

***Vipassanā* Meditation Instructions**

By S. M. Tai

Introduction

The following *vipassanā* meditation instructions are based on the method taught by the late most Venerable Mahāsi Sayadaw and the teachings of the late Venerable Sayadaw U Pandita and his disciples.¹ These instructions are for meditators (yogis) on intensive retreats. A summary of how to practice in daily life is included at the end.

Sitting Meditation

The Sitting Posture

Sit on the floor on a mat or cushion, with your legs “crossed” in the Burmese style. This means that instead of crossing the ankles so that one is resting on top of the other, the lower legs and feet are placed so that one is in front of the other. The upper body should be perpendicular to the floor, neither held too taut, nor slouching, nor leaning to one side. The pelvis should also be vertical, neither tilted forwards nor tucked backwards. Keep the neck straight and the head upright as well. The hands are placed one on top of another in one’s lap close to the body. Your sitting posture must be reasonably stable and comfortable, so that you can maintain it for one hour of sitting without moving or shifting.² Close your eyes.

The Primary Object

Focus your attention internally on the abdomen. This is the area below your solar plexus and above your navel. (It is not your chest.) Your main job during sitting meditation is to observe the physical sensations and movements in this area as you breathe in and out. To observe

¹ Mahāsi Sayadaw, *Practical Vipassanā Meditation Exercises*. Available for free online.

² If you are unable sit like this, you can sit in a chair. Your back is straight, supported by the chair. Keep the neck straight and place both feet on the floor, or on a cushion (if they cannot reach the floor).

means that you are “seeing” these sensations with your mind’s eye and knowing them through actual experience.

When you breathe in, you will find that the abdomen doesn’t remain still. It inflates and expands. So, as soon as the abdomen “rises” up with the in-breath, make a soft mental label, just once, in your mind: “rising,” as you observe the physical sensations in the abdomen, such as tightness, stiffness, tension, hardness, movement, etc. (These are just some examples of what you may experience, you may come to see a lot more than this.)

When you breathe out, you will find that the abdomen “falls” down, that is, it deflates and shrinks. As soon as the abdomen moves with the out-breath, make a soft mental label in your mind, just once: “falling,” as you observe the physical sensations in the abdomen, such as softness, looseness, etc.

Then, when you breathe in again, repeat the same procedure: make a soft mental label: “rising,” and at the same time observe the abdomen closely through the entire process of its rising. When you breathe out again, make a soft mental label “falling,” and observe the abdomen closely through the entire process of its falling.

For both clarity and brevity, we will use the verb “to note” to describe both making a mental label *and* observing the object. So, for the entire sitting hour, you should be noting “rising, falling, rising, falling, rising, falling” as continuously as possible, without missing or stopping to take a break.

You may ask, why bother making a mental label when you can just directly observe the object? In the beginning, the label is a necessary guide, like a ruler that helps you draw a straight line to your object. The mental labelling will help you remember to note the object of meditation, as well as focus your mind more accurately on it.³ But you must be careful not to simply recite the mental labels “rising, falling,” without actually *knowing* the object that is under observation.

For beginners, and for those who have not practiced regularly for a while, the rising and falling of the abdomen may be difficult to see. Be patient and persistent, and don’t give up if you can’t feel anything, even after a few days or several days of meditation. It takes a lot of practice to put the mind on the body and keep it there. Keep focusing your mind on the abdomen and

³ Later on, the labelling will also help you to become aware of the noting mind itself, which is an essential part of understanding the interrelationship between the body and the mind.

breathe normally. Do not change the breath in any way, such as breathing harder, faster, or even slower to try to make the abdominal movements more obvious.

During sitting meditation, you are focusing your attention, like a microscope, onto your primary object of investigation, which is the rising and falling of the abdomen. But unlike looking at a static object, the rising and falling is constantly moving and changing. So you cannot relax and gaze at it from afar. *Vipassanā* meditation is not about sitting down and waiting to feel peaceful. It is an active and dynamic process that requires a lot of hard work.

