

Mindfulness of Breathing (15) Supported by Pleasure

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There are a variety of stepping stones we are crossing and developing on this path of mindfulness of breathing. One of them is to really be present in our experience as it actually is. To have a higher, quality clarity of presence, where the mind, attention, and thoughts are not wandering off away from the present. We're really at rest, at ease, or established here.

To do that, it is helpful to develop concentration. To develop concentration, it's helpful to cultivate happiness. To develop happiness, it's helpful to cultivate tranquility. To cultivate tranquility, it's helpful to relax. To relax, but not to become completely limp. But rather, to be dignified and upright – here, really present, and relaxed.

We can ride the edge of that – sometimes too relaxed, sometimes too alert. We're operating there, finding where that balance is for us. One of the things to notice as we relax and calm the bodily formations – the fourth step of *ānāpānasati* – is the pleasure, or what's pleasing, or the well-being that comes from that.

Exactly what the right word is may be very personal. But some of the good feelings that can come from being with breathing include settling in the present moment, and letting tranquility, ease, and relaxation develop.

One of the means or stepping stones to that pleasure is to allow yourself to feel the goodness – feel the positive feelings that come from being calm and tranquil – from relaxing. Feeling the good feelings of this can be a singular moment of relaxing muscular tension, softening the shoulders. Rather than having the mind race off to the next important thing to think about now that they're relaxed, linger a little in that relaxation, and feel the goodness of it. Feel the pleasure of it, the good feeling, the ease, lightening, or whatever it might be. Feel that positive feeling there.

As you settle in meditation and your mind is not so agitated and caught up in thoughts, allow yourself to feel in the present moment the goodness of that – how it feels pleasant – the pleasure, positive feelings, and satisfaction of it. Not so much that you're evaluating it as satisfactory. But whatever the *felt* sense, the embodied feelings may be: "Ahh! That's good. This is so much better." You begin opening the nerves in your muscles and skin to really take in the feeling of well-being or the positive feelings there might be.

The third step of *ānāpānasati* – the third step of the first tetrad is:

Breathing in experiencing the whole body. Breathing out experiencing the whole body.

One of the benefits from beginning to expand the attention to feel the experience of breathing globally – or to globally experience the breath – is that it gives you a larger capacity to feel pleasure. To feel the goodness and positive feeling that come with getting settled, calm, tranquil, and relaxing further and further. Increasing our capacity to feel pleasure and well-being is one of the stepping stones – one of the things we're cultivating here in this practice.

We're developing a greater focus on and familiarity with breathing, getting to know the breathing more. Coming back from the wandering mind. Coming back here. Feeling more fully what's here, the global body, and then relaxing the bodily activity – settling it. All along, it's helpful to keep letting go of the thoughts that take us away. Because some sense of well-being and healthy pleasure is so important for this process, you also want to be very careful, if you can, not to make it unpleasant. Not to have an unpleasant reaction to your mind wandering off. Not to jerk your mind back to the breathing. Or to be in a hurry, as if it was an unpleasant duty. Or to feel like

you're being reprimanded: "You did something wrong." Or, "You come back here, and sit in the corner of the room, and just look at your breathing."

But rather, to look and see how you can come back to the present moment, come back to your breathing. And how you can stay there with a mindset, an orientation in the mind, that just enjoys the whole thing – so that when you notice your mind wandering off, you appreciate noticing it. "Oh, this is wise. This is good. To know that I'm drifting off in thought and lost is a really good thing. How lucky I am! I've seen it!"

If you have enough ability to criticize or reproach yourself for wandering off in thought, you have all the attention you need to be present. Because a certain kind of being present is there when you notice you're wandering off. So rather than reproaching yourself, you can congratulate yourself, "Oh look, I woke up. Great! I noticed I was thinking." This a little more uplifting rather than discouraging, even if it's 10,000 times in a sitting.

To welcome the mind back to the breathing, float the mind back, invite the breathing back into the attention. In the transition from having been lost in thought to beginning again with the breathing – can you find a way to do that so that it's enjoyable for you? You're happy to do it. You feel lucky and fortunate. "Wow. I get to use my attention in a way that really welcomes me back to breathing. Or is welcomed by the breathing. I can move slowly. I can feel that I have some efficacy and agency. I can use that to gently, lovingly establish myself with the breathing."

Maybe the general idea of what I'm saying here is understandable. How you do it is really up to you – to experiment and find a way that's appropriate for you. A way that gives you a sense of enjoyment and well-being in the engagement with it.

We're allowed to feel pleasure in meditation, to enjoy it. We're allowed to feel the joy, happiness, and well-being that can be there. The art of this is to do so without clinging, without spending a lot of time savoring it, working on it, holding on to it, or luxuriating in it. We want to relate to the pleasures and well-being that come with meditation with matter-of-factness and simplicity. But we also want to experience them.

This is a tremendous support for staying in the present moment, because the mind is more likely to want to stay in the moment if it's tuning into what's enjoyable. It doesn't want to be in the present very much if most of what we're aware of is unpleasant.

This middle way allows us to experience well-being, but we don't cling to it. We don't pump it up. We don't try to make too much out of it. Just enough so that it keeps us in the present moment, keeps us going. So, breathing, pleasure, and well-being.

As we get ready to end this little session together, I'd like to suggest that most of us don't avail ourselves of the well-being and pleasure that's already here. We don't take the time to notice or appreciate the small pleasures or the small senses of well-being.

Maybe there's some way that you can take the time through the day to appreciate small pleasures, small satisfactions, small senses of well-being, and small delights. You might start noticing that there is much more pleasure available than you realize, because you're caught up in projects, doing, thoughts, and all kinds of things.

Take time to feel pleasure, so that you begin to feel more comfortable staying in the present moment with your experience. In doing so, maybe your life will become richer, and not poorer. Maybe a poor life is one that spends too much time thinking about things.

I hope you explore this area of pleasure, enjoyment, and well-being because this becomes a theme as we continue with the next steps of *ānāpānasati*. So spend some time familiarizing yourself with these good feelings and your attitude towards them – or your avoidance of them. They set the stage for the next steps of *ānāpānasati*.

Thank you very much.