

Mindfulness of Breathing (6) Distinctions and Step 3

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Summary Keywords

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We are going to continue here on the Buddha's 16 steps of mindfulness of breathing. We are beginning to come into the third step. The first step is to train oneself to be present fully – as fully as one can – for the experience of the inhales and exhales. When the inhales and exhales are long, to experience them as long – to really be there in the experience. When they're short, to really be there in the experience of them being short.

I use the word 'experience' intentionally to make a distinction between trying too much to know, understand, or search – and to feel what's going on. Mindfulness is not a lot of work. It's more like dialing in to an old radio until you get just the right frequency, so you can hear clearly. You want to dial in to be really present and experience the body.

The first step is experiencing a long breath as a long breath. The second step is, when the breathing becomes shorter, to experience it as a shorter breath. So when the inhale or exhale is shorter, experience it as a shorter experience – a shorter breath. Here we're seeing two sets of distinctions being made. One is the distinction between the inhale and the exhale. The other is between these first two steps – between a long breath and a short breath.

I interpret this to mean – as we're sitting and meditating, and we get calmer and more centered – that the breathing begins to shift and change. The heartbeat maybe slows down. The breathing slows down. As the breathing slows down, it might not be as long. Of course, sometimes we're agitated, and the breath is very fast and short. Maybe the opposite of that is happening. As we sit down, the breath sometimes gets longer as we get more settled and relaxed.

But then later, you might find that the experience of breathing gets more subtle, shorter, and much more minute even. In deep meditation, there can be a sense of almost not breathing at all. This is partly because we hardly need to breathe anymore. We don't need much oxygen because we're not doing a lot. We're not being so active.

So we're making these distinctions. I keep using the word 'making,' but probably I shouldn't do that because experiencing distinctions is a huge part of Buddhism. Buddhism is really based on our natural capacity to see differences between one thing and another. We'll see this as we go through the 16 steps. Each of these steps is a new distinction – a new differentiation of things. We're experiencing things more fully, more precisely, and more clearly.

The beginning is just distinctions with the breathing. I also interpret this idea of experiencing the long breaths and short breaths as being an encouragement to really begin experiencing all the different qualities of sensations and experiences that come with each in-breath and out-breath. So whether it's fast or slow, whether the breath feels tight and held or loose and relaxed. The experience of expansion and contraction as the chest and belly expand and contract. The temperature in the nostrils changes with the in-breath and out-breath. The sense of sharpness sometimes on the in-breath – a sharp sensation – and softer on the out-breath. Sometimes the in-breath feels jagged, rough, and jerky. Sometimes it's a nice, smooth flow. It's the same with the exhale sometimes. So to begin entering into this world of breathing and really experiencing it more and more fully.

This is not meant to be work. I don't know if enjoyable is the right word, but it's similar to tasting food more fully and carefully, if you're really wanting to enjoy it. It's as if you are really going to enjoy the breath – you really feel it and sense it deeply.

As we settle fully in to the breathing, what it means is that we're no longer so distracted or caught up in our thoughts and preoccupations. It can take quite a while for us to really settle down to the breathing – being in the breathing. Coming back over and over again to the breathing. Letting go of our thoughts over and over again. It is said that it doesn't matter how often the mind wanders off. It only matters that every time you do so, you bring it back in a nice way and start over again. I love the expression “starting over.”

As we start over again repeatedly, the pull of thinking – the energy that goes into thinking – begins to abate. Thinking has less of a pull on us. We find ourselves settled more and more *here*, relaxed, calm, and in the present moment. As the mindfulness is working, we're not just getting calm. This is very important to understand. It's not just a process of using the breathing to get calmer and calmer. Because if we do that, the mind's sharpness to make natural distinctions and differentiations – to really feel things more fully and clearly – also begins to get dull.

So it's not just about getting calm. That's why we want to have a certain degree of calmness *and* alertness or clarity in the mind. As the mind gets more settled – more in the present, more *here*, and less distracted – we tend to start taking in more experiences of what's happening for ourselves in the present moment. We also start becoming aware of the wider range of experience in the body. For people practicing mindfulness of breathing, there's a natural tendency that as they settle, they experience their body more and more. There's more of a sense of embodiment and presence.

The third step of *ānāpānasati* is:

One trains oneself thus: breathing in, one experiences the whole body; breathing out, one experiences the whole body.

The idea of experiencing the *whole body* is that the awareness now becomes more inclusive. We might still be centered on the breathing, but the peripheral attention now begins experiencing more and more of the body. This happens for a variety of reasons. A primary one, as I just said, is because we're getting calmer, more relaxed, and less distracted.

Sometimes it's because, as we settle in, we become acutely aware of where the body is held tight. The tensions of the body become clearer and clearer. We become aware of the various tensions that we weren't aware of in daily life because we were so distracted and busy.

There's a phase of an honest meeting of all the holding patterns and tensions that we carry, which is a part of the meditation practice. Part of this opening up to the body is the body revealing itself and saying, "Hey, you! Look how tense I am. Include me. Pay attention to me too." Some of it is just a natural expansion of attention – to feel more and more.

For some people, this experience of the whole body is more limited to the whole experience of the breath – what's called the “breath body” – the full range of how the body experiences the breath, which changes as we breathe in and breathe out. All the ways in which we sense the diaphragm, belly, chest, nostrils, back of the throat – all the things that together are the “breath body.” Some people interpret this to mean the whole body itself. We're breathing now with the whole body. It's like the whole body is breathing with us.

There are many ways in which experiencing the body comes into play at this third step. We'll talk about this for the next days. Mindfulness of the body is very central to Buddhism as a whole – to early Buddhism, to the teachings of the Buddha. It's very important for this deepening process of breath in the 16 steps. It turns out the more we can be embodied, the easier it is to access, experience, and receive the deeper benefits of meditation. So it's well worth spending time with mindfulness of the body, and to really learn to appreciate this more and more deeply.

As we continue this journey of breath, I'm hoping to lay out all kinds of different angles for appreciating the breathing more and more. Maybe some of what I teach here about breathing will seem a little bit uninteresting, but it's the sum total of all these things together – as we take them in and know them – that will have a wider and wider range of connecting us to the present moment, the breathing, and meditation. It's the whole package – both what's interesting and not interesting – that can help us begin opening up into this wonderful journey of meditation.

Thank you, and I look forward to being here with you again tomorrow.