SN 47.10 — Bhikkhunupassaya Sutta: Directed and Undirected Meditation

English translation by Andrew Olendzki.

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Changes: Presentation only: original HTML markup reflowed into plain text; wording, numbering and source repetitions retained. No repetitions expanded.

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Text

The venerable Ananda arose early one morning, and taking up his robe and bowl approached a certain settlement of nuns, where he sat down on a seat that had been prepared. A number of nuns approached the venerable Ananda, and after greeting him, sat down to one side. So seated, these nuns said this to the venerable Ananda: "There are here, Ananda sir, a number of nuns who abide with minds well established in the four foundations of mindfulness. Their understanding is becoming ever greater and more excellent."

"So it is, Sisters, so it is!" replied Ananda. "Indeed for anybody, Sisters, whether monk or nun, who abides with a mind well established in the four foundations of mindfulness — it is to be expected that their understanding becomes ever greater and more excellent."

[Ananda later relates this exchange to the Buddha, who approves of his response and then elaborates:]

Here, Ananda, a monk abides contemplating body as body[*] — ardent, fully aware, mindful — leading away the unhappiness that comes from wanting the things of the world. And for one who is abiding contemplating body as body,[*] a bodily object arises, or bodily distress, or mental sluggishness, that scatters his mind outward. Then the monk should direct his mind to some satisfactory image. When the mind is directed to some satisfactory image, happiness is born. From this happiness, joy is then born. With a joyful mind, the body relaxes. A relaxed body feels content, and the mind of one content becomes concentrated. He then reflects: "The purpose for which I directed my my mind has been accomplished. So now I shall withdraw [directed attention from the image]." He withdraws, and no longer thinks upon or thinks about [the image]. He understands: "I am not thinking upon or thinking about [anything]. Inwardly mindful, I am content." This is directed meditation.

And what is undirected meditation? Not directing his mind outward, a monk understands: "My mind is not directed outward." He understands: "Not focused on before or after; free; undirected." And he understands: "I abide observing body as body — ardent, fully aware, mindful — I am content." This is undirected meditation.

And so, Ananda, I have taught directed meditation; and I have taught undirected meditation. Whatever is to be done by a teacher with compassion for the welfare of students, that has been done by me out of compassion for you. Here are the roots of trees. Here are empty places. Get down and meditate. Don't be lazy. Don't become one who is later remorseful. This is my instruction to you.

Note

*

These passages are repeated for the other three foundations of mindfulness: feelings as feelings; mind as mind; mental states as mental states.

Translator's note

This text is interesting for a number of reasons, though it seems not to be particularly well known or often referred to.

The framing story shows clearly that women were diligent and successful practitioners of insight meditation in the Buddha's time, and that they were well-supported in this pursuit. Ananda, the Buddha's cousin and life-long assistant, was a great champion of the nuns' cause and would often visit communities of nuns to encourage their dhamma practice. The Buddha seems to take the opportunity of Ananda's report to expound on some of the details of mindfulness technique.

What he says here about directed and undirected meditation is particularly interesting in light of the modern integration of metta practice with vipassana practice. The Buddha seems to acknowledge that mindful awareness is sometimes difficult to come by, and that

there are times when one's "mind becomes scattered" by the arising of challenging mind states (has this ever happened to you?).

His response here is not the warrior's tone sometimes found elsewhere in the texts, whereby the practitioner should just overcome the unwholesome thoughts and rouse up sufficient heroic energy to re-establish mindfulness. Nor is it the gentler response we often hear in the dhamma hall, to just be aware of what is arising, without judgment of any kind, gently returning our attention to the breath or other primary object of meditation. Rather the Buddha's suggestion is a deliberate re-direction of our attention to a "satisfactory image."

The pali words here are pasadaniya nimitta. A nimitta is an image or manifestation that appears in the mind — something akin to a sign, a vision or an appearance of an object in the "mind's eye." It is the term used in visualization meditations, and even has a slight connotation of "conjuring up" something in the mind.

The adjective pasadaniya is translated by Woodward in the PTS edition as "pleasurable," but this sort of term is too easily misconstrued in Buddhist contexts. I don't think the Buddha is suggesting here that we seek something pleasant in order to avoid the arising discomfort, but is rather suggesting a short term strategy for the practical disarming of the mind's defense mechanisms.

The commentator Buddhaghosa suggest that the image of the Buddha might be an example of a satisfactory image, but probably anything wholesome and not productive of strong craving (of attachment or aversion) will do. The idea is just to re-direct the mind to flow around the obstacle that has appeared, but not to use something that will itself become another obstacle.

The practical effect of this re-direction of attention is the natural calming of the mind and relaxation of the body. Only from tranquillity can true alertness arise — otherwise the mind's attentiveness is just busy or restless.

But as the ensuing passage confirms, this excursion into the deliberate cultivation of a specific image can be abandoned as soon as its mission (the restoration of concentration) has been fulfilled. Insight meditation has never been about cultivating blissful states of mind or body for their own sake.

But as a skillful means for helping our understanding "become ever greater and more excellent," it seems to be a useful technique. I think we need to rely upon the guidance of experienced meditation teachers, however, to help us discern when it is appropriate to apply this strategy. The mind is so capricious: it may turn to a more pleasurable object of awareness just to escape the growing pains of evolving insight; or it may mislead itself into thinking it is practicing undirected meditation when it is actually just "spacing out."

One important thing to notice about this passage is that the undirected meditation is occurring squarely in the context of the foundations of mindfulness. This is not "object-less

awareness" (which is not even possible in the early Buddhist models of mind), or the "awareness of awareness itself" that is mentioned in some traditions.

The meditator understands his awareness to be free and undirected, while contemplating body as body, feeling as feeling, mind as mind and mental states as mental states. What distinguishes undirected meditation from directed meditation is simply the role of intention in the process.