

Mindfulness of Breathing (68) Relinquishment as Generosity

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

ānāpānasati, mindfulness of breathing, sixteenth step, relinquishment, relinquish, *patinissagga*, giving, letting go, generosity, Ajahn Amaro, wholesome, unwholesome, grief, *cāga*, *vossagga*, AN-6-25, surrender, checklist

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We come to consider the final step of *ānāpānasati*, the sixteenth step of mindfulness of breathing. The most common translation in English is something like:

Observing relinquishment, one trains: I will breathe in.

Observing relinquishment, one trains: I will breathe out.

The Pali word *patinissagga* is translated as “relinquishment.” This word has a double meaning. It means letting go or relinquishment. It also means generosity, to give. In some contexts in the teachings of

the Buddha, *patinissagga* clearly means being generous.

This passage is so nice. I'll read it to you:

A noble disciple is someone who has come now towards the end of these sixteen steps. Noble disciples recollect, consider their own generosity like this: It is truly my good fortune and gain, that in a world of people obsessed with greed, I dwell, freely generous, open-handed, delighting in giving, devoted to charity, delighting in giving and sharing.

“Giving,” in the expression “delighting in giving,” is the same word as this final step in *ānāpānasati* of relinquishment. There is a deep letting go, which is almost an act of choice. In the last four steps of *ānāpānasati*, as we settle in, having gotten concentrated, quiet, and still – we then come to a stage where it feels best to not be working on meditation anymore. We don't have to work. We just settle back and observe. We are in the process of life – the flow of life – observing the transiency and the changing nature of moment-to-moment experience.

There is fading away of clinging, greed, and wanting. That fading away happens up to the point where our greed and hatred ceases and stops. Wow, to have a qualitative experience with the stopping of these

unhealthy movements of the mind and heart. “Wow, this is good; this is right; this is healthy. This is freedom – inner psychological freedom.”

Then, knowing that, seeing that, having wisdom about that, and saying: “I would like to be done with this. I no longer want to invest in these ways of being. I no longer believe in them. I no longer stand behind being greedy, hateful, resentful, complaining, jealous, or having any kind of annoyance or hostility that keeps me living in cynicism.”

We don’t do this punitively. It is not like we feel bad about ourselves. Rather, now we know something much better. We are letting go of what is unwholesome. If you read the teachings of the Buddha carefully, you will see that when he talks about what we let go of, he doesn’t talk about letting go of *things* so much – hardly at all. We don’t let go of our material wealth, friendships, or relationships.

What we let go of, what we relinquish, is our unwholesome psychological states – things inside of us. They are clearly the ones that most harm us – what the Buddha calls unwholesome, unskillful. In one place, he says explicitly:

If, when one gives something away, unwholesome mental qualities grow and wholesome mental

qualities waste away – then I say one should not give away in this way.

Here “giving away” is the Pali word for relinquishment. The word “give” captures the idea that it is an act of generosity.

I will read it differently:

If one relinquishes anything and then unwholesome mental qualities grow and wholesome mental qualities waste away, then I say, one should not relinquish in this way. But, if one gives away, if one relinquishes something and unwholesome mental qualities waste away, and wholesome mental qualities grow, then I say – one should give away, one should relinquish in this way.

This is not blind relinquishment. It is not blindly letting go of something, that we are supposed to let go of everything. Rather, we are letting go of that which interferes with our betterment or the best qualities we have. We are letting go so that our better qualities can come forth. And when we get quiet and peaceful, we have a much clearer sense of what those qualities are and of what gets in the way – what the obstructions are.

One of the most wonderful meditation instructions I received many years ago was from the English *bhikkhu*, a monk named Ajahn Amaro. He said something like:

Set yourself at ease – and then notice what takes you away from that.

That was the instruction.

No sixteen stages – that’s complicated. You just set yourself at ease. I understood that to be whatever modicum of ease that is accessible – the simplest kind of softening and relaxing. But then, the important part – the wisdom part – is to notice what takes you away from that ease.

Then consider: “Is it really worth it? Is it really for your betterment to lose whatever ease you have?” It is through deepening the ease, pushing the ease – coming to more ease – that we recognize better and better the goodness that is here within us. We better recognize when we are going in an unwholesome or a wholesome direction – when it is for our betterment or the opposite.

When we come to the last stage of *ānāpānasati*, there is now a real deep relinquishment. We are really ready to put something down and be done with it – enough of this already. Even though we cannot necessarily stop certain mental habits or tendencies, it is a powerful

movement to make an inner choice, an inner turning, and say: “I no longer stand behind this. I no longer believe in this kind of behavior.”

We can do that without any aversion, hostility, or feeling bad about ourselves. We can do it with joy, delighting in the word relinquishment. Delighting in: “Now I’m going to move in a good direction. I know there is a better direction.” To know that deeply is one of the great gifts of this practice – great gifts of life – and it is inspiring.

Rather than seeing our inner foibles or old inner habits coming back, and feeling depressed or upset by them, there can be a stance or recognition: “Oh, here it is again, and now I get to practice. This is what practice is. I know what practice is about now. There is a direction, a movement, or a journey. Really, I know what freedom is. And I know that this is not where it is. Now I have an opportunity to practice with this.” This is a fortunate thing.

Anyone who has the practice has good fortune. Anyone who has a practice is involved in a path of great goodness and benefit. Celebrate and delight that you have a practice, more than being upset that one more time you got angry, irritated, or greedy. Keep turning it over to appreciate it. Look for the generosity, goodness,

and delight in the possibility of being on a path of liberation – the freedom of letting go.

