

Mindfulness of Breathing (17) Fifth Step: Well-being

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We are continuing with this teaching on the Buddha's instructions for mindfulness of breathing. We are beginning to move into what's called the second tetrad – the second group of four steps in this practice. It clearly builds on the earlier steps. While the first tetrad is very much about the body – really being rooted and centered in our body – the second tetrad is about becoming more attuned to some of the feelings we have as we meditate.

So not just the sensations of the body, but what in English we call feelings. They're not quite emotions, but certainly inclusive of emotions. In particular, we start becoming aware of the pleasant sensations, pleasant feelings, and feelings of well-being, which can well up.

You have to be very careful about this. You're not expected to have feelings of well-being, joy, and happiness every time you sit down to meditate. That is unrealistic. The first steps of *ānāpānasati* can be the foundation. When I haven't felt happy or have felt challenged or upset in some way, I've benefited so much from just sitting and being content – just breathing with it. Sit, breathe, and settle. Allow that natural settling and connecting to the body – just being in the body.

I love composting the difficult emotions I have in my body. What that means is to feel the difficulty, to recognize what I'm feeling is difficult. And then feel how it is *in* the body. If there's anger or sadness, feel how it's expressed in the body. Come back and let the body compost it. Let the body feel and process it. It's a way of getting out of the way. In a sense, if I'm in my thoughts and stories, I'm just churning, spinning, and reinforcing it. Rather, allow the *body* to process difficult feelings.

The body is not just a physical body. The body is intimately connected to the mind, heart, and how things get processed. We have amazing processing capacity if we allow it. So, feel the difficulty. Breathe with it. Be with it, and feel it. Breathe. Breathe – nothing more. At times, there may not be any particularly difficult emotions or painful sensations – or as we abide in them, they might not hurt anymore.

We're just sitting *here*. At some point, we're soft, relaxed, and centered enough, in the present moment enough, that we start experiencing *feelings* of well-being. That's when the second tetrad kicks in. We only start becoming aware of this next tetrad when we start to experience some beginnings of good feelings in the body. There can be a variety of these – feeling calm, settled, holistic, present with it all, inclusive. There might be feelings of joy, delight, or happiness that well up from the inside.

Sometimes these develop and become quite strong. Some people use the word 'ecstasy' when these feelings are strong, but it's probably not the best word. Some people have pointed out that ecstasy means "being outside of oneself." In Buddhist meditation, however, it's more of an 'intasy.' It's more like being *in* ourselves. It's something that wells up from the inside.

We're really present. That's why the beginning – the first tetrad – is to be really grounded and rooted *here*. We do this over and over again, so that it's second nature. It's like being really comfortable and at ease *here* in this body. We're preparing the body to be the receptacle for meditative well-being, which is physical in nature. It wells up from the inside.

This idea of welling up from the inside is expressed in a metaphor the Buddha uses. That metaphor is a lake – a mountain lake maybe – where there are no streams bringing water into the lake. There is also no rain bringing

water into the lake. But rather there is an underwater spring, a fountain, that flows into the lake. The underground spring is where the lake gets refreshed. Water flows into the bottom of the lake – and up from the inside out. So there's no water coming from the outside.

This is a sense of well-being that is not dependent on getting what you want in life – winning the lottery, getting a present, having a nice experience, eating some tasty food, or having the weather be just right. For many people, their idea of happiness comes from success, and getting what they want in the world. In meditation, we give up wanting, and having our happiness depend on getting what we want. We settle, relax, and deepen, *here*. Rather than getting something that makes us happy – something external, or some reward system where we get something and therefore we feel happy – a very different kind of well-being begins welling up from the inside out.

It's well-being that has nothing to do with getting any of our wishes. It is something internal, which is not dependent on anything in the world being just right or a particular way. It's very empowering or relieving to experience this, because we then have access to a sense of happiness, well-being, contentment, and calm – just feeling good in ourselves, which doesn't require anything from the world around us.

In fact, when we sit and meditate, there might be uncomfortable sounds or things happening in the environment. But we're no longer connected to or concerned with that. This makes space for inner well-being to begin welling up. It certainly requires letting go of a lot of thinking about the world – thinking about what we want, what we don't want, and navigating the whole world of stories and ideas about all these things. All those stories express a kind of dependency on the world being a particular way.

Of course, we should fix, clean up, and take care of the world – at times. But it's okay not to do that when we're meditating. Meditating is a time when we can put all that aside – so that we can let the yeast of meditation begin to bubble, percolate, expand, and grow.

The first tetrad is making ourselves a receptacle that can receive and allow. When feelings of well-being arise, the instructions are to experience that well-being. The particular word in the fifth step is 'joy.' Sometimes joy is a bit too high a bar for people, or may be a word that some people struggle with. "Where do I feel that joy? What is it?" So I prefer the word 'well-being' initially.

A sense of good calm can be one of well-being – a sense of appreciation, valuing, coziness, intimacy, being present. A sense of well-being can arise for a number of reasons. But in the practice of *ānāpānasati*, this particular well-being becomes more salient with concentration on breathing. A certain intimacy and rapport with the breath. It isn't the breathing itself. People wonder, "Why should I still be with the breathing? Breathing is boring."

Breathing is not just physical. It's somehow intimately connected to our mind, heart and emotional patterns. It's a rich nexus of all the different crossroads of our inner life, which meet at breathing. One of the things that happens as we get closer and closer to just cruising with the breath – riding the waves of breath, or just staying connected to breathing – is we start getting concentrated. That concentration begins shifting the nature of breathing, and the feelings and sensations there. There's an intermingling, or a way in which the well-being of being concentrated infuses the breath with a certain kind of pleasure. That pleasure encourages or cultivates the mind to be more focused on breathing.

There's an analogy I like to use of stroking a cat. As long as you're stroking the cat, the cat purrs. But if you take your hand away, it stops purring. So as long as we stay connected to breathing in a concentrated, relaxed, soft way, at some point – and it might be some point further down the line – there starts to be a biofeedback system, where the very way in which we're concentrating, staying grounded, stroking the breath, or being stroked by the breath starts to give birth to a certain kind of well-being.

It's very important – I'll say it again: don't be in a hurry for this to happen. Be content with the first tetrad. But when it does happen, recognize it. Here, in the Buddha's instructions, you're allowed to feel well-being. You're taught to feel the joy, delight, or goodness that comes from practice.

There might be a lot of other feelings. There might be feelings of pain, or physical or emotional discomfort. But there's something more encompassing – an inclusive awareness that comes along with a sense of contentment, calm, joy, or appreciation – that holds all that.

We're beginning to get a sense of presence, attention, and well-being that is not dependent on the details of our life. This is revolutionary – to begin to realize you can feel sad or angry, or feel pain – *and* you can have a sense of well-being, which is bigger than that. It begins shifting the focus and preoccupation from the details of anger, resentment, or desire as the locus of what we focus on – to leaving those things alone, and focusing on something that is more encompassing – such as calm, ease, joy, or delight.

It's possible that you don't quite understand what I'm saying. That's okay. Don't be too concerned about it. But over these next days, we'll begin easing into the area of the second tetrad, and maybe you'll use your intuition or imagination to follow along. Or maybe you'll have some life experience that helps you relate to what we're talking about.

You'll learn these steps. Over time, you'll learn when they're relevant for you, and when you can follow along with them. When it's the right time, you will move into this on your own.

In the next days, we'll look at well-being, joy, and happiness in meditation. I'm certainly happy and delighted to share this with you. Hopefully a little of my joy will be contagious, and will support you as we go into these next steps of mindfulness of breathing. Thank you.