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Mahasati
Insight Meditation
Association



Mahasati Insight Meditation: A Brief Introduction

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Why We Practice Mahasati Insight Meditation

We practice Mahasati insight meditation to develop mindfulness in order to reduce, and eventually eliminate, our mental/emotional suffering. Suffering is the state of being at odds with our experience in the world. It is a result of the way our mind reacts to our experience. Our body, with its senses, encounters the world around it, and our mind then responds – thoughts are generated, and attachments and aversions arise – which leads to suffering. If we do not learn to develop mindfulness, we are simply immersed in this process, and our life consists of a series of moments of either vainly trying to hold on to that which we regard as pleasant, or trying to push away that which cannot be avoided (because it's already here).

The solution to this problem lies in learning to see this process, as it is happening, with more and more clarity. When we can see clearly what is happening within ourselves in the moment, the mind can naturally choose how to respond wisely, instead of blindly reacting.

What most gets in the way of this present moment awareness that we need in order to see our life clearly, is our attachment to, and identification with our thoughts. So we work toward learning to see our thoughts as they are happening. To “see” thoughts means that we do not get involved in the stories of the thoughts, but simply observe them as events that are arising and passing away in the moment. When we see thoughts, we are no longer identified with the thoughts. Our mind changes in a profound way. We are able to step out of the world of thought, and we begin to see our life clearly. After this point, if we are diligent and persist in the practice, self-awareness will become even stronger and more stable, allowing us to have more and more self-knowledge, and less and less suffering.

Where it Comes From

Mahasati meditation is based on the teachings of the Thai Forest Monk and meditation master, Luangpor Teean (1911-1988). The hand movements involved in the formal sitting practice have been around for hundreds of years, and are a traditional form of meditation practice in Southeast Asia. Luangpor Teean learned to work with these movements in a different way, and discovered that bringing awareness to repetitive body movements, such as these, is a very effective tool for seeing the nature of the mind. He spent many years of his life tirelessly teaching the practice to others and helped many individuals attain realization. The practice continues to be taught around the world by those who studied with him.

How to Practice

Mahasati practice recognizes that our nature is innately wise and pure and that all that is needed to eliminate suffering is to truly see our life in the moment exactly as it is. So when we meditate, we do not try to suppress our thoughts. We start by simply observing the movement of our body in the moment – either the hand movements during formal sitting practice, the leg movements during formal walking practice, or any movement of the body when practicing during daily life. When attending to the movement of the body, we do so with a light touch, and simply allow our awareness to maintain contact with the sensation of the movement. If we try to concentrate too hard on the movement, we will suppress our thoughts, and this is not our goal. We accept the fact that thoughts will naturally arise during practice, and establish the intention to watch this arising and passing away of thought from moment to moment, without entering into the story of the thought, as best we can. Of course, despite this intention, we will find ourselves caught up in thoughts over and over again. The practice then is simply to notice that this has happened, and to bring the mind back to the movement of the body – again and again – without any judgment. Maintaining our contact with the sense of the movement of the body is a tool to help us stay connected to the present moment, and a lifeline to bring us out of thought when we find ourselves caught up in it.

The Advantages of Mahasati Over Other Methods

The advantage of Mahasati practice is that it is very direct. There are no rituals attached to it, nor are there any preliminary practices that must be cultivated before the “real work” begins. Because we practice with the body moving and the eyes open, the mind is alert and less likely to slip into states of dullness or sleepiness. It is also much easier to integrate this type of practice into our daily lives. After all, our goal is not just to eliminate suffering during times of formal practice on our cushion or chair. We want to be able to come out of the suffering that arises during our daily lives. By learning to see and understand the nature of thought, rather than suppressing it, we come to understand how the mind gets caught in suffering, and we develop the ability to turn to the true refuge that exists in every one of us, even in the midst of the turmoil of our daily lives.

