

# Mindfulness of Breathing (8) Four Dimensions of Breathing

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

*ānāpānasati*, breathing, breath, sensations, mind, body, horizontal dimension, vertical dimension, aware, meditation, mindfulness, awareness, embodied, present moment, time dimension, breath body, mind dimension

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We'll continue with the topic of the Buddha's 16 stages of mindfulness of breathing. I want to repeat something I said at the beginning of the guided meditation: to really appreciate the value of how breathing sits at the crossroads of so much of our lives. Breathing is a valuable reference point for understanding our lives. It helps to delve deeply into or rest in the experience of breathing. The deeper we go, or the more concentrated we become, the more mindfulness of breathing brings together, processes together, and opens up to many different areas and aspects of our lives.

Breathing is, in a sense, a microcosm for understanding our lives. There are many dimensions to the experience of breathing. The horizontal dimension is one of the four dimensions I mentioned earlier. This is the spread of sensations throughout the body related to breathing – the sensations as the body moves, as the diaphragm moves, as the lungs fill with oxygen, and then as we let the air out.

The horizontal dimension is how we become aware of the sensations of breathing in the body in a deeper and fuller way. We have intimacy with them. It's like we're entering into the sensations of the breath, and fully feeling each of the particular sensations that come into play. We're not straining to feel them. We just become more and more receptive to the sensations. This dimension of sensation shows itself to us more and more. It's kind of a sensory awareness exercise. We're not following the air or the breath itself, even though we might use that language. *Vipassanā* is really the sensations of breathing that we're receiving, taking in, and experiencing.

The vertical dimension is how we feel connected to the movements of the body, and even to the places where there is no movement – where things are held, and maybe there's resistance. The vertical dimension is feeling the whole impact of breathing in a particular moment, anywhere it might be experienced.

The time dimension is how we follow the experience of breathing through time – the continuity of attention, the continuity of appreciation of the breath, unbroken by the mind that pulls us away in distraction. If we can stay with the breath through time deeply and well, then it's almost as if time disappears, even though there is continuity through time – continuity with the whole cycle of in-breath and out-breath.

If the breathing is fast and rapid, then we feel very few sensations as we're inhaling and exhaling. It's not wrong to breathe fast and experience almost no sensations. That's just the way it is now, and we feel it that way. As we settle in more and more deeply and get calmer, there is a tendency for the breathing to slow down. As it slows, there's more time to experience one inhale and one exhale.

When I was younger, I sometimes did a checklist approach to mindfulness of breathing. I used a mental note to represent the rising or falling of the breath – in and out. I noted it at the beginning of the inhale, as if it was a duty. When I said, "Rising," then I knew that I had done my job. I wouldn't pay attention to the rest of the inhale, because I had checked it off – done that. Then I was aware of the beginning of the exhale – and I checked that off too. I would drift off in thought, and, hopefully, I came back soon enough. What I learned was not to have that checklist approach – not to be content with just a cursory awareness of the in-breath and out-breath. I learned to really stay with the whole length of each breath.

Sometimes it's a feeling that I'm staying with it. Sometimes it's more a feeling that it's staying with me – or I'm just receiving it, letting it come. It's appropriate to have both options with the different states of mind we have.

Sometimes it may seem hopeless to stay with the breath. We try to stay with it, and direct ourselves to really stay there, but the mind seems intent on pulling us away. At other times, staying there with the breath in a directed way is little too forceful or active. It may be a strain. And to really relax deeply, it's better to be in a receptive mode, and to just receive the breath. This allows for continuity of attention through time, which is the time dimension.

The mind dimension, the awareness dimension, is how we use the mind with the breath – directed or receptive, spacious or intimate. Are we closely there at the heart of each sensation? Or observing the breath from a distance, like riding the waves of breathing? These are all ways of being with the mind as we breathe. This dimension is also being worked on and adjusted. Some of the adjusting is done unconsciously, and some of it is done as we settle in and get concentrated. It's like the whole system is adjusting itself.