When you are noting the rising and falling, first you need to be alert to and aware of the object right away, as soon as it arises, without forgetting it or missing it (this is *sati*, mindfulness). Then you have to aim your mind with mental energy (*vīriya*) so that your mind “hits” the object exactly like a target. Then, you want to stick your mental attention closely onto the object with concentration (*samādhi*), so that you can see it clearly.

Once you start to see the rising and falling of the abdomen, take care not to think about or analyze what you are experiencing. All you need to do in meditation practice is to simply know the present object experientially for one moment at a time. You do not need to go beyond the bare experience of the object, and think over, ponder, analyze or judge the object, such as: “What is this? Why is it happening? Is it good or bad? How do I describe it?” Only direct, experiential knowing, one moment after another, will lead you to real wisdom.

The Wandering Mind

After sitting for a while, you may find that your mind doesn’t stay on the main object easily or willingly, but frequently wanders off into long trains of thoughts. As soon as you realize that you are absorbed in thoughts instead of noting the rising and falling of the abdomen, turn your attention to note the thoughts. You can note the thoughts either in your head, or at the heart base (the chest area where the heart is), wherever they are more obvious, as “thinking, thinking.” Note the thoughts, but do *not* get involved in the content of the thoughts!

If you find that the thoughts disappear when you turn your attention to note them, then go back as quickly as possible to the main object of the rising and falling. If the thoughts don’t disappear, note them again with more mental energy until they disappear, and then go back to your main object. You can note the thoughts two, or three or several times. If you have to note

more than ten times, and the thoughts are still going on nonstop, then just leave them aside and go back with stronger attention to your main object.

Like a spider, you are anchored in the center of your web, which is your “home” object of the rising and falling of the abdomen.⁴ If a thought intrudes like a fly that is caught somewhere on the web, you rush out to catch it, cut it off, and then quickly return to the center.

You can note wandering thoughts generally as “thinking” or “wandering,” but you can also be more specific with your labels, and note “imagining,” “planning,” “remembering,” etc. But don’t spend too much time trying to choose an exact label, or else you will miss the object! If you see mental images in your mind, you can note them as “seeing, seeing.” By noting thoughts in this way, the wandering mind becomes just another object of meditation instead of a cause for frustration or something to try to get rid of.

Finally, do not get caught in the content of your thoughts! Again, do *not* get involved in the content of your thoughts! This means that *what* you are thinking is not important at all, no matter how fascinating or horrible it is. The longer you are lost in the content of your thoughts, the further away you are from *vipassanā* knowledge. Even if the thoughts are about the Dhamma or practice-related, that is still intellectual knowing and not intuitive understanding that leads to insight. Thinking is a major pitfall for many yogis.

Pain

Another object that arises and is challenging for every single meditator is pain. When you first start sitting, the body feels comfortable, but after some time, various kinds of unpleasant feelings start to arise in the body and intensify. Your legs may go numb, your back may feel stiff as your posture slumps, your face itches, and you may be aching all over. When these types of unpleasant feelings arise, do not immediately move, shift or change your posture in any way. (Don’t even quickly lift your arm to scratch a small itch.) Just be aware of these unpleasant feelings at first, and try to stay on your main object of the rising and falling of the abdomen for as long as you can.

If the unpleasant feelings become very strong, to the point that you are unable to stay focused on the abdomen, then you can turn your full attention to note them. Focus on *one* point of pain

⁴ This analogy was given by the Venerable Sayadaw U Pandita.

where it is the strongest, and note it carefully and continuously as “pain, pain,” or “stiff, stiff,” or “numb, numb,” “aching, aching,” or “hot, hot,” according to how it is manifesting.

It is important to have the right attitude when noting unpleasant feelings. You are not noting the pain to make it go away. That is out of your control. Pain comes and goes according to its causes and conditions, and not according to your will. So, you shouldn’t note pain with even a drop of desire for it to go away, nor should you hate the pain and try to crush it into oblivion with your mind. Most importantly, you should not have any fear regarding any pain that you experience during practice.

Rather, observe the pain as calmly as you can with a neutral mind, as though it is happening to someone else. Watch it closely to understand its nature. Pain can become a very interesting object to observe. These are some things you can investigate when observing pain (without thinking or analyzing): Is the pain increasing or decreasing? What is its duration and does that change? What is its location and does that change? What kind of pain is it and does that change? (Such as: hard, numb, dull, sharp, stabbing, hot, twisting, etc.)

