

# Mindfulness of Breathing (38) Experiencing the Mind

February 22, 2021

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

mind, mood, experience, activities, windshield, expansive, *ānāpānasati*, *citta*, mental activities, mental state, heart, heart-mind, equanimous, cat

## Gil Fronsdal

We're now beginning with the ninth step of *ānāpānasati*, mindfulness of breathing in and breathing out. The ninth step builds on the earlier steps. Some who teach *ānāpānasati*, the practice of sixteen steps, will insist that you should always begin with step one and systematically work your way through all the steps. There are some advantages to that. Some people's minds really like having order and clear, definitive steps. The mind gets organized, focused, and concentrated, knowing what it is doing step-by-step.

Other people find that it ties them in knots to do it this way. They trip over themselves. There is too much trying and expectation. Some people find that it is good to be familiar with all the steps. Then, as we sit and

meditate, we discover where we are – what the salient step is. Sometimes we can start on steps five, eight, nine – or any of these steps because we sit down and that's what's available. Sometimes we move up and down in the course of meditation.

These steps can be done linearly for those who find that beneficial. Or they can be a resource for those people who want to track themselves and understand the domain or territory of what's happening or what the emphasis is in their meditation at any one time.

When we get to the ninth step, it is helpful that the earlier steps are familiar and developed to some degree. The more we are grounded and relaxed in our body, the more we begin opening up in a holistic way to our experience. We begin working through some of our knots, entanglements, tightness, and tensions.

The second tetrad, steps five to eight, is to begin feeling and sensing the emotional tone of the body. If you're quite relaxed and focused, there is contentment and well-being. With that, it is easier to begin trusting that it is okay to relax the mental activity. We don't have to be so actively involved in fixing, solving, remembering, planning, criticizing, or in whatever the mind is doing. The activity of the mind can begin to rest. This resting, releasing, or making the mental activity calmer continues the process of becoming more holistic, being

more inclusive, more open to our experience. Based on that, it becomes easier to experience the mind.

Step nine is:

*Breathing in, one experiences the mind. Breathing out, one experiences the mind.*

I love the word experience. The Pali word could be translated as “to feel the mind.” It is not thinking about the mind. It is not having ideas about the mind. But rather, it is something more holistic, broader. It uses the range of our sensory apparatus to take in our inner life.

The mind is not the details or the particular activities of the inner life. As I’ve said, the mind is just the sum total of its mental activities. It is the way in which we can somehow take in the totality of whatever way *your* mind experiences the mood, mental state, overall configuration, or balance of it all. That is what we call mind.

I say this because there are a lot of people who would like the mind to be something in particular – to define it and know what it is. I don’t think that the emphasis in Buddhist practice is to know, in some abstract way, what the mind is. That is a topic for some other occasion, some purpose other than meditation.

In meditation, we are only interested in how each of us experiences our mind. For some people, the word heart is a better translation for *citta*. Some people even translate *citta* as heart-mind. It is the state of the heart, the state of the mind, the quality of our inner life. It is the mood or the atmosphere. It is the sum total of how all this works.

Sometimes there is a predominant mood of the mind. The predominant mood can be desire, lust, or strong wanting. Everything is seen through the filter of this strong wanting. It is almost like the mind has an overall force, like, “Give me that.”

We have a cat at home. I am delighted and amazed to see the cat definitely has desires. It seems like everything – the whole “catness” – is focused on getting what it wants. It is clear that desire is there – the mood of desire.

The mind may be like the overall disposition that we have. Sometimes it is not desire. You can feel the difference between a general mood characterized by desire and one which is not. Sometimes it is aversion, hostility, or ill will. You can see it sometimes in people. There is almost a cloud of anger or hostility around them. That atmosphere could be experienced on the inside as well.

There can be the absence of ill will. There could be love. There can be confusion that characterizes it all. The mind is jumping around not knowing what it wants to do and not understanding. The general tone of the mind is feeling lost.

There can be the absence of confusion. There may be clarity and wisdom. The overall mood of the mind state can be one of distractibility, jumping around, or scatteredness – or it could be one of being present and undistracted.

One of the great mind states, which the tradition talks about, is when one can know the mind is expansive or large. Or one can know the mind is not expansive, not large.

This points to how – as we develop this mindfulness and reflexive awareness of awareness itself, of the mind itself – that seems to change the mind. It is then harder to focus on only the things we are thinking about or are aware of. Something begins happening when we are aware of awareness, aware of the mind that knows, or aware of the mind state. It's like when someone points out to you how dirty your car windshield is, you're now aware of the windshield as you drive. You're not focusing on it, but you can't *not* see it anymore.

To become aware of the mind changes the mind. The mind is not a physical thing. The mind is the sum total of the mental activities that are operating. One of the key mental activities is knowing itself. If the mind is known – if we bring attention to the mind and the attention is not for or against, not with expectations, demands, or criticisms – but rather it is relaxed, equanimous, allowing awareness of the mind – that is a mental activity in itself, which then feeds back into the formation of the mind as a whole.

We are shaping our mind all the time. The brain may not change that much. But the mind is very flexible. The Buddha emphasized that the mind is very, very changeable. It changes with all our moods, activities, and what is going on.

Mindfulness itself, meditation itself, does have an effect on how we experience the mind. The instructions are:

*Know the mind, or experience the mind, breathing in and breathing out.*

As we do that, everything we do with the mind feeds back into shaping the mind and the experience of the mind.

We start being in a kind of loop or cycle where, as the meditation deepens, we bring more and more equanimity, openness, and receptivity to whatever our

experience is, including that of the mind. This brings those qualities to the mind itself.

One of the reasons we're trying in meditation practice to develop equanimous mindfulness, which is not for or against experience is that this is good in and of itself. As this gets stronger, it feeds back to reshape or reform the disposition, quality, and state of the mind. The mind itself begins feeling more receptive, soft, expansive, and all kinds of wonderful things we'll talk more about.

It might be difficult for some of you to follow what I'm saying. Maybe you can think about it as your mood, the feeling tone, or the emotional tone of your inner life, mind, or heart. You can certainly be aware of it anytime at all. But you may be aware of it after having meditated for some time. For example, the first eight steps more or less prepare the ground for mindfulness of the mind to have a wonderful feedback loop – to condition or open the mind in a deeper and deeper way that allows for concentration to develop.

I'll talk more about the mind over the next couple of days. In the meantime, what you might do as you go about some of your regular daily tasks like washing up, cooking, or driving is to start noticing the mood with which you do them. Really know the mood. Don't just check it off, "Oh, I'm annoyed at the exercise." Really experience the mood.

One way to make sure you've given enough time to experiencing the mood is to breathe with the mood. Take time to breathe with it for a while. Get to know it, and start recognizing your mood. As you go through your daily life, start recognizing how your mood shifts as it is known, as you experience it, and as you breathe with it. Don't overlook the windshield by looking through to what's on the other side.

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