It's remarkable to watch the changes over time in the mind, the breathing, and the body – as we enter into this tenderness, intimacy, and continuity with breathing over time. This is called the "breath body." This is where we fully experience all the different aspects of breathing. We experience the continuity of the whole in-breath and the whole out-breath over time. We feel how the breath comes into play in different parts of the body. We experience continuity from the beginning, middle, and end of the in-breath and the out-breath. We experience the breath throughout the body, or sometimes just in a particular spot.

A spot that I often notice is right around the belly. It's sometimes just below the belly button, and sometimes a little above it. It moves and shifts as I get more concentrated. Sometimes my attention to breathing goes up to my chest, and stays there. My body seems to partially direct where my attention goes. I just follow it wherever it seems predominant – or most alive – as I'm sitting and meditating. Sometimes I experience the whole breath body – a beautiful experience of expansion and contraction, like bellows or a balloon being blown up and then being released.

The more we're familiar with and resting with the breathing, then at some point, the experience of the third step of mindfulness of breathing – experiencing the whole body breathing in, and the whole body breathing out – spills over into parts of the body that are not directly connected to breathing. This is partly because the mind is getting more settled and less distracted. It's like turning on a light bulb in the mind. The light of awareness gets turned on. It's ready to shine and take in all the different aspects of present moment experience. In one way or another, we become more and more aware of our body over time.

When you're a beginner, sometimes the body is uncomfortable. You start feeling the tensions of the body. As you become more settled with greater awareness, your psychophysical system becomes more sensitive. You become more and more aware of the tensions and the holding patterns in the body. Rather than being upset about this, I'd encourage you to feel grateful for it. It's much, much better to know you have tension, than to have tension and not really know it. It's much better to really feel it, and be present for it, than to ignore it, even when it's uncomfortable.

The art of breath meditation is to learn how to include the whole embodied experience as part of the meditation. We become more and more embodied as we breathe. Then, as the practice deepens, the body begins to recede. So there's a period of time when the body becomes very embodied and full – and then the body recedes from being the central focus and gets lighter than how it was at the beginning.

So the third step of *ānāpānasati* is:

*One trains oneself: breathing in, experiencing the whole breath body. One trains oneself: breathing out, one experiencing the whole breath body.*

There are all these different dimensions to experiencing the whole breath body – whether it's the guided tour of the breath we did yesterday, the experience of breathing everywhere in the body, or the experience of the breath body that's continuous through time. Whatever you're doing, I hope you enjoy it. Have the idea in the back of your mind that this is not meant to be grim, or for there to be pushing.

Keep in mind that there is no failure with mindfulness of breathing. You can't fail. You can't do it wrong. Don't bother judging or comparing yourself with anyone else.

Maybe the worst that can happen is that your mind drifts off a lot, and you can hardly be with your breathing. But being with your breathing is not really the point. The point is to be aware of what's really happening right here in this present moment. So if you become much more aware of the power of the mind to wander off in thought – because you're trying to stay with the breathing – then the meditation has succeeded.

If you're able to stay with the breath through time, the meditation has also succeeded. As long as you're aware of and notice what's happening, then it's a success. If you drift off and are lost in thought – so lost in thought that you don't even know you're lost in thought – then there's no problem. You're too lost to know. As soon as you wake up from that, and you're aware that you've been lost in thought, there's no problem either. Now you're aware again.

I like to say there are no problems in meditation. You can't do it wrong. If you're in the present moment and you judge yourself – "I'm doing it wrong" – then, at that moment, you have enough wherewithal to simply be aware. Without that simple awareness, you wouldn't have made that judgment.

That's my little plug to enjoy this practice. Don't take it all too seriously. Settle in, and become more and more interested in your breath and breathing.

As I said yesterday, you will benefit a lot in meditation if you make it a daily practice to check in with your breathing throughout the day. Do a three-minute meditation or a three-breath meditation. Meditate sitting at a traffic light. Look for lots of opportunities to come back to your breathing, so it becomes more and more of a habit. If you do that, then all you're learning about mindfulness of breathing will benefit your life tremendously.

Thank you all very much.