When the pain becomes very intense, relax both your mind and body a bit, and just note the pain in general, without focusing on it too closely. Or, you can change objects to note the rising and falling again. If the pain becomes really unbearable, and you can no longer concentrate on it or focus on any other object in the body, then you can slowly change your sitting posture. Before you move, first note the intention to move. When you change your posture, make one small movement at a time, while noting and knowing one small movement at a time.

If you straighten your back or your neck, note “moving, moving” and straighten up slowly, part by part, so that you can feel each sensation in the back or neck as you are straightening up. If you move your leg, note “moving, moving” and observe the sensations that you experience as you slowly move the leg one segment at a time. If you lift your arm to scratch your face, note “lifting,” while observing the sensations in the lifting arm. When the hand touches the itchy spot, note “touching,” and know the sensations you experience when the hand touches the face. When you note “scratching, scratching” know the sensations you experience during that process. When you put the arm down, note “placing,” and know the feeling in the arm when it lowers down. When it touches your leg, note “touching,” and know the sensation that you experience at the touching point.

You should try not to change your posture during one hour of sitting, because every time you move or shift, you are disrupting your concentration and have to start all over again to build it

up. Even if you move only once, if you add up the number of times you have changed your posture during sitting meditation, it is already too many! Also, the sooner you move to relieve the pain, the sooner pain arises the next time you sit. Even worse, you have intensified your craving for relief.

After changing your posture, you will find that the pain disappears. Then go back to noting the main object of the rising and falling of the abdomen. After some time, another pain may arise and intensify. Again, try to stay on the rising and falling as long as you can. Then, when the pain becomes very intense to the point that you can no longer stay on the abdomen, turn your attention to note the pain without changing your posture.

After noting pain for some time, if it decreases or disappears, go back to noting the main object of the rising and falling of the abdomen. By noting pain and various kinds of unpleasant feelings with patience and perseverance, you can gradually build up both courage and concentration. When you learn how to face even intense physical pain without experiencing any mental pain, you will gain a lot of confidence and forbearance that will extend into your daily life as well. You will be freer from the fear of discomfort.

The Sense Doors and Mental States

During sitting meditation, the rising and falling of the abdomen is the main object. Wandering thoughts and pain are secondary objects that arise the most frequently. When you are sitting, your eyes are closed, so you do not see anything.⁵ You also are not eating or drinking anything, so you do not taste anything. So, the other sensory impingements that may arise during sitting meditation are sounds and smells. Smelling does not arise too often. If you smell something, pleasant or unpleasant, simply note it at the nose as “smelling, smelling,” and then go back to the main object of rising and falling. Hearing arises more often. If a sound is loud and distracts you from the primary object, note it immediately as “hearing, hearing,” right at the ear drum. Observe what happens there when you hear the sounds. Then go back to the main object of rising and falling. Do not note sounds continuously for a long period of time.

While you are sitting, various mental states may also arise and distract you from the primary object of meditation, such as happiness, calmness, depression, frustration, boredom, etc. Note them as they arise, as “happy,” “calm,” “depressed,” “frustrated,” “bored,” etc., and observe

⁵ If you see mental images during sitting, note “seeing, seeing.”

and know the feeling (whether pleasant or unpleasant) at the heart base, and then go back and note the primary object of rising and falling with stronger attention. If a certain mental state arises and becomes very intense, and you are unable to focus on the primary object, then keep noting the mental state until it begins to subside, and then go back to your primary object. Be careful not to get caught up in the accompanying thoughts that arise with the feelings!

Changing Postures

When the sitting session is over, you need to get up to do walking meditation. Before getting up, first note the intention to get up. Then slowly make one movement at a time, and simultaneously note one movement at a time as you gradually get up. You must note carefully during the process of getting up, so that your concentration remains continuous. If you get up quickly and hastily without bothering to note, then you are simply throwing away the concentration that you just built up during sitting meditation. No one is rushing you to get up, so you can take your time, break your movements down into separate segments, and observe the entire process thoroughly.

