

Mindfulness of Breathing (33) Establishing Awareness

February 16, 2021

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

awareness, *ānāpānasati*, mindfulness, meditative experience, concentrated, simplicity, establish, attention, allow

Gil Fronsdal

We're halfway through the sixteen steps of mindfulness of breathing. This week we will review and begin over in a way. We're not really starting over completely. Though, in meditation, it's useful to think that we're always beginning again.

We are active in our lives. We often have ups and downs. When we sit down to meditate, we seldom drop into the depths of where we were before. Rather, there's always a beginning over. To learn how to be a beginner, and engage in a way that is harmonious or supports an enjoyable settling-in is part of the art of meditation. Not to be in a hurry or striving, but diligent and wholehearted – showing up in a way that feels like, "Ah, this is really good – to be here."

In the Buddha's instructions, the preparation for the first step is to *establish* mindfulness, establish awareness. I like the expression "establishing attention here." I've asked people how they understand the idea of establishing awareness. Many people respond that it means to allow for and enable it. Awareness or attention is a capacity that operates in all our conscious moments. To establish this is to open up more fully to what's already here, and to center oneself in that awareness – to be rooted in the present.

Some scholars have said the Pali word for 'establish' could also mean to “stand next to” or “stand close to.” It means to really accompany something and links to the idea of having awareness established as though it's truly rooted *here* in the present moment.

A fair amount of what we have to do is to let go of the ways thinking preoccupies us so much that we don't even know we're aware. We get pulled into the drama of our stories and concerns. When we let go of the storylines, thoughts, ideas, and preoccupations, we're clearly cognizant: "I'm here in the present moment." Something as simple as: "I'm here in this body. I'm here in this place," begins to be established.

The question is: “What does it mean to establish yourself here in awareness, in attention, in a way that's

wholesome, helpful, or even healing – really being here in the midst of what's going on?" There might be a lot of emotional turmoil, difficulty, physical pain, or ongoing challenges in the environment. If it's appropriate to be meditating, what does it mean to establish yourself peacefully?

Another way of expressing this is the idea of sitting and practicing without being in conflict with anything. What does it mean to sit here without conflict? So we look around and see where conflict is, "Where am I caught up in responsibilities, desires, or resentments, and what are these?" Not necessarily to let go of them if it's not easy. But what is it like to be established sitting in the middle of it? This image of sitting in the middle and just being present for the experience.

When my son started kindergarten, he was young, perhaps four and a half years old. For the first month or two, he would find a little chair and place it right in the middle of where all the kids were playing in the classroom. He sat and watched everything that was going on. After a couple of months, he left his chair and started interacting and playing with the other kids. No one ever felt he was troubled, upset, or afraid. That's just what he did. He sat confidently in the middle and took in the whole new environment. He established himself in the chaotic room full of kids playing and

running around. So to establish oneself is to root oneself here.

I know some teachers who have emphasized that simply having your two feet rooted firmly on the ground, or meditating with your butt firmly on the cushion is where the heart of it is – really established here.

There was a teacher who gave a wonderful teaching. He said that because the mind can sometimes be wild and agitated, the definition of a successful period of meditation is one where you did not leave your seat. He elaborated that it may be like a rodeo, but you stay in your saddle, your seat. The reason he called it a success was because we don't give up or give in to it.

Sometimes it's just simply hanging in there and staying. It doesn't look like a wonderful meditative experience, but we're cultivating a lot of strength and stability. We're cultivating the ability to keep our seats, to hold our ground: "I'm staying here."

What's the nature of how we establish and practice awareness and attention? This took me a long time to understand because I sometimes had a lot of agendas when I was practicing. Sometimes I had an agenda to get concentrated. I was pushing, straining, and trying my best. Then judging and comparing myself when I was meditating in a room with other people. Part of me

was trying to catch up or to be as concentrated or mindful as they were. All this swirl of the comparing mind, needing to accomplish something, like proving myself.

Then there was the attitude of not liking what I saw in myself and being upset with this and that. The mindfulness had a sting. It wasn't just being mindful of something. There were little barbs poking or criticizing me – together with being mindful.

Slowly, I learned to simplify the awareness without all the extra stuff that we bring along. Some people would say the whole process of meditation, the 16 steps of *ānāpānasati*, is a process of simplifying awareness so it comes into its pristine purity or simplicity – just aware. To see clearly without the seeing having any filters or obstructions.

To just see – and to trust that this is enough. The actions of how we take care of things will come later. We're learning an ability to see in a clear, simple way, which allows us to see better what can be done or said. There's more wisdom that way. This is a quest for simple tranquil awareness, which is committed, established, and stays here with the experience.

It may be inspiring to remember the saying:

*If you want the wisdom of how to live in this world –
become tranquil.*

Have your awareness established in its simplicity, and learn how to be content with that. That is enough. For now, it's enough to sit here and be present. The action or the response can come later. So, establish awareness.

Let us all continue with our awareness practice. Thank you.