Mindfulness of Breathing

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 58:00

I think this has been a very successful day for practice because we've reached nearly the end of the first full day and everybody's still here. Congratulations and well done. The first days often are difficult. As you know from earlier retreats, it can take a while to settle in. So please don't get discouraged until about the third or fourth day.

The subject of tonight's talk is mindfulness of breathing. I wanted to talk about this because these are the instructions that we've been working with for the first couple of days. When I thought about talking about mindfulness of breathing, I realized that I needed to put it in the context of the Buddha's whole teachings. When I looked at doing that, it became like one of those Russian dolls—you know, where you take off the head and there's a smaller one underneath, and then you take off that head and there's a smaller one. I want to unpack the Russian dolls that hold mindfulness of breathing.

The first is the Buddha's first discourse, where he talked about the four noble truths: the truth of suffering, the cause of suffering, the end of suffering, and the way to the end of suffering. It's said that the whole rest of his teaching career—forty-five years—was just footnotes to those four teachings. This is the biggest container that we'll talk about, the Buddha's Four Noble Truths.

Within the Four Noble Truths, the way to the end of suffering is the Eightfold Noble Path. Within the Eightfold Noble Path, in the meditation section, we have right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. So now we're in the territory of mindfulness.

Within the territory of mindfulness, the way right mindfulness is described is in terms of the four foundations of mindfulness. Within the four foundations of mindfulness, the first foundation is mindfulness of the body. And within mindfulness of the body, the first thing mentioned is mindfulness of breathing.

So these are the containers: Four Noble Truths reveals the Eightfold Path, reveals mindfulness, reveals the Four Foundations, reveals mindfulness of the body, reveals mindfulness of breathing. This is the little bit of the teachings that I want to talk about tonight.

I also want to bring in a discussion of what mindfulness is and why mindfulness of the body is important and then the role of mindfulness of breathing. So I want to hit those last three dolls as we get to mindfulness of breathing.

What is mindfulness? I find this a really interesting question because I've asked a lot of people, and as many people as I've asked, I've come up with that many definitions. You can go on the web and find tons

of definitions also, especially because mindfulness has come into the mainstream and scientists are getting interested in it. They want to get really precise.

The Buddha never defined mindfulness. I think this is really interesting. He never said mindfulness is A, B, and C. You have to get the flavor of it from reading all the different things he said about it. If you go on the web and listen to recent Western understandings of mindfulness, you can get a lot of different definitions. I'm always kind of amused when I go on the web and read that someone is the foremost authority on mindfulness because they have a PhD and they've been studying it academically, never mentioning that the whole concept came from the Buddha twenty-five hundred years ago. I personally consider the Buddha the foremost authority on mindfulness.

In wanting to understand what mindfulness is, I think it's interesting to look at one of his discourses. The Satipatthana Sutta is the primary teaching that he gave on the general development of mindfulness. To unpack that term: sati means mindfulness, patthana means establishing, and sutta means, literally, thread, but in the context of the teachings it means discourse. This is a discourse on the ways of establishing mindfulness. It's sometimes called the foundations of mindfulness, but it's how we establish mindfulness.

I want to read you some excerpts from that discourse in the operational way that mindfulness is developed. In the first foundation, there's this phrase: "Breathing in long, one understands 'I breathe in long.' Or breathing in short, one understands 'I breathe in short.'" In the second foundation: "Feeling a pleasant feeling, one understands 'I feel a pleasant feeling.' Or feeling an unpleasant feeling, one understands 'I feel an unpleasant feeling.'" In the third foundation: "When the mind is affected by hate, one understands 'the mind is affected by hate.' When the mind is not affected by hate, one understands 'the mind is not affected by hate.'" In the fourth foundation: "When the enlightenment factor of energy is present, one understands 'the enlightenment factor of energy is present.' When the enlightenment factor of energy is not present, one understands 'the enlightenment factor of energy is not present.'"

What do you take as the key word running through all of these? What word repeats?

Breathing in long, one understands, "I breathe in long."

It's this word "understands," isn't it? It occurs in every one of the explanations of how to develop mindfulness. So I take this word "understands" as pointing us experientially to what mindfulness is.

This word "understands" is Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation of the Pali word *pajanati*. It is very closely related to the term *sampajanna*, which is usually translated as clear comprehension. While Bhikkhu Bodhi translates it as "understands," the Venerable Analayo in his book on the Satipatthana Sutta translates it as "knows." This is interesting—one person says "knows," the other says "understands." You get the sense this word is somewhere between understanding and knowing.

