

# Mindfulness of Breathing (27) Step 7: Experiencing Mental Formations

February 8, 2021

## Summary Keywords

sensation, mental formations, experience, mind, breathing, accompanying, *ānāpānasati*, body, sense, meditative, thinking, suffering, feeling, joy, thinking muscle, dis-identification, bodily formation, embodied

## Gil Fronsdal

The *ānāpānasati* practice involves 16 steps of mindfulness of breathing in and mindfulness of breathing out. There's a transition between the eighth and ninth steps. Going into the ninth step, we're still very closely and intimately involved with our embodied experience, which is always a foundation for the second eight steps. Now that we're in the second eight steps, we're going to open up more to the realm of experience, which may not be so directly related to the body, but more to the mind.

We're still in the body section of the first half of *ānāpānasati*. In the first tetrad, it's about learning to develop continuity with breathing, and beginning to experience and sense the body. Here we learn how the body is activated by the mind. We learn about the tensions of the body and how to relax them. As this happens, it frees up a good kind of energy in the body. As the concentration deepens, it also awakens meditative joy and happiness – well-being that comes with calmness, settledness, and contentment from just sitting and being here. With a certain kind of meditative well-being as a foundation, the instructions then open up to become aware of aspects of the mind.

In step seven, the instructions are,

*Breathing in, one experiences the mental formation; breathing out, one experiences the mental formation.*

Let's consider a few things about this. The Pali word for 'experience' – and maybe the English word as well – has a lot to do with the direct physical experience of a sensation. It's almost like this word translated as 'experience' could be translated as, "One senses for oneself the sensations of the mind – of the mental formation." Here it's singular: *the* mental formation. It's not necessarily about going and looking at all of the little detailed aspects of the mental formation. Instead, we're looking at how the whole thing is experienced.

Mental formations are those experiences associated with the mind. It's the mental activity that we can sense and feel. It's the mental activity that has some impact on the body that senses. I think of sensation as being very much a part of the body *and* of the mind.

For example, something clearly physical might happen if we're afraid. Our shoulders might tense up and become tight. That is a physical formation. But, if we're afraid and our mind feels contracted, small, or tight, that's a mental formation. That's a mental expression of the fear – of that activated state.

If we're thinking very intensely, we might feel it physically. We might feel the forehead get all bunched up and scrunched together. This is a bodily formation. But, if we look more deeply into the area around where we're thinking – for example, the brain – we might feel something behind the forehead in an area of the brain that's not particularly associated with muscles that are tightened up. There are still sensations there. There might be a feeling of contraction, a headache, agitation, or a sense of pressure or pushing.

Sometimes I feel there's a magnetic or gravitational pull for me towards thinking, or for thinking towards me. It's like a pull or a tug that relates to the thoughts. The mind is leaning in. Sometimes the gravitational center of my thinking is a little ahead of my body, as if somehow I'm leaning forward into the future.

It's possible to start feeling something that resembles a sensation associated with our mental activity. These are called mental formations. They are the mental activities we can feel. For example, if we look at thinking as a mental activity, the instructions here are to feel the physical experience of thinking. It's only feeling it. It's not

thinking better. It's not understanding or analyzing what we're thinking. It's not even about recognizing *what* we're thinking. It's simply recognizing the physicality or the sensation level of the thinking itself.

Basically, I like to think of this as feeling the "thinking muscle" – the ways in which we feel thinking: energetic, tight, constricted, pressurized, in a hurry, low energy, swampy, or lacking clarity. There is a whole realm of things that can identify how thinking feels for us, as opposed to analyzing what it's about. This is a wonderful aid to not get caught up. It grants us permission during meditation to not have to fix our thoughts, fix the world, understand, or analyze what's going on. Here we're only asked to feel it – to feel an aspect of what the mind is doing. The mind is very important, but we focus on a particular aspect, which is the level of sensation. We're connected to it, but we're not being pulled into the storyline.

Without establishing the foundation of steps five and six and having some feeling of well-being, we don't start actively taking in what's going on in the mind. There's a container, a context of well-being for looking at an area of our life which is often quite difficult. We're not trying to do a spiritual bypass, or avoid our inner suffering or challenges. But maybe we're touching it with a breath, with awareness, or with emotions that are supportive. They have goodness. They are calm, supportive, kind, and generous. This can happen because of the foundation that was built earlier in these steps of mindful breathing.

The context for becoming aware of the mental activity is one of kindness, goodwill, and even joy. When I first discovered it, I found it to be a great and wonderful paradox. That one can experience suffering in oneself and in the world and, at the same time, have a lot of joy. In fact, my ability to go deeply into the practice of *vipassanā* – where at times we experience a lot of personal suffering – was supported by having cultivated meditative joy, which could hold that suffering. So it isn't having one or the other; they can both be there.

All this involves dis-identification from being locked in or overly preoccupied with what we're thinking and emoting. We can just hold it, and be present for it in a different way than we usually are. This is one of the opportunities that *ānāpānasati* presents to us.

*Breathing in, one experiences the mental formation.*

We're not trying to parse out the details of it, just the whole gestalt – the global feelings and sensations of what's going on in the mind.

*Breathing out, one experiences the mental formation.*

Because we're breathing in and breathing out, this again is like a support for not getting wrapped up in or being caught by our thoughts. As long as the breathing stays relaxed and smooth, we tend to have a more open and free relationship to what we're including in our awareness, and to what we're accompanying with the breathing.

I hope this makes sense. We'll do more of this over the next few days. If it didn't make full sense, don't worry about it too much. You may have enough understanding so when I go over it in the next days, it will become clear.

For now, maybe you can spend the next twenty-four hours reflecting on and practicing with this idea of accompaniment – that we're accompanying things. We're accompanying ourselves, our hearts, our minds. And we're accompanying other people. What does it mean to be a companion in this way?

Thank you, and I look forward to tomorrow.