

Satipaṭṭhāna (4) Knowing and Experiencing

January 6, 2022

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

awareness, toolkit, attention, know, feel, feeling, experience, sensory, physical, breathing, long breath, short breath, particularity, anchor, sensations, rumination

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I am continuing with the four foundations for awareness. This particular set of practices, which the Buddha teaches, calls upon our toolkit of attention. We can think of attention as a toolkit with different component parts or tools. We have tools for being attentive and present, for helping awareness become established.

Knowing is one of the tools or supports for establishing, maintaining, and letting awareness grow. We talked about the simple knowing of breathing. Feeling is another tool for attention that the Buddha talks about in this text. I am using the word “feeling” here as a synonym for “experiencing” – allowing oneself to experience sensations physically. Feeling is a physical,

sensory experience. For some people, the subjective, embodied experience of feeling is a stronger entry point into the present moment – to be established here in awareness. For other people, it is knowing. For yet other people, it is their ability to settle back and observe what is happening.

Knowing, experiencing, and observing are all parts of the toolkit that support awareness. In this discourse of the Buddha, the first instruction or exercise in breathing is to know. As we breathe in a long breath, we know it is a long breath. As we breathe out a long breath, we know it is a long breath. It is the same for a short breath. As we breathe in a short inhale, we know it is a short inhale. As we breathe out a short exhale, we know it is a short exhale.

We know the particularity of breathing. To vaguely be present for the breath coming and going does not give an anchor or strong rootedness in the experience of breathing. Instead, we want to know the particularity of breathing. For me, the idea of long or short represents all the different things we can know about breathing.

If we are aware of breathing in the chest or belly, we can know the feeling of expansion on the inhale or contraction – a gathering together – on the exhale. We can be aware of a sense of pressure or movement. We can be aware of tautness, tightness, and fullness. We

can be aware of a feeling of release. We may be aware of some pulling in or contracting during the inhale. There is a whole range of particular sensations, which are slightly different for each person, day, and breath. Knowing the particular sensations that come into play helps us to be rooted in the present moment.

It is not chasing after all the possible sensations we can have. It is not about busily trying to catalog the sensations. We know the sensations as a way of helping us be established more and more here, in the present moment, with our experience. As we do this, it works as an alternative to the mind wandering off into all kinds of thoughts.

One big movement in meditation, especially for beginners, is to train the mind to be present for something that is not the world of discursive thoughts. The attention is present for something healthy, wholesome, and useful to be centered on. It is an alternative to the way the thinking mind distracts, fragments, and undermines us.

They say that one of the leading causes of depression is rumination – endlessly thinking the same debilitating, discouraging, critical thoughts. Rumination is also probably a leading cause of anxiety – imagining all kinds of dangers.

An alternative is to keep coming back and find ourselves rooted here. It becomes self-reinforcing after a while because there is goodness. A feeling of rightness, gathering ourselves together, unification, concentration – a sense of ease and lightness – begins to come together as we stay with the breathing.

Knowing is one of the faculties that supports that. Gentle, relaxed, soft – I like to think of this as the natural way the mind knows things. There is a clock next to the camera I look at for YouTube. As I am saying this, it is obvious to me that the clock says 7:39 a.m. I do not have to work to see that. It is so obvious – I see it, I know it. The knowing is that easy. It does not mean straining and investigating intensely, “What is actually going on here?” Rather, it is centering ourselves in that experience through knowing.

Experiencing or feeling, the tool of attention the Buddha talks about after the tool of knowing, can also be done with breathing. We can *feel* the subjective experience of the body breathing. What is the body’s experience of breathing? The very things that we can know with the first tool – knowing what is happening – can also help us feel what it is we know.

Feeling provides a bit of protection from knowing being only a cognitive event. We can also feel, sense, and experience the sensations of breathing – their texture,

flavor, taste, fullness. For some people, that actually works better. They primarily feel the subjective experience in their bodies. They sense and rest in that experience. As they do that, at some point, knowing what they are experiencing becomes clear. But for other people, knowing comes first, and then they can feel.

The direction the Buddha takes this text is to know and then experience. (This may be because one has to start somewhere in a text.) The way he words it is:

Breathing in, one experiences the whole body.

Breathing out, one experiences the whole body.

I will talk more about that tomorrow.

For now, I suggest, as you go through your day – maybe meditating at least once more before tomorrow – focusing on where you feel your breathing. So, the instruction would be as you breathe in – experience, feel, sense what it is like to breathe in. As you breathe out – experience, sense, feel what it is like to breathe out. Rather than the whole body, use just the part of the body that is engaged as you are breathing. And rest in that experience.

Again, it is not probing, penetrating, or forcing ourselves onto the experience. It is almost relaxing – and receiving the experience. That may happen more with the inhale. The exhale can be about relaxing and letting go.

Today I may have given a lot of instructions, but the idea is to keep it simple. Perhaps choose the simplest way that supports you. For the next 24 hours, try to see if you can discover more richness or fullness in the experience of breathing.

Maybe use a timer to remind yourself to check in with your breathing. “How is my breathing now? What does it feel like? What is the experience like?” You can discover a lot about yourself through your experience of breathing. How contracted is it? Is it tight? Where in the body are you breathing? Is it mostly chest breathing or are you breathing in the belly in a relaxed way? Is it uncomfortable to breathe? Are there restrictions in breathing? Does it feel easy and flowing?

The idea is not to be critical of anything. Just drop in and feel, “Oh, it’s like this” – and experience that for a while. Try to do whatever you can to familiarize yourself with the experience of breathing at different times throughout the day.

We will continue tomorrow. Thank you, everyone, and may you have a wonderful breathing day.