I want to suggest, drawing from Guy Armstrong's definition as a modern Western interpreter of the

Buddhist teachings, that for us as practitioners, the working definition of mindfulness can be: understanding what your experience is in the present moment.

This is a lot less complicated than many of the definitions you'll read on the web. You can find some very long descriptions with a lot of added material, but I think for our purposes, based on the Satipatthana Sutta, this is a good way for us to think of it.

I like this definition because it's really simple and directive. Suppose you get in a situation where you become confused or a little lost, or you're not sure how to practice in the next moment. What this definition says is: take a look at what's happening in your present moment experience. If you can do that and notice what it is, you've reactivated mindfulness. That means you're back on track, and that means the path is engaged again. You've engaged the path to awakening.

This is really easy. No matter what's going on, you just ask—this is another way to put it—"What's happening now?" When you know the answer to that, when you understand, "Oh, this is what's happening now," mindfulness has been reactivated.

I want to put this out really as a practice instruction. It's my interpretation—other teachers may frame it a little differently—but I found that this really works. It's really simple and really helpful for me to remember. In any moment, this is how we turn mindfulness back on: we ask, "What's happening now?" We look and we see.

As Andy said this morning, it can be in any of the six senses. It could be sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thoughts, emotions, mind objects. Just take a look. One of those will stand out when you look.

The next question is: is mindfulness automatic? Is it always happening for you? Did it happen every moment today? No, not likely. If it did, please come sit up here and you can give us teachings.

We have to make a little bit of effort to be mindful, but that effort doesn't need to be very hard. For instance, if you put your fingertips together right now, can you be mindful of that experience of the fingers touching? Is that difficult? No. Mindfulness can be just that light and just that easy. It requires a little bit of attention to know it, but not much work.

The difficult thing with mindfulness is remembering to do it in every new moment, because we get distracted. We go in other directions. It's not hard to be mindful, but the intention has to be renewed frequently because it's not automatic. You can't just say at the start of a sit, "I'm going to be mindful this whole sitting," and have that happen.

During the sitting, you need to keep renewing that intention to answer the question, "What's happening now?" It's the renewing of that intention that makes mindfulness come into more and more moments of your day—more and more moments of your sitting, your walking, your working, your meals, your showers, your bathroom breaks, and so on—so that little by little, the whole day gets filled in with these

moments.

And that's what we're pointing to when we talk about the continuity of mindfulness. It's not that we expect mindfulness really to be continuous, but the aim is to make it more and more frequent. That is, fill in more and more moments of the day with this quality, simply knowing what's going on, what you're experiencing. And that's how it develops.

So it's very simple. And when you first come into a retreat like this, it may not feel like very much. When we noticed the contact of the fingertips, that probably didn't feel like an earth-shaking moment. But what's so interesting is that when you put one simple moment next to another, next to another, the power of the momentum of the continuity of mindfulness starts to build and it does become earth-shaking.

This is a practice that can take us to the depths of our being and give us a fantastically new approach to life—to our inner life, to outer life, to other people. So it's fascinating to me that such simple knowing, just knowing what you're experiencing, can lead to such powerful results.

I'd like to read this from the Buddha. This is toward the end of the Satipatthana Sutta, the Discourse on Mindfulness:

"This is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the surmounting of sorrow, for the disappearance of pain and grief, for the attainment of the true way, for the realization of Nibbana, namely the four foundations of mindfulness."

That's a big promise. And it all starts with such a simple act of connecting—connecting to the present moment.

Now, I think everyone admitted you weren't mindfully present in every moment of the day. So we have to look at the question: what's the alternative? When we're not being mindful, what's happening?

I like this cartoon in the New Yorker from some months ago. There was a person at work on their PC, supposed to be working on the keyboard, but there was a thought bubble—a fantasy, an imagination—of them on the golf course. Daydreaming, obviously. The next panel showed that person on the golf course, and there's a thought bubble as they're holding their club of them making love with a partner. Another daydream. The third panel—maybe you can guess—they're in bed making love with their partner and there's a thought bubble of them being at work on the PC.

This is the alternative when we're not mindful. We get taken over and carried away into these imaginings and into these thought streams. So where do they take us?

When we're not mindful, where does the attention go? It goes a lot into past, it goes a lot into future—remembering and anticipating. It goes into planning, into judging, into comparing, into views and opinions, and it goes into fantasy, some pleasant, some unpleasant.

We can talk about these as distractions. And to me, that sounds kind of neutral. You know, "I got distracted for a second, but now I'm back." But if you look closely at where the thoughts lead emotionally, is it always that neutral?

When you go into the past, do you sometimes go into regret, sadness, anger, conflict, judgments of yourself or others? When you go into the future, is it just a kind of clinical investigation, or do you go into wanting or longing or anxiety or worry or fear about the future?

