



OPEN EYE

Meditation Group

See for Yourself

## Directed and Undirected Meditation

### Sutta: Directed and Undirected Meditation SN 47.10

The Buddha

Commentary: Andrew Olendzki

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 female practitioners 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 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, one abides contemplating body as body[\*] — ardent, fully aware, mindful — leading away the unhappiness that comes from obsessing for the things of the world. And for one who is abiding contemplating body as body,[\*] a thought regarding the body arises, or bodily distress arise, or mental sluggishness arises and this unfocuses one’s mind sending it here and there. Then one should direct one’s 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. One then reflects: “The purpose for which I directed my my mind has been accomplished. So now I shall withdraw directed attention from the satisfactory image that has created within myself contentment and concentration.” One withdraws, and no longer thinks upon or thinks about the image. One understands: “I am not thinking upon or thinking about

anything. Inwardly concentrated, I am content.” This is directed meditation.

And what is undirected meditation? Not directing one’s mind outward, one understands: “My mind is not directed outward.” One understands: “Not focused on before or after; free; undirected.” And one 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.

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

### Commentary

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 women’s causes and would often visit communities of women to encourage their dhamma practice. The Buddha seems to take the opportunity of Ananda’s

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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 (referring to image) 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 has a connotation of recollecting something in the mind.

The adjective *pasadaniya* is translated by Woodward elsewhere 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 a pleasant state that allows relaxation, contentment and then concentration.

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 sutta confirms, this excursion into the deliberate cultivation of a specific satisfactory inspiring image, directly effect the body in a relaxing way that then lead back to concentration. The image can be naturally released as the restoration of concentration has been fulfilled.