No matter where you are in the sixteen stages of *ānāpānasati*, each step of the way is good in itself. It is good enough. In fact, the ancient commentaries say each step of the sixteen can be complete in itself. Each step contains within it the path to all sixteen. So if you stayed at the first step of breathing in long, knowing you are breathing in long, then the other fifteen steps will follow along as you settle in and get concentrated on just that one thing.

It doesn't matter which stage you are at – that is the right place for you. That is a good place. That is where your delight, pleasure, and joy can be – that you are so fortunate that you have a path. This is your step now. This is your movement, your ability to practice.

The further you go, the more you will understand what is wholesome. The more you understand what is wholesome and delight in generosity, the more you can give away and give up the unwholesome. I use words like “give up,” which originally meant to offer something up on an altar. The original meaning of sacrifice is to make sacred. In Latin, and maybe in French as well, the root or original meaning of the word surrender is “to give something, to give up.”

We have come to the end of the sixteen steps. The discourse on *ānāpānasati* has further things to say about this. What is most interesting for me about the instructions after the sixteen steps is how the fruit of the practice, the liberation of the practice, becomes more and more the basis for the practice. The topic for next week is how liberation becomes the basis for practice.

So thank you.

I have a little time for some questions if you'd like. They can be on anything. I will try my best to track the questions.

Q1: “Do you have any additional advice on how *ānāpānasati* can be practiced in a relaxed, open way without turning it into a linear checklist?”

I think that with every meditation practice we do, funny habits of the mind can come in and take over.

Sometimes the practice starts becoming mechanical.

Sometimes there may be a linear checklist: “Where am I?” Don't be discouraged by this, but learn to recognize it and figure out a way to not do it. Sometimes when I've done something similar, I just backed off. I went back to

the very beginning. Or I went back, not trying to do the practice of *ānāpānasati*, but just open awareness.

When it seems like nothing is working, one of my great defaults for practicing is to tell myself the word “here.” I just say “here.” It is not a command, like to a dog. It is just the recognition: I am here. I say the word, and then I open my attention to just recognizing what is here.

Sometimes what I recognize is that my mind is out of control and spinning around: “Oh, here. This is what it feels like to have a spinning mind. Here. This is what it’s like to be upset. Here. This is what it’s like to be agitated.” There is generosity in that here – in that opening: “Oh, this is what it’s like.” Nothing has to be different. It is just a clear recognition. I’ll do that for a while, and then, at some point, things settle down. Or if I’ve gotten mechanical or into a checklist approach to practice, then I stop doing it and start fresh again.

A lot of thank-yous. I appreciate them. It’s very nice.

Q2: “Is it to be expected that grief would come with disenchantment?”

No, that is not to be expected. But it’s pretty common. I think that sometimes when we do this practice, we realize that even when we let go of things we know are

unhealthy – there can be grief for the going away of something that has been our companion for a long time. Or there is grief around what we lost because we were caught up for so long in some unhealthy way of being, and we have to grieve first before we can really move on.

There was a psychologist who did a lot of this practice. His take on all this is that the path to liberation is one continuous process of grieving. This might have been true for him. It hasn't been true for me, but grief definitely can be an important part of this whole process. It is not to be pushed away or to feel that it's unfortunate to be grieving. I did give a talk last Sunday morning on grief. I talked about liberating grief. That might intrigue you if you didn't hear the talk.

Q3: “Folds in the unfolding.”

Yeah.

Q4: “What is the source of the excerpt you read about generosity today?”

It's my translation. All I have here is the reference. It's from the *Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*, Chapter 6, sutta number 25.

It's very nice to read all these comments and thank-yous. It's a wonderful thing to share this path and this practice with all of us here.

Q5: “Grief arises at unexpected times.”

Yes, for sure. Some teachers say that if you haven't had a good cry, you're probably not really on the path to liberation.

Q6: “Can you please clarify again the relationship between the sixteen steps of our practice off the cushion as well as while meditating?”

Well, that's a good question. I generally don't think too much about the sixteen steps in daily life. I have spent much of my adult life meditating on my breathing. This has been the foundation of my meditation practice, and it spills over into daily life. I'm frequently attentive to my breathing and include my breathing and awareness of it in whatever I'm doing. It has been a great gift in my daily life to track and watch my breathing – when it gets held, tight, or constricted, and how it shifts and changes. Sometimes it's the first indication that I've gotten caught, stuck, or reactive. Just being familiar and connected with the breath, being able to come back and relax the breath, and have an easeful breath as I go through my daily life has been beneficial in many, many

ways. I don't think about whether I'm on any particular step of *ānāpānasati* in daily life.

Q7: “Is the sixteenth step open awareness?”

Some people might experience open awareness with the sixteen steps, but I wouldn't want to identify the two together. The deepest letting go we do is a phenomenal absence. To give it any kind of description that it is something – even something like open awareness – diminishes it or misses the point a little bit.

Q8: “What is the Pali word you said at the beginning meaning generosity?”

There are three Pali words that mean letting go or relinquishment. Translators often translate all three of them as relinquishment. But they also mean generosity. The one for the sixteenth step of *ānāpānasati* is *patinissagga*. Then there's *cāga*, and there's *vossagga*. It's a wonderful thing to see this close association in Pali with letting go and generosity.

This is wonderful. I need to stop. Thank you all. We'll continue this exploration of *ānāpānasati* in the context of liberation next week. I look forward to it.