

Mindfulness of Breathing (4) Steps 1 and 2: Experiencing Breathing

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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The topic for today is to discuss the first two steps of *ānāpānasati*, which we'll probably do for a couple of days at least. The first two steps of mindfulness of breathing begins where we ended yesterday. That having gone to a forest, or to the foot of a tree, or to an empty hut, one sits down cross-legged, upright, and establishes awareness – *sati* (mindfulness) to the forefront. Then to mindfully breathe in, and mindfully breathe out.

I think what's inherent in this is the idea that we're not so much *doing* mindfulness, but we're dedicated to really staying close to our innate, natural capacity to be aware. We're opening and settling our awareness.

We're tapping into our capacity to be aware. You get a little sense of this if someone tells you to stop being aware. They say, "Okay, stop! Enough of this awareness thing." And you try to turn it off. Unless you go to sleep or really distract yourself, you might think that you're not aware. But awareness is just part and parcel of being conscious. It's part and parcel of life – certainly of a wakeful life.

This interplay between what we *do* and what we *allow for* is inherent in the practice of *ānāpānasati*. There is an engagement in the allowing, but we don't *do* the awareness. We *allow* the awareness. We allow the awareness to take in the experience of breathing. As we begin experiencing it, then there are other different faculties of attention that come into play.

With the first step of *ānāpānasati*, the instructions are – I'll tell you what it is, and then I'm going to talk about some of the individual words:

One trains oneself as one breathes in a long breath, one experiences it as a long breath. One trains oneself as one breathes out a long breath, one experiences it as a long exhale.

First is the idea of training oneself. This is a training practice. We're cultivating and developing ourselves. We're training ourselves to be in the present moment.

We're training ourselves to stay close to or rest in this dynamic and interesting place of awareness. We are training that ability to be aware – to allow awareness and to stay close to it – with the breathing. The breathing is always in the present moment. So if we're with the breathing, we're with the present moment.

In this first step, we're training ourselves to do something specific, and that is to experience the breathing. This doesn't mean we're literally following the air that we're breathing. The air is not really the object of the meditation. Rather, it's the sensations in the body that come into play as we're breathing.

If you take a deep in-breath, you feel the movement, stretching, and expansion of the chest. Then as you exhale, you feel the release of that expansion – the settling and the movement back. There are many physical sensations that come into play when you are breathing, depending on where in the body you're experiencing the breathing – whether it's the belly, chest, nostrils, or the whole body breathing. There is pressure and the release of pressure. There's smoothness and choppiness. There's tension that happens as you breathe in, and the release of tension as you breathe out. There is temperature that comes into play; there's tingling and vibration. There is a sense sometimes of weight, heaviness, or resistance, as you

breathe in. Maybe at the top of the in-breath, there's holding or resistance as you breathe in. There are lifting, expanding, falling, and contracting sensations. There's a whole slew of sensations that come into play. So the idea is to experience that.

It's like if you said while tasting good food, "This is really exquisite!" Maybe you spent your last money buying the food. You probably don't want to be distracted – by going on YouTube or the web to avidly read the news – while you're eating this last, wonderful morsel of good food. You would close your eyes and really taste it, savor it, and fully take it in. You would experience it.

That's what this word 'experiencing' means. It contains within it the Pali word for 'feeling.' It also contains the word "with feeling." It means "feeling with oneself," feeling in oneself here in this experience. Feel it carefully. So we're talking about sensations.

The third part of this first step is to recognize whether the breath is long. If it's a long breath, experience it as a long breath. Here, there is also a very simple recognition of what's happening. One is recognizing some quality of the breathing – how it's experienced when it's experienced as a long breath. This is partly a stand-in for feeling all the sensations of breathing. But

it's also a means to begin noticing how breathing changes as we settle into the meditation.

The next step in *ānāpānasati* is:

One trains oneself as one breathes in a short breath, one experiences it as a short breath. One trains oneself as one breathes out a short breath, one experiences it as a short breath.

Often, there's a movement or a change that happens as we sit. Sometimes when the breath is fast, tight, and agitated, there can be short, rapid breathing going on. As we relax, the breath settles down, and becomes longer and more relaxed. When it is long and relaxed, as we get more concentrated, the breath sometimes becomes shorter, sometimes more shallow. It changes its nature.

Regardless of which direction it changes, there are these changes that occur as we meditate. I might be sitting in a very relaxed way with my breath, and then think about something that happened many years ago that really upset me. I find my breathing changes. As we experience the breathing in a deeper way – more fully – we start noticing the changing, dynamic nature of all the sensations in the breathing. We also start seeing the relationship between the state of our meditation, the

state of our mind, and what's going on with our breathing.

It's not analyzing, commenting on, or getting deeply involved in needing it to be a certain way. It's just that as we experience breathing, we become more aware of every nuance of this sensory quality of breathing – feeling and sensing what happens in the body. I often say, “Experience how the body experiences breathing.” This points to the idea of really being in the sensations or the sensory quality of it. Let the body take the lead, which means don't have your mind take the lead – like the breathing should be a certain way. Or “I have to make it be a certain way.” Or “It's the wrong breathing.”

Trust the body. Let the body take the lead, and show itself to you as it actually is. As you do this, there's this constancy of coming and going – constancy and inconstancy, continuity and discontinuity of breathing, as I talked about at the beginning of the guided meditation. Begin to take refuge in the constancy of breathing. But allow the inconstancy of the comings and goings of the in-breath and out-breath to help you be relaxed and not fixate on something. Be ready to let go of the exhale. And that letting go of the exhale at the end allows you to take in the next inhale.

This movement of allowing and receiving, letting go and taking in, and keeping the continuity of feeling and sensing is the thread that goes through the 16 steps of *ānāpānasati*. We're breathing with our life – with this foundation, this constancy, this basis of support.

So today, in order to enhance this path we're taking, you might check in with your breathing at different times of the day. See what sensations come into play, and how those sensations change. What is the nature of your breathing? Is it short or long, shallow or deep? Are different parts of your body involved or activated in the breathing? Is there more chest breathing or belly breathing now? Just get curious. There's no need to judge any of it. What you're trying to do is develop a repertoire of recognition – a wider sense of becoming literate in the whole experience of breathing.

As you do this over time, breathing becomes really rich – really valuable, fascinating, and interesting – and invaluable to connect to. Maybe set an alarm every hour reminding yourself to check in with your breathing. How is it right now? The more you become aware of it, the more I think that this *ānāpānasati* will come alive for you.

Thank you very much, and I look forward to our time tomorrow.