For example, if you need to move your arm first, move it slowly and gently, while noting “moving,” as you observe the sensations in the arm. If your hand touches the mat, note “touching,” and know the sensation of touching. If you move your leg, note “moving, moving” for each separate segment of movement. When you bow, carefully note the process of bowing, one movement at a time. When you are getting up to a standing posture, you can note “moving, moving, moving,” (or “getting up, getting up,” whatever label works best) as you straighten your body part by part. When you are standing still, note “standing, standing.” Then, note “right step, left step” as you slowly walk away from your seat and out of the dhamma hall.

Note in the same way when you change your posture from standing to sitting. Note “right step, left step,” when you walk to your seat. Note “standing, standing,” for a minute or two before you sit down. When you do sit down, do not simply plop yourself down and hurry with quick and careless movements into your sitting posture. Rather, sit down slowly and gradually, part by part, carefully noting one movement at a time. There is no rush to sit down. If you note every movement carefully, you will maintain the concentration that you developed during walking meditation, and it will be much easier for you to focus on the rising and falling of the abdomen during sitting. Carefully noting the change in postures will help you develop stronger concentration, which will lead to deeper insight knowledges. If your concentration is steady and continuous, insight knowledge can arise at any moment!

Walking Meditation

Choose a straight, even and cleanly swept path that is about twenty steps long. You will be doing formal walking meditation back and forth on this path for an hour (or forty-five minutes, if you factor in the time needed for using the restroom). If you need to use the restroom or drink water, do so before or after your walking session. Do not interrupt your walking session halfway to use the restroom, or do something else, as this will disrupt the concentration you are trying to build. Also, do not change walking paths halfway, thinking that you will get better concentration on a different path. Once you start your walking session, you must walk continuously for the full hour (or forty-five minutes).

Stand at one end of the path, with your eyes cast down, looking about four feet in front of you. Do not look up or around, as this will distract you. Although you are looking down, it is very important to keep your neck straight, as the head tends to bend down. Your hands are clasped together, either behind your back, or in front of you. (Or one hand can clasp the opposite wrist or forearm.) The arms should not be swinging freely. Also, do not carry or hold anything in your hands while you are doing formal walking meditation.

Before you walk, first note the standing posture as “standing, standing.” Scan your body from head to feet, neither too fast nor too slow, and observe the standing posture. Do not pay attention to the form or shape of the body. Instead, focus on the sensations that you feel in the body.

After noting standing, do one-step noting for the first fifteen to twenty minutes. When you step forward with your right foot, note “right step.” At the same time, put your attention on the bottom of the foot and simply become aware of the sensations there (such as hardness, softness, pressure, etc.) as soon as the foot contacts the ground. Do not think about the form or shape of the foot. When you step forward next with the left foot, note “left step,” and be aware of the sensations on the bottom of the foot as it touches the ground. In this way, note “right step, left step” continuously without missing until you reach the end of the path.

When you reach the end of the path, stop, close your eyes and note “standing, standing,” about five times. Then, open your eyes, slowly turn around while noting “turning, turning,” placing your attention either on the entire body or the bottom of the feet. After turning, note

“standing, standing, standing,” three times, and then note “right step, left step, right step, left step,” until you reach the end of the path. Note standing, turning, and standing again. Keep noting “right step, left step,” as you walk slowly back on the same path.

For the next fifteen to twenty minutes, do two-step noting, “lifting, placing.” Here, your attention should be focused on the movements of the foot and lower leg. Try to synchronize your noting with your movements. So, as soon as the foot lifts, “note” lifting, and observe the sensations in the foot and lower leg during the lifting process. As soon as the foot lowers, note “placing,” and observe the sensations in the foot as it lowers and touches the ground. The foot should not be lifted too high up, or extended too far forward. Also, the front foot should be fully placed down on the ground before the back foot lifts up. The pace of two-step noting will be much slower than one step noting. Keep noting “lifting, placing, lifting, placing,” until you reach the end of the walking path, and then note “standing,” (five times), “turning, turning,” and “standing, standing,” (three times) before you walk back on the same path, noting “lifting, placing, lifting, placing.”

