

Mindfulness of Breathing (20) Absorbed in Breathing

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Today we'll continue with the topic of *ānāpānasati*: mindfulness of breathing in and mindfulness of breathing out. We're now moving into the territory of the second tetrad where we train to experience joy as we breathe in, and experience joy as we breathe out. We then train to experience happiness as we breathe in, and experience happiness as we breathe out.

What the sixteen steps of *ānāpānasati* have in common is mindfulness while breathing in and mindfulness while breathing out. There is a connection to the rhythm of breathing in and out. As we move into the joy and happiness steps of *ānāpānasati* – the sense of wellness and well-being that comes along – I think it's important to remember how important this rhythm of breathing in and breathing out is.

As I've said, continuity of breathing can keep us in the present moment. Breathing is always a present moment experience. It keeps us moving along in the present. But it's also inconstant. There's discontinuity because the inbreath is only there while you're breathing in, and the outbreath is only there while you're breathing out. One leads to the other. There's a rhythm of one after the other. The sensations at the beginning of the inbreath are different from those at the end of the inbreath. The sensations at the beginning of the outbreath are different from those at the end of the outbreath.

There's a constant change of sensations and movement experienced in the body. Sometimes if we're focusing mostly on a little spot in the chest or the belly, we can feel the changing texture of sensations there. If we're aware more broadly, we might feel the changing sensations in places that are activated as we breathe.

So there's both constancy and inconstancy with mindfulness of breathing. There's constancy with the rhythm of breathing, and inconstancy with all the pieces and subsets of it coming and going.

We can't hold on to any part of the breathing without causing problems. If you hold on to the exhale, you never inhale, and then you run out of breath. The same thing happens if you hold on to the inhale. Some people prioritize, for example, that they really don't want to let go at the top. It can be very subtle.

Some people come to the top of the inhale, and they don't really want to give up anything. They kind of have a policy of holding on to everything. They want things for themselves. Some people don't like to start the exhale because it's a kind of letting go. There's a subtle resistance to letting go.

People can very subtly get a little anxious especially at the end of the exhale. Or there's a very subtle attitude maybe at the beginning of the inbreath: "No, I don't want to breathe in. It's just a bother. It's more work. Leave me alone. There's enough input coming my way."

So there can be very subtle attitudes that operate in the cycles of breathing when we get to that little bit of holding, resistance, or triggering of thoughts of fear or aversion. If you're really attentive, you can see in that cycle when some psychological thing is triggered occasionally. Don't try too hard to look for it, but it can be there a little bit.

Or if you start thinking about something else – a major preoccupying issue – you can feel the breath getting held. You're still breathing in and out, but maybe it's all chest breathing and the belly is tight. There's some holding going on.

But if you stay with the inconstancy in the flow of breathing – remembering that this is constantly letting go, opening up, releasing, softening, and allowing for the flow – it's a protection from getting attached to anything, getting hooked too much on things, or getting caught in thoughts or reactivity. It's a way of keeping us limber, relaxed, loose, or not so caught. It's by degrees, so don't think it's all or nothing. Slowly, the breathing begins to massage us, and begins to support letting go.

With time, as the breathing becomes more like a slow and easy flow, tuning into the breathing becomes a little like sitting at the edge of a river, watching the rippling of the water flowing down the river. Sometimes we can spend a long time looking at the changing patterns of the water flow. The patterns are not that different from each other, but they're changing. It's also like looking at a fire. To watch a fire can be very relaxing. We're not necessarily trying to quiet our mind or stop thinking about anything. But by letting that be the way the mind and the attention gets absorbed and flowing, something gets quieter and stiller.

The same thing happens with time. As the breathing becomes more relaxed, loose, open, and flowing, and we can be with the inconstancy and the constancy – the inconstancy of the little wavelets of breathing on top of the constancy of the flow of the river of breathing – we get absorbed and pulled into it.

It's not like we're looking at the surface of the water. What we're doing is feeling and sensing all the sensations that come alive as we breathe. Especially, as we really get settled into the present moment and stay with the rhythm and flow of breathing, pleasant sensations get born. They can take the form of contentment, pleasure, joy, delight, happiness, a sense of goodness, a glow, warmth. I know I'm repeating things, but I think they're worth repeating.

Everyone will experience this a little differently. Some people might feel a glow in their chest as they settle into breathing. Some people might feel warmth, or something good in their belly. Some people may feel intense and joyful tingling, a delight in the nostrils as the air goes in and out. When the sharpness of joy and pleasure gets more and more intense, it's almost a thrill.

There might be a sense of locationless thrill throughout the body that comes as you really settle in and get absorbed, as you might get absorbed watching a river.

My first experience of being absorbed and feeling the goodness of it was when I was about ten years old. We lived on the outskirts of a little town in Italy. I took a public bus to go to school in town. My bus stop was right near the end of the line. There was a driver, and there was a conductor who sold the tickets. The conductor went up and down the aisle selling tickets as people got on board. When we got far enough outside of the city, no new people would get on the bus. The conductor then sat in a particular seat and did the accounting of all the different tickets he sold: round trip, one way, children, senior citizens. He had a ledger that he wrote in. I learned that if I sat in a particular seat behind him, looked over his shoulder, and watched him do the accounting of the tickets, I would start feeling so good. I would feel warm, and my chest would glow with delight and joy. I felt content, safe, and settled. Just watching him, everything was right in the universe. I had no idea why. I'd never thought about it. I just knew that if I sat there, I'd have this really good feeling.

Many years later when I started meditating, I realized that I was getting absorbed in the very simple thing that the conductor was doing. Maybe I was tapping into his concentration when working. Somehow, I was getting absorbed with the movement of his pencil on the paper and his focus on it. I wasn't trying to get concentrated. I didn't know I was getting absorbed. It was just my world getting so content, happy, and settled watching him, his pencil, and his ledger.

Maybe this story captures a little the sense of what's possible in breath meditation as we get into the fifth and sixth steps of *ānāpānasati*. We're not trying too hard. It's almost like we're just sitting back and watching on a nice, quiet day. Nothing to do, nothing to be. Just watching the river or the conductor writing in his ledger on the bus. And allowing ourselves to include the good feelings that come with that.

Remember, these feelings don't come automatically or right away. The first four steps of *ānāpānasati* are always the default. The basic default is the first two steps – becoming familiar with the breathing, and developing a capacity to stay in the present moment with one's experience.

We are always going back to the beginning. You might go back to the beginning multiple times during some sittings. It was one way in the beginning, and then you're back near the beginning at the end. Who knows all the ways that things can change in our mind and body?

Don't have some idea that it's linear. Don't have some idea that it has to be a certain way. Don't be in a rush. But when you're settled and present enough, at some point, the fifth and sixth steps might be relevant. If so, gently allow yourself to be absorbed in that, and feel the goodness of it. Let the breathing in and breathing out – that rhythm always going on – keep you from getting attached or wanting, and keep you loose and limber in the mind. Staying with that flow in and out.

Then letting the rhythm of breathing in and out move through or with the goodness that's there as well. Let that grow and be expansive so it can include all the challenges. The challenges are there in a relaxed way without us needing to be preoccupied with them, caught by them, or needing to fix them.

I hope you'll feel contentment. Perhaps the assignment for the next twenty-four hours can be to look for opportunities to have contentment in your day. I suspect if you do that, even for a minute or so, you'll find more opportunities. Look for them and hang out with them a little. That contentment in your daily life might support you to feel this meditative goodness and contentment that supports a deepening of practice.

Thank you very much, and I look forward to our time tomorrow.