

# Mindfulness of Breathing (3) Introduction

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

*ānāpānasati*, breathing, mindfulness, Buddha, establishing, postures, bird, full moon, awakening, disciples, meditation, rains retreat, awareness, harmonious, unified, Four Foundations of Mindfulness, Seven Factors of Awakening, Eightfold Path, Five Faculties, Five Powers, Four Bases of Success

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Today I'd like to give the third introductory talk on this topic of mindfulness of breathing. Then tomorrow we'll start with the 16 steps that the Buddha taught for this practice. There is one discourse where the Buddha lays out this teaching of the 16 steps, and it can be divided into three parts.

These parts are characterized by the way in which they are unifying things. The discourse doesn't say this explicitly, so maybe this is my interpretation. But it emphasizes the bringing together in harmony of different elements of practice – the different practices that the Buddha taught, the different mind states that happen in meditation, the different developments of meditation, and how it all fits together in a harmonious whole. It also includes the Buddha's community during his time, and how they came together in a harmonious, unified way.

The discourse begins with a beautiful image of a full moon night in the fall – maybe around September – in the woods in ancient India. If the canopy is not too dense, the full moon can really light up with a beautiful, clear, peaceful light. It lights up, and you can see pretty well at night. The full moon is so different from the sun, which you can't really look at without injuring yourself. But the full moon, which represents the awakened mind in Buddhism, is safe to look at. It's cool and peaceful. It brings a light that we can see clearly in the dark.

On this full moon night, there is a large gathering of the Buddha's disciples in the woods. They're there for three months for what's called the rains retreat. The ten senior disciples of the Buddha are there. Each of them is there together with a group of new monks whom they're training. One of the senior disciples of the Buddha has 10 new monks, and others have 20, 30, or 40 new monks – all in multiples of 10. It's well organized. The idea of harmony and order is implied in this. For these three months, each of the senior disciples is teaching the younger disciples meditation practice. The Buddha gathers them together on this full moon night, and he says:

*I'm really pleased with all of you. I'm delighted in your practice. You've developed and matured wonderfully in this practice. However, you can mature more. There's more to be done. I was going to leave now at the end of this rains retreat, but I'm going to stay here one more month. Why don't you stay one more month also and keep practicing, because you're doing so well.*

So they do. They're living together harmoniously in the woods. The senior disciples are living together and supporting the younger disciples, and the Buddha is pleased. The image is one of unity, harmony, and dedication of practice. The full moon can almost stand for the maturity of these practitioners. Their hearts are becoming full, mature, and awakened.

They practice for another month, and the Buddha gathers them together again. He says, "I'm really pleased with all of you. You've really matured further." Then he says:

*Here in this community, everyone is well practiced. Everyone is well settled. Everyone is ethical. There's no one who's slacking off, and I'm really happy with how it's going.*

You get the sense that the whole community is maturing harmoniously. They are developing in the same way on the path of practice. The Buddha says:

*Yes, here among you all, there are those of you who are fully awakened, those of you who are well on the way to full awakening, those of you who are at different stages of awakening. There are those of you who are practicing the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, the Seven Factors of Awakening, the Eightfold Path, the Five Faculties, the Five Powers, and the Four Bases of Success.*

He goes through all these different practices that they're doing, including loving-kindness, compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity. All these different practices and developments of early Buddhism are represented in that community. They all have a place. They're all important and valuable. So that's the setup for the teachings on breathing.

While I don't think the Buddha uses the word 'but,' he then says:

*But mindfulness of breathing, when practiced and cultivated frequently leads to great benefit, to great advantage. When you practice mindfulness of breathing, it cultivates the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. As you cultivate the Four Foundations of Mindfulness with breath meditation, it develops the Seven Factors of Awakening. The Seven Factors of Awakening lead to initial awakening. And then initial awakening allows those seven factors to develop further, which leads to final awakening.*

Again the Buddha is bringing together all these different parts of the path of practice, and explaining how they fit together, and support each other. Mindfulness of breathing is not a separate practice from the Four Foundations of Mindfulness or the Seven Factors of Awakening. He's really built up a whole momentum in his teaching in the prologue of the discourse – and mindfulness of breathing is so valuable.

