

## **Pay attention, widen and soften, meet what arises, include it all**

Ajahn Sucitto, 2018

A decade or so ago, I came up with a four-line synopsis of what meditation meant to me. It was 'Pay attention; widen and soften; meet what arises; include it all.' It was handy and portable, but it needed fleshing out. In terms of silent meditation, this came down to:

'Pay attention': heighten your awareness of the immediate present experience without attempting to change it. Tune into how the steadying effect of that absence of reactivity. Feel how your body is when that quality helps you to settle; and when that feels adequate and comfortable, and as it feels suitable, sense how your breathing feels. Above all, hold your attention on the aspect of the body that allows you to feel more comfortably settled. (This includes the space immediately around your body.) In this way, through careful attention, mindfulness has been established.

'Widen and soften': relax the intensity of the focus, and also any ideas of getting somewhere, or searching for an experience, or trying to change anything. Let yourself be fully receptive to how it actually is. If the experience is pleasant, absorb into it. If it is difficult, step back and rest in the wider field of awareness. Get a feel for the awareness that your experience of your body/breathing arises within – and let things change in their own time.

'Meet what arises': you may notice irregularities your breathing, or discordant experiences in your body. Alternatively, subtle pleasure may arise. Have an attitude of meeting these phenomena, rather than pushing through them, hanging onto them, or wondering what to do next. You may detect qualities such as hesitancy, fascination or forcefulness in terms of your attitude. Acknowledge any of these, and rather than thinking about them, notice them as qualities in the mind's field, of a similar nature to those in the bodily domain. Meeting these, as they are, you may notice dispassion – a realization that none of these can be held as mine, or as inherent. They are 'there' rather than 'here'; they don't constitute a self. Take your time and sense how that realization feels.

'Include it all' refers to continuing this process as other phenomena arise. As they will – all is changing, and your embodied mind, as awareness deepens into it, will unfold in the way that a crumpled rubber sheet does when it comes out of compression. In this process, it will present both the nature of the forces that caused it to contract (such as fear, hurt or desire) and the factors such as gladness, rapture and ease that are sign of the beauty of that unfolding.

Like all models, this one is simplistic and subject to misinterpretations. The first one being to assume that a later part of the instruction supersedes an earlier one: in which case we lose the quality of careful attention as we widen and soften. Then the focus collapses, the mind gets flooded and attention gets drawn into narratives or sidetracked by daydreams. In brief, mindfulness has been lost. So no wisdom or release can occur; and to 'include it all' from that basis merely opens the floodgates of memory, fears and fantasies with no way of learning from what has arisen. But when careful attention does give rise to strong mindfulness, we can linger in that very quality and learn about mindfulness, and what 'mind' actually is. Mindfulness is more

like a loop than a thumbtack: it can narrow to sit on a small location (such as the nosetip) or it can widen to cover the experience of the body as a whole unit. And mind isn't an entity, it's a permeable field of changing qualities. And it's sensitive, a 'heart'. Hence the value of mindfulness is that it holds the boundary of attention, and shields the mind from useless, damaging or irrelevant phenomena. Then, as it gathers energy and strength, it can be directed without its loop being broken.

The theme of widening and softening can consequently enable the steadying effect of mindfulness to be felt through a wider field (such as in terms of the bodily effect). As that effect can be referred to the central focus of mindfulness. So: what's happening in the next room? The song I heard on the radio two days ago that is throbbing in my head? It's probably not useful to focus on these. But tension in my body, or impatience in my heart-mind, or other *embodied effects* of the sounds around or within me, yes, if mindfulness is fit, these may be usefully addressed. As long as mindfulness can keep tethering effects to its central theme: so – how does restlessness or irritation feel in my body? Embodiment is the key, because it opens the potential to meet phenomena as energies and sensations, rather than think about them, obsess or fight with them. Properly met, they can find release.

Hence meeting what arises. And the gift of that is that in the simplicity of just being with phenomena, and letting go of the 'normal' responses – strategies that come from the socially conditioned self – a response can arise by itself from the embodied mind. This embodied mind is a natural condition – it arises as we did at birth from the awareness of being in, or sensitive to, a body. It has no Buddhist jargon, but is empathically responsive. Its response arises somatically – as a shift of energy – and carries a heart resonance. This resonant response is the 'feel' of realization. It may or may not bring a word or phrase to mind; you can't predict it or strategize it, but it is in the moment (and only in this moment) accurate – and conducive to release. As the sticking point of a mind-state opens with that response, the lock falls away and the spell of attachment is broken. The mind-state can then pass.

So how do you get that release going? At the place of meeting, you pause, and invite – offering an attitude of 'Can this speak?' 'What is needed now?' Note, it's 'What does this need' - not 'What do I want.' But you don't reply, or make a suggestion: the response does not arise from the conceptual mind, but from mindfulness and inquiry in the embodied domain. They offer an invitation for phenomena to reveal their nature.

