

Mindfulness of Breathing (21) Q&A on Breath Meditation

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Before going further with *ānāpānasati*, the practice of mindfulness of breathing, I thought we would start over in a slightly different way with the most basic aspects of the practice.

Over the past weeks, I've offered subtly different ways of working with the breath. You don't have to remember all of them. Some ways will work for you or inspire you, and that can become a basis for how you practice. Perhaps offering a wide range of ways of being with the breathing will make it more likely that you'll find something. You may be able to piece together parts of it – the subtle, different ways of being with the breathing, working with the breathing, meditation, and the breath.

Today I want to stay really basic rather than move further on with the steps. In some ways, we are going slowly through the steps, and in other ways we're going fast. It might be ideal to spend a year going through all the steps.

On Monday, we'll continue with the next steps. The next steps are quite fascinating and significant for working with this meditation practice. But, before we go on, I want to take some questions from you. We've been doing this breath meditation for a few weeks. It would be nice if a few of you had a chance to ask some questions. You can put them in the chat, and I'll try to respond. Hopefully the questions will be relevant and interesting for many of you. It's interesting for me to get some feedback, to learn about the kinds of questions or challenges you have – or the joys you may have.

There are a lot of chat questions. I'm not able to follow them in order because they pass by so quickly. We can think of this as if I'm pulling questions out of a hat, rather than taking them in sequence.

Q1: "I experience anxiety."

I think anxiety comes from the Greek word, to 'choke' – to not be able to breathe fully. Working the edge of where the breathing is held or resisted can sometimes be helpful with anxiety – expanding and relaxing it.

Q2: "How can this help with severe chronic pain?"

This might not help, but there are plenty of people who find that breath meditation can help with severe pain. Certainly, I have had lots of severe pain in meditation. It's surprising to discover that it's possible to feel joy and pain at the same time. It's possible to be calm and feel pain at the same time. It's like two different aspects of our being.

If we identify too much with the pain or become too preoccupied with it – that influences the inner state of how we are. However, if we don't identify with it or aren't too preoccupied with it – it's there, and we don't ignore it – then our inner state, our emotional state, our mood doesn't have to be tied to it. The inner state can be peaceful and calm. That doesn't necessarily make the pain go away, but it creates a different context for being with the pain. The pain isn't the primary influence on us, but there's something inside that might actually influence the pain.

When I've had severe pain in meditation or in life, I sometimes just breathe through and around the place of pain. It depends a little on what kind of pain it is. Just breathing through it and with it, I don't identify so much with it. There is a little sense of relaxation – of something releasing, or my preoccupation with it releases. There's a lot more that can be said about pain.

Q3: "Have you experienced all 16 [steps]?"

Sure! Sometimes I've experienced them sequentially, one after the other. But, at other times, it's more random. I sit down to meditate, and find myself at different points in the steps. Or I'll jump ahead. Or go through them quickly, and one of the steps becomes the more predominant one for the day.

Q4: "What does it mean when the body disappears?"

Generally, when the body disappears in meditation, it means we're concentrated. The thinking mind has become quiet enough that we're not conceptualizing about the body. It can be a little hard to imagine if you have never experienced it. But a lot of the ways in which we experience the body is mediated through our thoughts and ideas – through the activity of the mind that constructs the body.

Take eyesight, for example. Photon light particles travel to the eye, get turned upside down, and go against the retina. Nerves send these electrical signals to the brain, and the brain reconstructs the signals into something that is a simile of the world out there – the world that we're seeing.

Sometimes that reconstruction is not accurate. A twig on the ground may appear as a snake. I've also seen a person in a crowd of strangers appear to be a friend of mine because there was enough similarity. But when I looked more carefully, "No, it's not my friend."

The reconstruction process is an activity the mind does. As the mind gets calmer, it's not reconstructing so much. It's not taking the signals from the body to reconstruct, and so it seems like the body is disappearing. Sometimes the body seems to disappear entirely. I've had to open my eyes in meditation to make sure I was still there because it felt so empty.

Sometimes there's an intermediate stage where the mind is still reconstructing sensations, but it's not doing it accurately. In meditation, people may feel elongated, like they're about to touch the ceiling. They may feel squat. Their hands feel like they're getting really big. It's not particularly unusual – it's just a perceptual distortion. Usually this happens at a particular stage when people go deep in meditation. It doesn't last too long. After a while, with the capacity to settle and to get more concentrated, the perceptual distortion stops.

Q5: "Is it important to follow the steps in order?"

No. Sometimes it's helpful to do so because it can help the concentration. You're on task, and you just do it. At other things, it's not to do it on task – doing a technique can make the mind too busy. We start with breath meditation and getting settled in. Then, rather than following the steps exactly, we recognize the steps as we deepen the practice. We recognize where we are. And because we can recognize it, we can let it become more full and complete. Then, on its own, it moves into the next step, and the next step. I prefer that way, rather than intentionally moving ahead when we feel it's time. You do your practice, and allow it to unfold in its own way. Sometimes it jumps around. It doesn't have to be the same sequential steps.

