

Mindfulness of Breathing (2) Introduction

January 5, 2021

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

breathing, Buddha, mindfulness, mutuality, intimacy, vanity, concentrated, mind, connection, Rāhula, *ānāpānasati*, Zen, botany, oxygen and CO2 cycles, oak, UC Davis, clinging

Gil Fronsdal

Today I'd like to continue the introduction to the theme for this next period of time. The theme is mindfulness of breathing. Specifically, it is the teachings the Buddha gave called *ānāpānasati*, the 16 stages or steps to mindfulness of breathing.

The intimacy of breathing is quite phenomenal. If we live in our thoughts the whole time, we might not really appreciate the cooperative and connected nature that we have with the world around us, and to the world within us. Breathing can really be a bridge to feel a deeper connection to the world and ourselves.

I'd like to give an example that is a little conceptual. It had a big impact on me when I was in college. I was sitting in a big amphitheater in Davis, California, where I went to college. On the board, the botany professor was drawing big, circular diagrams of the cycles of oxygen

and carbon dioxide, and talking about how these cycles operated in nature. I was enthralled by the whole description. I think I got maybe somewhat concentrated listening to it. At the end the class, walking out of the amphitheater, I came into a courtyard with some very big, old Valley Oak trees. I was stunned. I stood in the middle of the courtyard, and looked at the oak trees. Having just heard about the cycles of oxygen and carbon dioxide, I thought, "I could lose a kidney, an arm, an eye. I could lose all kinds of parts of my body, but I still depend on these plants creating oxygen. They're in some ways more important to me than some of the parts of my own body."

So that was my thinking. Then I wondered – and this is what really stopped my mind for a little bit in a wonderful, delightful way. I thought, "In that case, where do I stop, and where do the trees begin?" I had a feeling that from this perspective, there was a continuity. There was no sharp line between me here and the trees there. Somehow we were in it together. To feel and sense that intimacy, interconnectivity, and mutual support was a very inspiring moment in my life.

Some of the feelings of connection and intimacy came because I was somewhat concentrated. To be able to ride the breath and get concentrated clears the mind of the debris and the distractibility of the mind, so that we

see with greater clarity. There tends to be a feeling of intimacy and connection that comes from that.

Turning the attention inward to the breathing is also a way of deeply connecting to ourselves. Because it turns out that the deeper we go into meditation, the more we can feel and see how the subtle adjustments and changes in the breathing have to do with our emotional state, mental state, and reactivity. It's possible to be very settled, and then see that when we start picking up a particular exciting thought, the breathing changes accordingly. Maybe the system thinks it needs more oxygen now in order to have more energy to get engaged in this thing.

Certain emotions – even a little anger or fear – affects the breathing. Also a little clinging and attachment. Breathing is intimately connected to all these aspects of our psychology. There's mutuality there, because one affects the other.

If we can attend to the breathing – really stay in the breathing, and let the breathing become easeful, relaxed, and natural – then that actually changes our psychology, emotional states, and mental states. And vice versa. By really getting into the breathing and seeing the connection, it's a way of settling in and harmonizing our inner, mental life in a way that doesn't require understanding it in some deep way, or fixing it

even. The breathing rectifies and harmonizes. So really trust and engage in the breathing.

I give these two examples as a way of showing that breathing is so intimately connected to human life, that it's well worth spending time really learning to connect to the breathing. Make it a habit. As you go through the day, notice your breathing. This habit has been so beneficial for me. When I go into a store, have a conversation with someone, or give a Dharma talk, the breathing will sometimes let me know that I've gotten a little too attached to something, or over involved somehow – because the breathing changes. By having breathing as a regular reference point, I sometimes catch myself, and see what I'm doing more quickly than if I were tracking all the complexity of my mind and what was going on there. Breathing is such a useful thing.

It seems the best records we have indicate that the primary meditation practice that the Buddha himself did was mindfulness of breathing. There are stories or records of him going off and sitting for one to three months in the forest on a self-retreat. When he came out, he would tell his followers, "During that retreat, I practiced mindfulness of breathing."

For me, there's a very touching story of the Buddha teaching mindfulness of breathing to Rāhula, his son. Rāhula was a teenager, and he looked a little like his

father. The Buddha was certainly well respected in his time. Looking a bit like him, it may have been easy for Rāhula to give birth to a little vanity. The Buddha and his son were going for alms round together into a town. As they were going there, the Buddha picked up on the vanity that his son had. He turned around to his son and said:

Rāhula, any kind of material form, whatsoever, whether past, future or present, internal or external – all material form should be seen as it actually is, with proper wisdom: “This is not mine. This I am not. This is not myself.”

Anything that's physical – any physical shape or characteristic we have – should not be seen as me, myself and mine. Since Rāhula was caught by his physical appearance, he thought that he'd been admonished by the Buddha's statement. So Rāhula went back to the monastery where they had been staying, instead of going to get his daily meal. Someone then said to Rāhula, "You should really ask your dad to give you instructions in meditation." When the Buddha came back, Rāhula got instructions in meditation – maybe for the first time. After some preliminary instructions, the Buddha gave his son instructions in the 16 stages of breath meditation.

It's very touching – this closeness and connectivity between father and son. The most important discourse

on mindfulness of breathing is called the *Ānāpānasati Sutta* – the sutta on breathing in and breathing out mindfully. It also emphasizes this mutuality, this interconnectedness, this harmonious and unifying way that things can come together with breathing.

I guess I've run out of time now, but tomorrow I'll do one more introductory talk on this topic. I'll discuss this very important discourse of the Buddha. It is usually the one we take as the instructions for these 16 stages. Then we'll start getting into the topic more deeply.

Finally, I'll say that when I was studying Zen in Japan – where there also was a big emphasis on mindfulness of breathing – one of my Zen teachers there said that all of Buddhism can be discovered through mindfulness of breathing, through attention to breathing. I more or less go along with that. To really care for, attend to, entrust yourself to, and be referenced by your breathing – all the things you need to discover to become really free and liberated will appear and come to play in breathing in its own time and way.

Intimacy with breathing, attending to breathing. I hope that over time you'll come to really love the experience of breathing – there's love in attention to breathing, love in breathing – and that you will be free.

Thank you so much, and I look forward to tomorrow.