

Mindfulness of Breathing (19) Meditative Joy and Happiness

January 27, 2021

Summary Keywords

joy, happiness, breathing, energetics, pleasure, ecstasy, rapture, contentment, well-being, tranquility, Buddha, mind, experiences, centered, gathering, settle, upwelling, *ānāpānasati*, *Discourse on Mindfulness of Breathing*, Middle Length Discourses, fifth step, sixth step, Bhikkhu Bodhi, bowl, marble, underwater spring, lake

Gil Fronsdal

The 16 steps of breathing meditation that the Buddha taught come from a variety of places in the discourses. The most common is the “Discourse on Mindfulness of Breathing,” the “*Ānāpānasati Sutta*.” It's in the collection of the *Middle Length Discourses*. There have been a variety of books that explain or describe this. The descriptions of the 16 steps are a bit like Cliff Notes – just brief sentences.

Different meditation teachers will have a different take or explanation for how these work or what they are, which

is appropriate. There are many techniques. They are like placeholders for a whole universe of experience.

We're coming into the fifth and sixth steps of *ānāpānasati*. The fifth step says, "One trains." In other words, one practices. It's like one practices the alphabet to really learn it – one does it over and over again:

One trains so that, as one breathes in, one experiences joy.

One trains so that, as one breathes out, one experiences joy.

The sixth step is:

Breathing in, one experiences happiness. Breathing out, one experiences happiness.

The words for 'joy' and 'happiness' may be translated differently. The famous translator, Bhikkhu Bodhi, translates 'joy' as 'rapture.' What I translate as 'happiness,' he translates as 'pleasure.'

The difference between the fifth and sixth steps is that the joy factor – whatever it is – is a little energizing. It can be quite strong. It's more like a thrill or a delight in the body – a flow of energy or pleasure in the body, which is uplifting and delightful. It has a lightening feeling.

The sixth step – what I call happiness and Bhikkhu Bodhi calls pleasure – is that when the energetics of joy quiet down, the pleasure or the happiness of the joy remains. Something is more settled, with more of a sense of contentment.

Some people get quite attached to the energetics of joy. Sometimes a strong feeling of ecstasy or rapture can course through the body in cascading waves of joy. It can be intense. But, sooner or later, we get a little tired of the energetics of joy.

The upwelling energy begins to settle and quiet. Now there's a state shift. In retrospect, we see that joy has a kind of mental quality, mental energetics. But then it settles. We're more settled in the body. There is more of a feeling of contentment, well-being, and tranquility in the body – which for me feels like sublime happiness. But, because it's more physical, some translators like to translate it as 'pleasure.' It doesn't have that mental energy as well.

The operating verb is that one 'experiences.' You could just as well translate the Pali word here as, "One feels." One allows oneself to really feel what is here. Elsewhere, the Buddha says that when this kind of pleasure or joy begins to surface, one is allowed to feel it in such a way that one allows it to spread through the body.

As I said yesterday, the Buddha said this kind of pleasure or joy is not to be feared. It is not to be dismissed or belittled. It's actually quite healthy to experience it. For some people, when they feel it and it's very healing, it creates a context in the body and the heart – to better be present for what is difficult. It's not a denial of what's difficult or painful in our lives – the difficult emotions, or what's happening in the world around us.

But it's easier to be present for it without falling into being a victim of it – or being oppressed by it, or suffering even more because of it, or feeling self-pity – because we have this goodness, joy, happiness, and well-being in which to hold the challenges of our lives.

The joy and well-being in this step come from starting to be absorbed or continuously intimate with the experience of breathing. It also comes when there's more of a sense of wholeness. Everything is included – nothing is being held at bay.

The earlier steps of *ānāpānasati* – the steps of the body – have to do with feeling and relaxing the body. When the body is tense, in a certain way, it is not whole. We're cut off from parts of it. But, as we feel into and relax the body, there's a feeling of wholeness – of gathering together.

That gathering together and becoming whole is what contributes to joy arising. It's like we're creating the channels, the openings for well-being to be there – which can come when we start becoming really intimate, connected, or continuous in the attention.

So the awareness itself gets gathered together to really be in the present moment with the breathing – as opposed to thoughts jumping around here and there. About what's for dinner, what I'm doing tomorrow, and what I did yesterday.

The mind begins to have wholeness. It begins to gather around just being in this experience here. The mind centers itself on the experience of the body breathing. This centering itself in the body breathing has the joy, the delight. The problems of our life, the preoccupations, agitations, and anxieties that are fed and perpetuated by thoughts begin to quiet down. That is a relief.

The combination of the mind's intimacy, the awareness's intimacy with the whole experience of breathing, and the wholeness of the body, tends to start producing – from the inside out – a sense of goodness. A sense of goodness is my generic name for a whole family of feelings we might have: joy, delight, satisfaction, contentment, pleasure, thrill – wonderful

feelings that arise. And they come for no good reason. For what's outside in the world, nothing has to be better in the world. It comes because of this really intimate gathering together – harmonizing our whole being – which can come when we're really present here.

The first four steps of *ānāpānasati* – which can take a long time to penetrate – have a lot to do with finding ourselves present here in a whole, embodied, and inclusive way. It's not a narrow, tight, little concentration – but rather a centering where everything is included.

An image I have for this is a big bowl. If you take a marble and drop it into the big bowl, it'll go up and down and around. If you lean into the bowl and push the marble, you can keep it going. It'll keep spinning forever if you keep pushing it. But if you stop pushing it, it'll slowly come to center at the bottom of the bowl. The whole bowl is there, but it's resting at the center.

It's the same with our attention, thoughts, and awareness. If we are pushing the marbles in our mind with thoughts, involvement, interest, and reactivity, they will keep spinning. The thinking mind just spins, keeps going, and gets distracted. But, as we leave it alone, everything begins to settle – gathers together. We support it with our practice of intimacy and getting close to breathing. Then with time, we get centered at the bottom of the bowl – centered on the breathing.

This starts becoming a very pleasant and enjoyable experience. The joy factors begin bubbling up within. The Buddha's description of this is that of an underwater spring flowing up into a lake. It just flows up from the inside and spreads out. Sometimes you can feel that with the inhale. It's almost like there's an underwater spring deep in our torso, right down near the base of our body or the base of our chest. As we breathe in, there's an upwelling feeling. Then, as we exhale, perhaps there's a feeling of it flowing all back down again and flowing out. This flow, pleasure, energetics, lightness begins happening.

It can be quite subtle at first. It's good to recognize it and realize, "Oh, this is actually a good thing to pay attention to." But don't look for it when it's not there. Don't try to manufacture it. Don't feel like you have to have the fifth or sixth step of *ānāpānasati*. Only sometimes it begins to start happening.

The core practice is the first four steps. It is so beneficial to stay in the first four steps for a long time. Essentially, the longer we stay there, the more we allow ourselves to have a stronger foundation for what follows.

Unless you learn about this potential for joy and pleasure as part of meditation practice, you might not appreciate or recognize it when it happens. You won't

include it or become whole with it. Let it spread and open – and receive it through your body. All of this requires some modicum of a quiet mind. It doesn't have to be completely quiet. There can be some light thoughts in the background. So don't be at war with your thoughts and feel you have to not think at all. That just produces tension. But there is a quieting that happens as we practice.

So, mindfulness of breathing. I hope that you'll have some opportunities during your meditation and your day to appreciate, value, and enjoy yourself breathing.

Thank you very much.