

Meditation Techniques: Breath, Body, Listening, Feeling Tone, Loving Kindness, Question by Martine Batchelor (Toronto, June 17-19, 2011)

Martine: Each meditation technique insofar as they help you with concentration and creative engagement, will generally work, to some degree., but not to the same degree for everyone. Some will suit some people, and not others. I recommend that you have one practice like the breath, you sit in meditation and generally you come back to that because you are familiar with it; you can do it, you're quite comfortable with it. It is very good to have this ground practice, let it be the breath, or loving kindness, or asking a question. And what we can see is that the other techniques are tools of awareness. Being aware of the breath is a little different from doing loving kindness, is a little different from asking the question because they have different effects. These tools of awareness could be more appropriate to certain circumstances in terms of outer conditions or inner conditions. For example, the breath (as long as you don't have asthma), can be a very good practice for quieting, to stabilize. That's why in MBCT they have these short three minute breath meditations which stabilize us in the midst of different activities of the day.

I feel the body awareness meditation is very useful in terms of moving from really being in our brain, in abstraction, to being more organically here. If you have lots of thinking about planning - which seems to have an energy of its own which is not very helpful - you've planned something 100 times, when possibly after 10 times you could have a little break - then being aware of the body is helpful. Being aware of the feet while walking, or the hands while washing the dishes, really coming back to something in the body is very helpful, very useful.

In terms of listening meditation again you can use it in two different ways. For people who are very sensitive to sound, if they do listening meditation in an open manner they can start to feel that the sound is not aggressing them, that the sound is not against me. They can hear that the sound arrives and passes away, they can have a different relationship to sound. Otherwise if you're not specifically sensitive to sound, listening meditation can really open us up to the world, so we're a little less self-centered, so there is an opening outside of ourselves.

In terms of vedana, being aware of the feeling tone, it is a very useful tool, and again you have two different techniques. One is just to aware of the feeling tone: pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, and that can be very interesting in terms of the choice: after there is contact that produces feeling, what do I do? To be aware of the feeling sensation in the body, the emotional sensation in the body, so that you go more to the sensation in the body rather than the meaning or the story of it. It can be quite useful to be with our feelings in different ways.

With loving kindness and the four brahmaviharas (immeasurables), they each have a little direction. Loving kindness (metta), or wishing well, can counteract resentment, compassion makes you more aware of suffering. Rejoicing (sympathetic joy) makes you more appreciative, and connects you to your happiness and the happiness of others, and equanimity balances things out.

The questioning meditation can help us in terms of giving us more choices. I felt this practice made me more flexible. Instead of this is like this or this is like that, you see you could do it this way or that way. You see more possibility.

I would say it's good to be grounded in one meditation practice and see the others as complements, tools of awareness for different conditions.