

Mindfulness of Breathing (30) The Mind as Activity

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Continuing these talks on *ānāpānasati*, mindfulness of breathing, we enter into the domain of mental activity. The Pali word for "mental activity" is *citta saṅkhāra*. *Citta* is usually translated as 'mind' and *saṅkhāra* as 'formations.' This week, I've been calling *citta saṅkhāra*, "activities of the mind."

It turns out the mind is not the container or the organ for mental activities. The mind is unlike the brain, which many in the modern world think of as the organ for mental activities. *Citta* itself is an activity. It's the sum total of all the activities of what we might call the mind. *Citta* is all the activities of the mind as we experience them – as we can know them.

The idea that the mind itself is an activity encourages us to not take the mind as a particular thing. Not to reify it, or treat it as a foreign object. From the Buddhist point of view, all we have as human beings are the activities of life that are operating together to make us alive. When the activities of life are no longer here, we're no longer alive.

One of the activities of life is the activity of the mind, the mental activities. To start becoming aware of the mind and appreciating it is the task in the middle stages of *ānāpānasati*. It's important to appreciate that this happens in the middle. There's been a lot of emphasis on breathing – embodied breathing – and on being rooted in the body, really feeling the whole body. Starting to feel a real sense of well-being, contentment, and joy in the body – spreading that contentment throughout the body – has also been emphasized.

There's a movement towards becoming whole. In the classic language, it's becoming unified – where everything is included. As we move through *ānāpānasati*, it's not so much that we're starting to emphasize the mind more. Rather, we're opening up wider to become more inclusive of this whole.

If we're very quiet, still, centered, and in the body, the body – because it's so well taken care of and is no longer a challenging place to be in deeper meditation –

begins to recede as a central focus of awareness. The quality of the breathing tends to change. As we go through meditation, it's fascinating to watch the different stages that breathing will take.

Sometimes breathing will become very quiet, subtle, and still. It's so quiet that sometimes it seems as if we've stopped breathing. The first time that happened to me in meditation, I was very content with a lot of well-being, sitting very still. There was no trouble at all. Then I noticed I hadn't breathed for a while. With fear, I immediately gasped for breath. I had this thought: "I'm going to die!" But there was no danger of that. It was just the idea that we're supposed to be breathing all the time. That breathing had seemingly stopped was a bit jarring for me.

Eventually, I learned there's plenty of oxygen getting into the bloodstream – even when the experience of breathing has gotten so still that it has seemingly stopped. The body and the breathing sometimes seem to recede.

Then the sense of wholeness and inclusion begins to include the mental activity, the mind. We begin appreciating that it's possible to understand the body itself – not the physical body, but how we *experience* the body – is a byproduct or is contingent upon our mental activities.

If the mind is really quiet and still, the construction of the body – the making of bodily experiences, interpreting the body, and focusing on the body – begins to recede as well. The body as it is experienced begins to become more porous, transparent, and translucent, until it also seems to disappear.

The activity of the mind is part of this. In some forms of Buddhism, it's said that the activity of the mind is all we have or is all there is. They say consciousness is all there is.

But I don't think the Buddha would say that. He would say that most of what we experience – the experience of life – is very much conditioned and affected by the quality and activity of the mind itself, of *citta*. *Citta* activity, the activity of the mind, is actually a hugely important part of our life. It's how we construct ourselves, our world, and the way we live in and experience it.

To start becoming aware – not this complicated idea that we're constructing our own experience or influencing it greatly. But to begin appreciating that it's possible to quiet, still, and soften the mind. Not necessarily doing it too intentionally. It tends to happen as we start getting more and more settled, unified, and less in conflict with the mind, the heart, or the world. As

there is less being for or against things, the mind tends to become quieter. The activity slows down.

But slowing down doesn't mean we become slow-witted. As I've said over the last few days, the mind operates so much better – more clearly, creatively, intelligently, and wisely – when there's less active energy, less applied energy given to our thinking, to the mental activity.

The mental activity begins coasting, or comes into harmony, where there's no resistance to anything. It begins to operate in a very harmonious, deep way – almost effortlessly. There's a movement of quieting the mental activity.

Part of *ānāpānasati* is to recognize what mental activity feels like – the experience of it. That's how we can start becoming aware of how energetic and tense it is – how much pressure, contraction, resistance, and agitation there is in mental activity. Then to hold that in awareness. Breathe with that. Be aware of that. And when it's easy to relax, calm the mental activities – but don't do it too much or make it a big project.

In fact, the bigger project than calming the mental activities is to get to know it – step seven of *ānāpānasati*. I can't overestimate how important it is for people who do *vipassanā* practice to learn the art of

knowing the experience really well. Knowing how to be with the experience without being for or against it – without being actively engaged, or trying to do something with it.

When that's learned well, then it's a good time to actively quiet and soften the mind, the mental activity. To let go of our thoughts and preoccupations. Not to do it because we have to, but because it's wise. Not to do it because we're expecting to be successful, but because we're quiet, peaceful, and calm enough – so why not? Why not let the mind become even more still and quiet?

Appreciating the mind as activity, and relaxing and calming it. And beginning to appreciate and recognize the ways in which the mental activity has become calmer and quieter. That's to a relative degree. If you're super agitated, it's really good to appreciate that now you're half-agitated. Earlier, you were a hundred percent agitated. Rather than feeling upset about the fifty percent agitation, celebrate it.

Any movement in the right direction in meditation should be celebrated, rather than giving yourself more material for why you're not far enough along or not doing better. Appreciate the calmness and tranquility of the mind.

For the Buddha, tranquility begets tranquility. He actually used the word 'food.' Tranquility is the food or

the nourishment for more tranquility. So, as you relax and calm the mind – as the mind becomes calmer – nourish yourself with that calm. Take it in. Enjoy it. Let it spread and be more a part of who you are. Appreciate it!

I've had situations where I've been calm enough. But the authority of my thoughts and my sense of responsibility were so strong that I felt like I had to think about things. I couldn't sit and appreciate the calm. But tranquility is the food for more tranquility. You're allowed to take in that food. You're allowed to be nourished by it when it's there, when it comes.

Step seven of *ānāpānasati* is:

Breathing in, one experiences mental activity.

Breathing out, one experiences mental activity.

Step eight is:

Breathing in, one calms the mental activity.

Breathing out, one calms the mental activity.

I hope you enjoy that. But I hope you don't set up an excited mind in opposition to a calm mind. There are times in life when it's quite wonderful to be excited and engaged in things. To be able to be relaxed and fluid in going back and forth between a happily excited mind and a happily calm mind is one of the joys of practice.

Enjoy your day. Thank you.