightness and an awareness of the body in space.

In more advanced practice, the three phases of walking (lifting, placing and weight transfer) are further divided into three parts, making nine phases altogether. Another variation is to place the foot flat on the ground instead of heel first. Some teachers, such as Thich Nhat Hanh, coordinate walking with the breath.

Lying Down Meditation. The lying down posture is used to relax completely and is the preferred position in which to do body scans for some people. Lie on a zabuton lengthwise with your hips at one end. Your head may be on or off the cushion depending on your height. The relaxed position is with the lower back flat against the cushion, so that there is no tension in the back. To eliminate the arch in the back, place thin cushions, a blanket or other objects that can be fine-tuned for height under your head. Draw your knees up, keeping your feet flat on the floor and about shoulder width apart. Adjust their position so that the knees rest together effortlessly when you relax your thigh muscles. If they fall apart, move your feet outward. The lower back should rest on the zabuton or be close to it. The arms should be positioned with the elbows on the cushion and the hands resting on the abdomen, palms down. Use the breath to experience sensation throughout the whole body. Notice how the body relaxes on the out-breath and how gravity creates the sensation of sinking into the earth.

**Other Approaches to Vipassana**

**Noting**

In noting, a practice popularized by the late Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw of Burma, the main object is the natural breath. The meditator allows the breath to come and go, observing the rising and falling of the abdomen and other sensations and experiences as they arise. The rising and falling of the abdomen is noted continuously as “rising”, “falling.” If the mind wanders, attention is shifted to the new object which may be a sensation, thought, emotion or other mental state. These are similarly labeled, i.e. “planning, planning”, “burning, burning, anger, anger,” “ringing, ringing,”etc. The characteristic of the object may change, come and go, intensify or diminish. Any change is registered. If the object dissipates, the meditator returns to noting the rising and falling of the abdomen.

This practice keeps the mind in the present and leads to seeing the impersonal nature of objects. The continuous flow of sensations, emotions and thoughts are not “I” or “mine” and are not identified as self.

**Choiceless Awareness/Choiceless Attention**

Another approach that is based on experiencing impermanence is “choiceless awareness,” a technique taught by Krishnamurti and widely adopted by Insight practitioners. This method is part of the “condensed” method of Anapanasati. The condensed method has two steps: practicing breathing until a certain level of concentration and calm is reached, i.e. putting the hindrances in abeyance, then opening awareness to whatever arises in the body-mind process and seeing that it is all impermanent, unsatisfactory and lacking an essential self. The meditator is open to whatever arises in consciousness—physical sensations, sounds, mental images, thoughts, emotions, etc. Attention shifts rapidly from moment to moment, but the meditator does not get caught up in the content of the experience as it arises and passes away. Rather, he continuously observes the activity and the state of mind itself. The mind is observed as an ongoing process.

It is particularly useful way to explore the five aggregates which encompass all the experiences that are used to fabricate the sense of a permanent, unchanging self.

**Focusing**

Inquiry is part of the insight meditation process. Often there is a “felt sense” of the subtle sensations that may have a tangible quality—hard/soft, heavy/light, calm/jittery, warm/cool, etc. It may be helpful to bring these sensations to the conscious verbal level. The important thing is to verbalize the felt sense by describing it in experiential terms rather than trying to label it or conceptualize it. A teacher or spiritual friend who has been trained in Focusing can help clarify the description of your sensations. For example, saying that “it feels like there is a heavy weight on my chest” describes the experience whereas saying “I’m depressed” is a conceptual label. Being aware of sensations creates space before reacting and has a beneficial effect on interpersonal relations. Focusing has its origins in psychotherapy and personal growth but has applications to the meditation path.

9/23/18

**Insight Meditation Workshop – Resources**

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**Teachers/Vipassana Instruction**

Robert Beatty, Portland Insight Meditation Community, Portland, OR, <http://www.robertbeatty.com>

Lisa Ernst, One Dharma Nashville, Nashville, TN, <https://onedharmanashville.wordpress.com>

Jonathan Foust, Insight Meditation Community of Washington, D.C., <https://www.jonathanfoust.com/>

Hope Martin, Hope Martin Studio, New York City, NY, <http://www.hopemartinstudio.com>

Southeast Vipassana Center (Dhamma Patapa), Jessup, Ga. <https://www.patapa.dhamma.org/>

Insight Meditation Workshop-- Agenda

10:00 – 10:15 Meet and Greet.

10:15 – 10:35 Introductions

10:35 – 10:40 Reading of the Satipatthana Sutta

10:40 – 11:00 What is Insight Meditation?

11:00 – 11:20 Preface to the Meditation Instructions

11:20 – 11:45 First Two Instructions—Awareness of Breathing

11:45 – 12:00 Break

12:00 – 12:05 Breathing – Experiencing the Entire Body – Overview

12:05 - 12:25 Exercise 1 – Body Scan

12:25 – 12:35 Exercise 2 – Breathing in the Six Directions

12:35 – 12:50 Experiencing the Entire Body

12:50 – 1:15 Calming Bodily Formations

1:15 – 1:30 Insight Meditation with Hearing as the Object

1:30 – 1:45 Lying down Meditation Posture

1:45 - 2:00 Comments and Feedback

2:00 – 3:00 Lunch

Insight Meditation Workshop dates will be posted on the Sandy Springs Insight Meditation web site (<http://www.sandyspringsinsightmeditation.org/study-groups>) and the Sandy Springs Insight Meditation Meetup site. To register for the workshop, join the Sandy Springs Insight Meditation Meetup Group (<https://www.meetup.com/Sandy-Springs-Insight-Meditation-Group/>),

find the workshop under “Meetups” and click “I’m Going”. If you would like to be placed on the distribution list to be notified about upcoming workshops, email Bruce Williams at [bruce.williams@mindspring.com](mailto:bruce.williams@mindspring.com).