

# Mindfulness of Breathing (62) Opening to Constant Change

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Buddha, flow, change, suffering, experience, breathing, liberating, enlightened, concepts, settled, healing, impermanence, inconstancy, *ānāpānasati*, “*Aniccā vata saṅkhārā*,” pain, Plato, rightness, cycle, caring, love, world

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In this process of *ānāpānasati* – mindfulness of breathing in, mindfulness of breathing out – we’ve come to the core, the heart of it: the insight aspect. The purpose of insight is to liberate us, to free us. This involves clearly centering ourselves in the core dynamism – the core aspect of how life is.

All the previous steps, in a sense, are preparing us for this, and I want to emphasize the importance of this preparation. Certainly, it is preparation for what we are doing in the last steps of *ānāpānasati*. But we are also preparing ourselves, finding our willingness to meet this

world as it is – the ability to really be in this suffering world.

We are preparing ourselves by developing the qualities of attention, concentration, persistence, and well-being. And by purifying ourselves – working through all the hindrances – the attitudes and places where we need to be healed and settled. This is a beautiful and profound process. We need this to be available in order to care for this suffering world.

We come to the thirteenth step where we are experiencing – observing – impermanence or inconstancy. This has three different aspects where things are changing and inconstant. One is there is loss – things disappear.

But also, the fact that things change allows for new beginnings. The fall gives birth to the winter. The winter gives birth to the spring. Things pass or die away in the fall, and then get reborn in the spring. There is this cycle, which we need.

We live in a world of tremendous suffering. We have experienced so much in the news for so long. The amount of hate that gets expressed in violence and killing is astounding. This has been going on since the

time of the Buddha. How do we address this? How do we meet this?

*Ānāpānasati* is a beautiful, profound practice. Maybe I shouldn't use "beautiful" in this context. It is a profound, helpful, and healing practice. To stay constant with the inconstancy of breathing – the rhythm of breathing – frees us from the contractions, resistance, fears, preoccupations, and distractions of the mind. It allows something to settle – to come into harmony and ease – which allows for the self-healing qualities of this human body and heart to operate. It makes room for some of the most beautiful qualities of who we are to surface and come forward.

The ability to dip into the inconstancy and the changing nature of breathing is to have a direct confrontation with what is most difficult in this human life – and with what is most wonderful and healing. Not only is there loss because things have changed – but also useless, painful, or difficult things are also disappearing. Suffering disappears.

Part of the inconstancy – the changing, impermanent nature of all this – is a rich world of so many things we enter into, sometimes simultaneously. There is loss. But with loss, there is also gain – in the sense that, at times, we also lose our suffering. With the new arising and

appearing of things, some things appear that are not good. But there is also the possibility of good things arising.

The teachings of the Buddha – to really see, feel, and be in this current of change – give us some agency to shape how we experience and how we are in this world. Certainly, most of us cannot change the world dramatically, but we can change our immediate world. We can change ourselves. The practice has a lot to do with understanding change and finding a way to harmonize and work with it so that we cultivate ourselves. We develop ourselves to become better people – to prepare ourselves for this world – so that we have resiliency, open-heartedness, non-clinging, and non-hostility.

It is powerful to work with the changing nature of this world. In *vipassanā* practice, we're working with that changing nature of the world all the time, but this is not often emphasized. In the thirteenth step of *ānāpānasati*, this is the part of the world we are really working with. We are entering into this flow and change.

It may be easy for a teacher to say what I'm about to say, but much more difficult to do it. To enter into what the Buddha was emphasizing – to really observe inconstancy – means that we are no longer in the sway

of, caught in, or seeing reality through the lens of our concepts, ideas, and stories. These too are part of the inconstant, changing world. Stories come and go – they arise and they pass. There is all this change, flow, and movement in the story-making, concept-making mind. Everything is flowing and changing.

How do we really get into that and rest in it? The Buddha taught this because it is liberating. This is where freedom is found. This is the core insight of the Buddha's teachings – over and over again – to see inconstancy, change – to see, maybe we can say, impermanence.

This is represented by a number of things. The first person who was enlightened, after hearing the Buddha's teachings, exclaimed and proclaimed their awakening with the statement:

*Everything that has the nature to arise has the nature to pass away. Everything that arises passes away.*

The Buddha explained that everything that is an experience is inconstant. Concepts might not be. The ancient Greeks had a lot of controversy and debates about the nature of impermanence, change, and inconstancy in this world. This is a common topic for philosophers. The famous philosopher Plato was not

that comfortable with: “Everything changes.” He wanted to have something that was permanent. With the little bit I know about him, I believe that he settled on the idea of platonic concepts – there are ideas that are unchanging.

But ideas are not direct experience. The Buddha, over and over again, places us in direct experience – breathing with it, being mindful of it, feeling it – entering into this inconstant world to know it, because that is the way to freedom. As I said, the first person who was enlightened said everything that has the nature to arise has the nature of passing away. There is something about this insight that is liberating.

When the Buddha died, I believe one of the first statements someone said became a funeral chant for Buddhists. It is said to be the saying by the arahant of the fully enlightened one. The chant in Pali is:

*Aniccā vata saṅkhārā.  
Uppāda-vaya-dhammino.  
Uppajjitvā nirujjhanti.  
Tesaṃ vūpasamo sukho.*

[Translates:]

*All things are inconstant.  
They have the nature of arising and passing away.  
Those who see deeply into this truth,  
Experience happiness.*

This happiness is not being totally delighted and happy all the time. Instead, it is a deeper happiness, contentment, satisfaction, or intimacy – that we are in touch with what is real in this world of ours. Even if this world is full of suffering – which it is – the violence against Asian-Americans lately, the shootings in so many places in this country, most recently in Boulder. You cannot say we are happy in relation to that.

But there can be a feeling of rightness that, “Yes, if this happens in the world, we want to be present for it.” We want to know it. It is right to be aware of it – even if it’s painful. Even if it touches some of the deepest strings in our hearts. To have the capacity: “This is what’s happening. Yes, let’s be present for it. Let’s breathe with it.”

All the steps of *ānāpānasati* can be relevant for this – feeling that pain. But feeling the pain is not the same as feeling suffering. The freedom of this practice – the rightness of this practice – is to feel this world, be present in this world, without suffering. Feeling the pain of this world willingly, so we can also have compassion for it and care.

We prepare ourselves for all that this world has to offer so that we can offer ourselves as someone who is

loving, compassionate, and caring. We live in this world in a way that supports the betterment of all beings everywhere.

May all beings everywhere be free.

Thank you.