Q6: "How to work with a controlling breath?"

This is really common. I think the most useful thing to do is to not worry about it. Don't be bothered by it. Allow yourself to have a controlled breath. You can cultivate strong mindfulness and concentration with a controlled breath, or with one that's not controlled. The breath is not the main issue – it's really the quality of the attention you bring. If you're not bothered by it, you're more likely to get out of its way. When we're bothered by a controlled breath, we actually, in some subtle way, reinforce it. It makes it more difficult to let go.

It can be interesting to become a connoisseur of a controlled breath. Just be content to have a controlled breath, and then get to know it really well. Where exactly is the sense of control? Where's the tightness, the resistance, the pushing? What are the emotions or beliefs connected to it? Really get to know it, inside and out. Getting to know it sometimes is a little tricky because focusing on it directly after a while can disarm the control. You may

discover something interesting that needs to be relaxed and released, and it becomes easier to do it. That's one of the things I would do.

I've done so much of this over the years. Sometimes when I had a controlled breath, I imagined I was bringing my attention from the back forward, like going in through the back door – the back ribcage. There was very little sense of control in the back ribcage, and I felt the breath there for a while. That relaxed my control in the front, and slowly I moved the attention forward gingerly without triggering the control.

Q7: "I have a challenge in the outbreath smaller and belly tight. Your suggestion to observe the end of the inbreath and the end of the outbreath is helpful since I do get anxious there. Any thoughts about that?"

I think it's similar to what we discussed about control. It's very significant to recognize and observe what we're actually doing. When we see something about ourselves, we have a tendency to have judgments, reactions, or to think it should be different. Don't underestimate the significance of observing it and seeing it. It might be all you need to do. I've been anxious or tight in my breathing, controlling my breathing. I just allowed myself to feel it, know it, and continue with the breathing – and the breathing becomes a massage for it.

Some point of the inbreath can feel like the heart of the massage – the pushing and then relaxing. Or it may be the top of the inbreath, or the end of the outbreath. It depends on what's happening. Just be with the rhythm, and find a way to be really content – like you're in it for the long term. You're not trying to fix it. You're not concerned about it. Just recognize, "Oh, it's unpleasant. It's tight. It's controlled. There's anxiety." I breathe with it. We're going to be friends, and just breathe and breathe. Over time, that attitude can be a very effective way to let things settle without being involved in mental preoccupations, which often stir it up even more.

Q8: "Let's do another Zoom sometime with the sangha."

We may be able to do it next week. It depends on whether I have time. Right now I have a number of things I have to take care of that makes it a little hard.

Q9: "Any idea for trauma survivors and disassociation? Sometimes I may think I'm concentrated, but maybe I'm disassociated."

Certainly, trauma survivors have their own path and care that's needed for breath meditation and meditation in general. It's a noble path – a dignified path for people who have trauma to work through – and to work with – in meditation. It often needs a little different kind of attention than the usual, basic instructions I would give.

What's really good is a lot of compassion, care, and generosity for oneself, and a lot of patience with it all. And the permission not to have to go headlong into the trauma or the fear. It's fine to be at the edges of it, and it's fine to avoid it. It's fine to breathe with it without fixing it.

When trauma responses arise in meditation, a very helpful skill to develop is to end the meditation. To come out of that state, revive oneself, or come back to normal. Develop that skill, so there's confidence that as you go into it, you could come out if you wanted to. If you wanted to explore and go further with the sensations of trauma, you do so with a lot of confidence that, at a moment's notice, you could pull yourself out.

There may be disassociation. It's not a crime to be disassociated. It's okay within reason. If it happens in meditation, it may also have a helpful function. Sometimes it's a break. There is a kind of relaxation that can happen with some disassociation, so do not be in a hurry to make it wrong to do that. But, if you suspect it's a problem, one way to work through disassociation is to have a focus on the body. More often than not, I associate disassociation with not being connected to the body.

Getting professional help is good. If you think it's a big issue, it's good to find professional help. In some areas, there are therapists who know about mindfulness, Buddhism, and meditation. They can be particularly helpful for people who are meditating.

Q10: "After the 16 steps would you make letting go the next theme?"

That certainly can be. But we'll see that letting go is built in to *ānāpānasati*. At the end of each tetrad, there is some quality of letting go. We'll see next week, when we get to the eighth step, that it has letting go. At the end of the first tetrad, there is relaxing or tranquilizing the bodily formations. That's in the family of letting go. At the end of each tetrad, there is letting go. So we'll do some of that here.

Thank you for your questions. I'll read the rest of them so I get a sense of your concerns. I appreciate this chance to be with you. I look forward to next week and continuing in this process. Thank you very much.