For the last fifteen to twenty minutes, do three-step noting, “lifting, moving, placing.” This is the slowest speed of walking and the most detailed observation. As soon as the foot lifts up, note “lifting,” and observe the sensations in the foot and lower leg for the entire process of lifting. As soon as it moves forward, note “moving,” and observe sensations in the lower leg and foot during the entire process of moving forward. As soon as the foot lowers down, note “placing,” and observe the sensations in the lower leg and foot during the entire lowering process until the foot touches the ground. Again, try to synchronize your noting (meaning both the mental label and the observation) so that it is concurrent with your movements. Note standing, turning and standing, every time you stop at the end of the walking path.

If wandering thoughts arise while you are walking, ignore them and stay on the movements of the feet and lower leg. If the thoughts are too distracting and your mind is completely not in your body anymore, then stop first and note them. Then continue with your walking by noting more energetically or noting more closely. While you are walking, ignore all sights and sounds. If something really distracts you, stop and note it as “seeing, seeing” or “hearing, hearing.” Do not note seeing or hearing while you are moving. If there is an itch somewhere, ignore it if you can. If you really need to scratch, stop first, and then carefully and slowly note scratching. If you need to change the position of the hands, walk until the end of the path, stop, and then change the position of your hands. Do not move your arms or hands while you are in the middle of walking.

As mindfulness becomes more continuous, one-step walking meditation can be done a bit more quickly in the following situations. After you get up from sitting, at the beginning of your walking session, you can do one-step noting as “right, left, right, left” more quickly for ten minutes or so to relieve the stiffness in your legs.⁶ When you feel sluggish after mealtimes, and in the early morning or late evening when you feel sleepy, you can also do one-step noting a bit more quickly for ten to fifteen minutes to wake the mind up. For the first walking session in the early morning and for the last walking session late at night, if you feel tired or less focused, you may do one-step noting for the entire session. Formal walking meditation back and forth on one path and walking while noting “right, left,” from one place to another are the only kinds of walking permitted during a retreat.⁷

During an intensive retreat, walking meditation is just as important as sitting meditation. Yet many yogis do it casually for a few minutes as a relaxing break or skip it altogether. These yogis are missing an essential part of the practice! Walking meditation balances effort and concentration, and also develops strong and durable concentration that extends into the next sitting, like charging up a battery. You will experience a big difference in the quality of your sitting if you do walking meditation thoroughly beforehand. Walking meditation can become so interesting and absorbing to note, that one hour can pass by like a few minutes. It is anything but monotonous.

Daily Activities

In addition to sitting and walking meditation, yogis must note all daily activities. This includes waking up, getting out of bed, getting dressed, putting on shoes, going to the toilet, brushing your teeth, eating, drinking, bathing, opening and closing the door, etc. There are many movements to note in these activities, so you can break them down into separate segments as much as possible, focus on the movements of the hands and feet, and keep the labeling relatively simple (such as “moving,” and “touching”). You will not be moving as fast as you do in everyday life. Move at a speed at which you can note and know the present object.

⁶ When you walk from one place to another, you can simply note “right, left, right, left,” and proceed at a moderate pace, neither too fast nor too slow, as long as you can note and know every single step. There is no need to walk extremely slowly and note “lifting, moving, placing,” in this case.

⁷ During a retreat, yogis must never walk casually for exercise, such as walking briskly in circles with the arms swinging freely.

Here is an example of how to note during eating. After you sit down, first note the sitting posture. Then note “seeing, seeing,” when you see the food. Note “lifting,” when you lift your arm, “touching” when you hold the spoon or fork, “scooping,” when you take a portion of food onto your utensil, “lifting,” when you lift it up, “opening,” when you open your mouth, “touching,” when you place the food in and close your mouth, “placing” when you lower the spoon down, “moving,” when you lower the hand back down to your lap. Then note “chewing, chewing” while you chew, and observe the taste or the movement of the jaw. Note “swallowing” when it occurs. When you are chewing, it is better to first place the hand back down on your leg instead of resting your hand on the edge of the table while holding the spoon at the same time. Note in this way for every mouthful of food you take. If you note in this way, eating will no longer be a pleasurable activity, but will feel more like a tiresome burden. This is how you start to see the true nature of the mind and body process.