What is revealed is that phenomena - *dhammā* – are not things, people, events in the past, or scenarios in the future, but energetic qualia of 'becoming' that arise and pass and are not self. Well you may have known that ... in your head, but your heart-mind didn't. It was still holding on, resisting, agitating, blaming, indulging, complicating ...

'Include it all' means what it says. It has at times felt naively optimistic. But it's an aspiration; perhaps better expressed as 'include what your mindfulness can manage'. Much of what I was referring to in this meditation instruction was to spread awareness over the whole body, when physical pain, emotion and blocked energy arise that cause a restriction. These are phenomena that one could call one's own, or one's kammic inheritance. In meditation practice the skill is to locate the stuck place, then without losing awareness of that, to widen the loop of mindfulness

into a broad focus on the whole embodied state. When this process comes to rest it accesses the response of Dhamma.

For instance: 'I have a pain in my right shoulder, it's been there for years; I've tried shifting my arm, doing stretches etc. but after twenty minutes of sitting in meditation, it becomes acute. If I could only get into *jhāna*, then I wouldn't feel it ... but the pain gets to me first and stops me doing that. I've tried being patient, and sending it *metta*, but still the thing persists.' Well, the practice I outline means that first you pay careful attention to the pain as a phenomenon: how does it move? If it were visible, what would it look like? Then you soften your attitude and widen your focus: how far does the pain extend? Where in your body does it go? Can you get the whole of it, and connect it from its tail-end to the adjacent area that is not in pain. (Maybe in the above instance that's halfway down my back.) Widen to include the tail-end of the pain where it meets the non-pain – and settle awareness at that transition point. This will open a 'drainage channel' through which the body can gradually discharge the tense defensive energy that has accumulated around the pain. In its own time, the body will open more fully and the pain will soften or even vanish.

Ah yes: 'in its own time' - because 'include it all' also means including two interrelated pieces – the mind's attitude and the quality of awareness. Can your attitude soften out of 'this is getting in my way' to one of meeting the phenomenon with something like respect? Furthermore, can you meet psychological stuff in the same way, and widen to include the awareness of all that? Either of these pathways will take you to an awareness that is void of strategies, expectations, or identification – where a cool and unplanned response can arise. So if you can meet, widen and include, you will have learnt something that is worth having pain for. Because this is where the inevitable dukkha of life becomes a teacher and guide rather than an obstacle. Here is the wisdom that knows nothing, expects nothing, and rather than control phenomena, allows them to be felt and released.

The skills of this process become increasingly relevant as the full realm of experience is allowed into focus. What becomes clear is that, even as what can be called 'my stuff' gets less, the domain of experience widens to include the socio-cultural domain and the kammic field that we arise within. Because the mind is an affect-response experience, not a distinct entity; it is affected by the 'all'. So just because one doesn't identify with or feel responsible for environmental destruction, social injustice and the rest of it doesn't mean that the mind isn't involved. If you've seen it or heard it, your mind has registered it. And probably felt shocked – and then gone about its daily business. 'Other people ... After all, what can I do?' Well, you could widen soften and include the resonance of that. No, it won't fix things, at least immediately, but it will change your attitudes and actions. You might for example meet people who feel the same way. That's where right action begins: to meet what arises internally - and widen to associate with people of integrity. So one fruition is that you realize that we have access to another field, that of goodness, of Dhamma.

When this becomes apparent, it's possible to include the potential of what other people see you as. Because you don't measure yourself so personally. For instance, finding myself as a white Anglo-Saxon male, and by default thinking along those lines, can make me overlook the amount of damage people who look like me have caused. Sure, I *personally* have led a harmless life and

I experience generosity, kindness and compassion towards other beings. So from my point of view, I am not a threat. But on getting more acquainted with the history, I can now understand more easily why non-white people may see this 'me' phenomenon as a threat, or be triggered by a casual remark. And if I attune to the potential in another to feel that wavering unsettledness, I also sense that in myself, and am aware of the need to pause, listen and open to what may arise at our meeting. But I don't expect another to see me 'as I really am'. Because a true meeting is not of two solid and distinctly-boundaried entities bumping into and measuring each other anyway; it is an interaction of inherited sensitivities in a relational field. From this field, a deep and accurate response can arise. That is, if we can put aside what we identify ourselves as being (well-intentioned monk, etc.) and what we identify ourselves as NOT being (authority figure etc.), we simply meet what arises. A phrase in the *Sutta-Nipata* comes to mind in which the sage is described:

*...a person of nothing, who has nothing that they hold as theirs, and nothing that they reject as not theirs.*

Inclusivity then doesn't imply that we as individuals are all equal: some are stronger, more quick-witted or have access to deeper domains of concentration than others. There are gifts and talents, as well as disabilities and limitations. But there is a unity that includes all. It is one of respectful awareness within the relational field. If we acknowledge being changeable configurations within that (rather than fixed entities), we can attune to the mutuality of existence and the responsibility that this entails. To meet what arises, and include. Then come what may, we live with integrity and balance, because awareness isn't biased or shutting things out.