The Buddha is then going to start giving the instructions. But before talking about the first step, he gives preliminary instructions for doing breath meditation. He says – and maybe it's worth reading it:

*How is mindfulness of breathing developed and cultivated, so it is of great fruit and great benefit? Here, a practitioner, gone to the forest, or to the root of a tree, or to an empty hut, sits down, having folded their legs crosswise, set their body erect, and established mindfulness to the forefront. Ever mindful, one breathes in. Ever mindful, one breathes out.*

There's a definitiveness to sitting down to meditate *here*. The Buddha is very particular and specific about the location. I don't think it's because these particular locations are where you have to go meditate, but rather, this idea of sitting in a definitive place, like "I'm here. This is the place where I'm sitting. I'm rooted. This is where I'm going to be." Wherever it is – in the forest, at the foot of a tree, an empty hut, or in a quiet room in your house – "This is the spot."

Having folded one's legs crosswise is a cross-legged seated posture. There are other postures as well. Elsewhere, the Buddha talks about four dignified postures. I don't know if he said 'dignified,' but this is how it's come down through the ages. They are the postures of sitting upright, lying down, standing, and walking. All are suitable meditation postures. They are different ways of sitting. Again, there is this definitiveness of really taking your place, sitting up.

The Buddha says, "With one's body erect." Of course, if you're lying down, the body is not erect. But maybe erect also means a kind of internal uprightness, integrity, or confidence: "Yes, here, I'm going to practice."

So there's time, effort, and emphasis placed on gathering oneself together. For me, symbolically folding your legs together is a gathering together – coming here, being established here. I used to be able to sit full lotus, really cross-legged. There is a gathering together of the physical energies that seems to happen with this posture. It really helps you to definitively be here. Then, with that, the Buddha says:

*Ever mindful one breathes in. Ever mindful one breathes out.*

So here, ever mindful. That one establishes mindfulness is a fascinating idea. One establishes mindfulness to the forefront, and ever mindful one breathes in, and breathes out. This term "establishes mindfulness" is interesting – as opposed to saying, "Now you do mindfulness. Now you apply mindfulness. Now you are busy being mindful." Rather, establishing mindfulness has a very different connotation than doing mindfulness. I think of this as awareness. You don't *do* awareness, but you can establish yourself in awareness.

I'll give you an analogy, and then we'll stop. Imagine that you're a naturalist, and you've been told of an amazing bird that lives somewhere in the woods. The bird is very shy. If you want to see this amazing bird, it's important to go to a particular place – a clearing in the woods – and stand there very still. You have to be very patient. The bird can come from any direction. It can come from above, behind, the side, and even from below. The bird might suddenly appear, but it flies through very quickly. If you blink, you might miss it – and if you're too busy looking for it, you can't really see it. The very looking for it makes the mind too busy. You have to just stand there, and be very still, with all your senses open – establishing awareness, all your senses open, without doing too much looking or searching. Just be open to all your senses, so you're alert enough – and when the bird comes through, you're ready to see it there. If you spend your time daydreaming and thinking, you won't have your senses open enough to see the bird.

That's my analogy for this idea of establishing mindfulness, establishing awareness. And then: "Ever aware, one breathes in. Ever aware, one breathes out."

Since breathing is so close and intimate with the whole, inner experience of awareness – if awareness is established, then we become aware of breathing. This is a different feeling or these are different instructions than: "Now bore into your breathing" – like: "Be in the control tower; really apply yourself; and focus on the breathing."

It is strong attention to breathing, but it's through establishing attention, establishing awareness. When awareness is established in breathing in and breathing out, then the 16 stages of breathing begin – which we'll talk about tomorrow.

Thank you very much for today, and I look forward to tomorrow.