Just as with walking meditation, many yogis skip noting daily activities altogether, thinking that it is not really important, and end up with many large gaps in their noting. It is like a car that keeps starting and stopping. It will take a long time for the car to move forward, much less reach its destination. The more you note daily activities, in addition to sitting and walking meditation, the more continuous your mindfulness becomes and the faster you will make progress.⁸

Important Points to Remember

If you want to make steady progress in your meditation practice, remember and follow these points:

1. Be continuous in your noting. This means one noting per second, from the moment you wake up in the morning until the moment you fall asleep at night. If you can make effort and note well during sitting, try to make just as much effort and note equally well during walking meditation. If your sitting and walking are good, try to note all changes in posture and all daily activities so that there is no break or gap anywhere. Continuous noting takes a lot of mental energy, but the more you try, the more momentum you will develop. The more continuous your noting, the stronger your concentration. The stronger your concentration, the deeper your insight knowledges.

⁸ Do remember to keep your noting continuous (and your eyes cast down) when you go to your interview. Your teacher is carefully watching to see whether you are keeping your mindfulness intact or not!

2. Do only one thing at a time, and note only one object at a time. The mind cannot take two objects at the same time. If you scratch your nose while you are walking, thinking that you can be aware of both actions at the same time, you are actually not knowing either one fully. Instead, perform one action at a time, so that your mind can catch each separate movement, one after another. Noting only one object at a time also helps your mind to be concentrated and calm, instead of being overwhelmed by too many objects to note.
3. Be in the present moment. This means to give priority to carefully and concurrently noting the present object, instead of rushing to the next activity. If you rush to stand up, rush to sit down, rush to finish eating, rush to use the restroom, rush to go to bed, etc., your mind will always be in the future and not in the present moment. Do not think or believe that: “I can be mindful later, after I do this first.” Being in the present also means that you do not get caught up in ruminating about past objects or experiences.
4. Be in your body at all times, not in your head. Cut off all thoughts, good or bad, right away, and anchor your mind on your primary object during sitting and walking, and be grounded in your posture and bodily movements in between. Guard the sense doors carefully so that the mind does not leave the body. For example, if you see something that catches your attention, note “seeing” at the eye base right away, so that thoughts about what you have just seen do not arise and distract you.
5. When you lose mindfulness (which happens to everyone every day), completely drop whatever just happened and do not get upset or blame yourself. As soon as possible, note the next object with a fresh mind. Or, you can stop whatever you were doing and get grounded in your body again by noting your posture in the moment. The sooner you can start up your mindfulness again with a positive attitude after missing or forgetting to note, the better. Remember that one moment of noting is one moment of mental purity. The power to generate mental purity again and again is in your hands. At any moment, you have the power to turn away from negative thinking and habitual reactions, and choose to develop mental clarity instead.

Practice in Everyday Life

For practice in everyday life, sitting for one hour a day is the minimum. If you have a suitable space, you can also do half an hour of walking meditation before your sitting. Sitting twice a day is even better if you have the time. When you are busy, sitting for even half an hour is better than not sitting at all. Throughout the day, at any time, you can place your mind on your body and note daily activities in a general way (since it is not practical to note your movements in detail and move slowly as in a formal retreat). You can be aware of the hardness under your feet when you are standing, and the hardness under your seat when sitting. You can also be aware of changing your posture. You can note “right, left, right, left” whenever you are walking at a normal speed. If you are grounded in your body, you will automatically become aware of any prominent mental states (without deliberately looking for them). If you find yourself caught in unwholesome mental states, you can apply wise reflection, curb the negative thoughts, and turn your attention to something wholesome instead. If something unpleasant happens, you can just be aware of the feeling of tension in your chest area without reacting immediately with irritation or annoyance. If you encounter pleasant experiences, you can also be aware of the pleasant feelings without getting carried away by them. Every little bit of mindfulness in daily life, based on a firm foundation of keeping the five precepts, adds up to keep your mind more energized and less stressed, and will help deepen your concentration on your next intensive retreat.