

Mindfulness of Breathing (14) Feeling Calmness

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Gil Fronsdal

In the last couple of weeks, we've gone through the first four steps of *ānāpānasati*. The first step is to be aware when we're breathing in a long inhale, to know it's a long inhale. When we're breathing out a long exhale, to know it's a long exhale. It may seem rather simplistic, boring, or "What's the point of doing that?" But I take it to mean becoming aware of greater attention, sensitivity, and understanding of the physical experience of breathing – how it is.

It's such a valuable way of establishing attention, getting focused, and taking our mind away from our preoccupations and concerns of the day. To center ourselves in something that is considered extremely wholesome in Buddhism – the wholesome attention to just breathing. It might seem simplistic to just focus on the sensations and experience of breathing, but we'll see in the 16 steps how it opens up to a whole new world.

The second step is when we're breathing in a short inhale or a short exhale, to know that's what it is. So again, see the changes. As we settle in, and get more concentrated and settled, our breathing begins to shift and change. One of the more common changes is that if you sit down and have big, fast breathing, then as you settle, the breathing becomes more subtle and relaxed. There tend to be slower and shorter breaths at first.

As we settle more, there's a natural way in which we tend to become more and more aware of the body – to awaken a sensitivity to the body. As we do so, we start becoming aware of more than just the sensations of breathing. It might be the global experience of breathing or of being in the body. It isn't so much an exercise, like "now go and search." But rather, to go along with and support the expansion of attention in the present moment, which begins to encompass our physicality, our embodied experience.

As we're more familiar with the body, at some point we can feel that now it's time to relax – to bring some tranquility, to release some of our tension. Then we do that, and in a sense, we start over again. I like to think of it not so much as a technique, "Do A, B, and C," but rather, as a recognition of a natural movement as we get more and more settled, "Oh, now I'm here. Now I'm here."

After we're relaxed, it's good not to be thinking, "What's next?" But rather, to sense it more, and settle in more. Now, experience what the breathing is like more deeply. Let the experience of being embodied become fuller – as it grows in tranquility, where calmness can begin to set in.

The fourth step is calming or relaxing the bodily formations – the bodily activity, the way tensions are held in the body. I like the word 'relaxing,' although it might be better sometimes to have the notion of calming, when we can't actually release some of the holding patterns in the body. It might be frustrating if that's what we're trying to do.

But it might be possible to calm the body. Calming is a little different from releasing tension. Calming is more like suffusion – suffusing a sense of tranquility, ease, settledness, and peacefulness, which can also suffuse this body. So whatever way this calming is – calming of the body, tranquilizing of the body, relaxing of the body – it's the fourth step.

The last step of each of the next tetrads – the groups of four practices up to the sixteenth – belongs to the family of letting go and releasing. In *ānāpānasati*, we will see a pattern. As we come to the fourth step of each tetrad, we come to a place of transition – a certain kind of release, freedom, liberation, and letting go that becomes

possible. It's a natural transition. When something has released or relaxed, we can then go on to the next point, and do the whole thing over again at a deeper level, or in a more fully, embodied way.

With the fourth step, we become calm and tranquil. Then, as a good preparation for the second tetrad, we relax the body, and let the body become more tranquil, settled, and calm. Or if we just feel like we're getting more settled and calm as we're meditating, without any doing on our part – it's useful to experience and feel that more fully.

Don't just recognize, "Oh, it's nice that I'm calm," and then go back to your breathing. Take the time to feel the fullness. Feel the experience of what it's like to soften, relax, and become calmer.

A very important part of these first steps of *ānāpānasati* into the second tetrad is the word 'experience.' Maybe we could use the English word 'feel' – to really feel and experience what's happening. There is an embodied or physical sensing. It's not thinking about it, analyzing it, or reflecting upon it. But it's a lot about dropping in, and allowing ourselves to feel and sense what is going on with the body.

As we get calmer and more settled, we take time to feel and sense what that experience is like. "How is that in the body?" Not trying to make more of it *per se*. But just let it register. Take it in. Be nourished by it, supported by it. Let it be a little encouragement, "Oh, this is good! This is so good. But let me not linger too much. Let me not savor this. That's going too far. But let me feel it in a full way, and let me be encouraged now to really settle further into my breathing." And maybe go through these first four steps again.

I simplify the four steps [into three] by saying: "One is to become familiar with the breathing, the sensations, the experience of breathing. Two is to start becoming aware of more of the global experience in the body breathing, and open up the attention to feel more peripherally what's happening as we breathe. Three is to relax, settle, and calm the body."

Be careful – when we have the idea that this is a progression of particular practices, it can be easy to get caught up in the idea that it's a project, a set technique, paint by numbers or something. This can be okay, but don't get caught in it, or be in a hurry. Don't have expectations about how quickly it's supposed to unfold. Even the very first two steps of *ānāpānasati* are worth doing for a full sitting a whole week, a whole month, or a whole year. Chances are, if you do that, the other steps of *ānāpānasati* will just find you when you're ready. You don't have to get ahead of yourself so much.

If the first steps of *ānāpānasati*, which we've done the last couple of weeks, are nice for you, you can cycle through them in an easy, relaxed way, and settle. Maybe it can be a bit of a spiral as you go through them – come back to the beginning, and go through them again. It's like you're getting more and more settled, concentrated, and here in the present moment. More attentive.

One of the new practices or ideas for today is the idea that when you do relax, and there is calming of the body, take a little time to really allow yourself to feel the affect and effect of it. Feel the consequences of calming. Feel the goodness of it. If there's pleasure, feel the pleasure of it. So you're more able to use that to be even more embodied – more present here. Experience it more fully.

As you go through the next twenty-four hours, I assume for many of you there will be all kinds of small ways that you will find yourself getting tense, holding your shoulders, contracting, getting caught up in something. When that happens, practice releasing, and soften in your body. Then take some time to feel what happens as you do so. What are the consequences of that? What is the goodness and the pleasure of that?

It can be a little bit of a challenge to do this, because we can get tense when things around us are exciting or something important is going on. It's like, "I have to get back to what's important," and then we go back to being tense. But if you take time to feel the goodness of relaxing – maybe you can find another way to participate in the activities of your life that are not so tense.

May you practice well today. May your relaxation and calmness be such that you're ready to support and offer your goodwill to all people today – especially everyone in the United States, no matter how they're feeling about the events of today. Thank you so much, and I look forward to our time tomorrow.