Essential Meditation - Class 4 Notes

Welcome to week 4 of your meditation journey! By the time we are half-way through our class on Wednesday, we will be at the half-way point in the series. This is fitting, because this week we will be talking about Pratyahara, which is a pivot from the more external aspects of meditation (which are collectively called Bahiranga), which include Yama, Niyama, Asana, and Pranayama, into the internal aspects (called Antaranga), which include Pratyahara, Dharana, Dhyana, and Samadhi. As I have mentioned in class, I think of the external aspects as preparation or maintenance in our daily lives that helps develop and maintain a proper state for mind for a depth of concentration and a more quickly developed meditation practice. So our step toward Pratyahara is really where the heart of meditation begins. From this point, we will be discussing increasingly more subtle states of consciousness, but I want to emphasize that although these states might be difficult to describe using conventional language, they are nonetheless states of consciousness that are universal and can be achieved by anyone who puts in the time and energy to develop a meditation practice. Many of you may have experienced these states already, and not even known it!

Pratyahara

Pratyahara is the gateway into the last three limbs - Dharana, Dhyana, and Samadhi - which are collectively called Samyama. Without a firmly established Pratyahara, these last three states are not possible. So you can see that this state of Pratyahara is critical for the development and deepening of practice.

Pratyahara is usually translated to "withdrawal from the senses," and denotes the space in a meditation practice in which the concentration of the meditator is firmly established, and thoughts and sensations of the body cease to be a significant distraction to the meditator. What is meant by concentration being firmly established? This means the meditator isn't sleepy or nodding off, nor are they trapped in dreaming or random thinking. Thoughts may still arise and fall, but they become diminished in their strength and dominance in the mind. The key differentiating characteristic of Pratyahara is that the meditator is not taken away from the very practice by thoughts that arise, sensations that come in through the 5 senses, or impulses (like sleepiness or hunger) that arise. There is a *solidity* to the meditation.

Although the standard translation of Pratyahara is "withdrawal from the senses," examining the literal translation can bear fruit in contemplating the nature of this particular state. The word comes from the roots *prati* - which means to move away from or withdraw, and *ahara* - which means food. The "food" here is the food that the five senses feeds to our mind. If you consider that the entire makeup of our thoughts are sensory impressions and related emotions and instinctive impulses to sensations, you see that it is the five senses - taste, touch, sight, smell, and hearing that gives rise to our very thoughts. Likewise, impressions that we receive from our five senses trigger memories and associations, and therefore give "food" to our mind, our very cognitive makeup.

This "feeding" of the mind is the reason why, during meditation, we seek to practice in a space that limits sensory input. We sit very still (dampening our sensation of touch), in a quiet room (decreasing our hearing sensations), with our eyes closed (no sight - you can see where this is going…), ideally, you are not eating at the same time, nor sitting in a very stinky environment. Limiting our sensual input allows our mind to quiet more quickly.

Pratyahara is not just sitting in an environment that limits this feeding of the senses, however. It is a specific state in which our consciousness ceases to identify as strongly with thoughts and impressions as they arise. There is a firm sense of the practice of meditation occurring, and not much else. There is a solidity to the meditation. In the state of Pratyahara, one might cease to feel their body as strongly. Thoughts, though they may still arise, fall by the wayside more easily without distracting the meditator into a chain of associated thoughts. If a sound comes through, the meditator doesn't spend time thinking about the sound - what it means, what made the sound, etc.

We normally spend our lives in sensory overload. There is a never-ending stream of information coming in through our senses, and we develop, throughout our lives, myriad ways of reacting to this sensory information. This state of overload causes our attention to be constantly scattered, and hinders our ability to collect our consciousness together into a state of concentration. So developing the state of Pratyahara allows us to collect and strengthen our ability to concentrate, which is vital to the next three limbs.

Calm Abiding

Pratyahara is, as we've said, the pivot into the internal practice of meditation, and the gateway to the last 3 limbs (or Samyama), which lead to Vipassana, or insight. But it is also the beginning of the development of Samatha, or Tranquility. Samatha is usually translated to 'tranquility,' but can also be referred to as "Calm Abiding," which is closer to a literal translation. I find this term to be a wonderful descriptor of the characteristic of the nature of Pratyahara.

The 5 Hindrances

In Buddhism there are, classically, 5 hindrances to meditation. These hindrances are all applicable here, because they can categorize a lot of different states of mind that holds one back from Pratyahara. These hindrances are (in no particular order):

- Sloth & Torpor: half-hearted action with little or no effort or concentration
- Ill-will: feelings of hostility, resentment, hatred and bitterness
- Doubt & Uncertainty: lack of conviction or trust in one's abilities
- Restlessness & Worry: the inability to calm the mind and focus one's energy
- Sensual Desire: seeking for pleasure through the five senses of sight, sound, smell, taste and physical feeling

There is a lot to be said about these hindrances - my purpose here is to list them for your personal consideration. There are five mental factors that are listed in Buddhist Canon that can help to overcome the five hindrances. They vary slightly based on the different texts in which you find them, but they can be helpful in contemplating how to overcome the hindrances. I'll list them here for your reference if you happen to find yourself victim to any the particular hindrance(s):

- Sloth & Torpor is overcome by applied thought - thinking along a certain line, analysis of the cause of apathy. Stimulating zeal for meditation. Obviously not to be done during meditation!
- Ill-will is overcome by rapture or well-being - stimulated by mettabhavana, developing compassion.
- Doubt & Uncertainty is overcome by sustained thought or precise investigation. This can be seen as study.
- Restlessness & Worry is overcome by non-sensual pleasure or serenity. Pranayama can help here.

- ✦ Sensual Desire is overcome by contemplation of impermanence.

Homework

We are continuing the practice of Anapanasati - following the breath. We are increasing the time to 15 minutes this week, so get ready! :)

Keep an eye out for the state of Pratyahara. It's nothing to obsess about, it is simply something to seek to recognize, not to spend time thinking about, especially during your meditation! So keep to the task, maintaining the concentration on the breath.