Start to investigate what is happening when you're not being mindful. Is it just a neutral experience, like imagining what's for lunch? Or do some of these thoughts, memories, plans for the future take you into areas that are actually pretty emotionally charged?

In my observation, this happens a lot. When our minds wander, they tend to wander into areas that have charge for us. So it's hard to be mindful in the middle of a thought stream, but when you return to the present moment—which you will—check and see where the attention has been. When you come back, do you feel more peaceful, more settled, more contented, more calm, more happy? Or how often do you feel more agitated, more stirred up, more discontented, more upset?

This is not to be judgmental, because all of our minds wander in these directions. We're not wanting to judge this activity, but we do want to learn from it. We want to learn what's going on in our minds. Specifically, we want to learn what are our actions of mind, of speech, and of body that lead us into more unhappiness, and what are the actions that lead us into more happiness.

One of the key questions you can investigate is: where is the attention dwelling? And when the attention dwells in the present moment, how does that feel? Well, the present moment isn't always pleasant. Difficult emotion may be present. The body may not be so comfortable.

So coming into the present is not always a great experience. But because of our development of mindfulness, it holds this transformative potential. So it's where we want to place our bets, really, as meditators. It's what we want to trust in.

But when we wander away in extended thoughts, again, check it out. Do they lead to greater calm, contentment, happiness, and settledness? Or do those thought streams end up making us more agitated and dissatisfied? Do they tend to lead more to suffering? And where are we dwelling? Are we dwelling in the present, which has the potential to be transformative? Are we dwelling in past and future views and opinions, regrets and anticipation?

This is a really key distinction that the Buddha drew between what he called wise attention and unwise attention. We're always placing our attention somewhere. This is an interesting thing to see when you start to meditate and observe the mind. The attention is always landing somewhere. In Abhidhamma terms, the attention is what's called a universal factor. It's present in every waking moment. Where is the attention landing and where is it dwelling? We can examine this. We can start to observe the mind.

One of the great things, Joseph's first teacher, Manindraji said, "If you want to understand the mind, sit down and observe it." And that's really what we're doing here. It's really simple. We sit down and we see what it does. So one of the things it does, it moves attention from one object to another throughout the course of a sitting, a walking, a meal, moving about your room and so forth. Where is the attention landing and how long is it dwelling there? Is it dwelling in places that lead to greater calm, settledness, peace and happiness? Or is it dwelling in places that leave us more agitated and stirred up?

It's not that we can automatically control by will where the attention goes and for how long, but this is the interesting thing about the wisdom aspect of mindfulness. Remember I said that pajanati, related to clear comprehension, has a wisdom component. So mindfulness has an intelligent property built in. It understands, it knows. And that intelligence, when it wakes up, can look at attention, where it's dwelling that leads to happiness, where it's dwelling that leads to suffering, and learn from that.

You don't have to force it by will, but if you turn your mindful attention to that question, mindfulness will show you the answer. And more and more, just by wisdom, we learn, "I don't really want to hang out where I'm increasing my own suffering. I want to hang out with attention that's leading to greater happiness." So trust in this aspect of mindfulness. Trust that it will learn as you observe and show you the way. You don't have to figure it all out ahead of time. Watch what happens, what leads to happiness, what doesn't.

So, of course, wise attention to the present moment is one of the best ways to dwell. As the Dalai Lama said—you could say this about a lot of things—the present moment is the only place we can feel love or compassion or insight. All these beautiful qualities come about when we can connect to the present moment. So this first benefit of mindfulness is that we spend more time connecting in the present, less time in the agitated thoughts of past and future. That leads to more settledness and we start to learn how the mind operates, what leads to suffering and what leads to happiness.

But I think you all know it's not that thoughts are the problem or that thoughts are the enemy or that we shouldn't be thinking. We're not meditating to stop thinking. We're meditating to become aware of thinking when it happens. So we'll unfold the instructions in a few more days so that we can be as mindful of a thought as we are of any other present moment experience. But it takes a little stability to do that well, so we'll wait a few more days to do that. So just as Annie said this morning, anything that's happening can be a great ground for mindfulness, including thinking. And we'll get there.

So that's just kind of a broad view of mindfulness, the way it leads to peace, the way it leads to greater happiness, connecting to the moment. And then I want to talk a little bit about the next dallin, which is mindfulness of the body. Within the overall field of mindfulness, this is one that is really helpful and really central. Mindfulness of the body. It's in so many discourses of the Buddha's. Of course, it's the first foundation of mindfulness in the Satipatthana Sutta.

There's one part in the numerical discourses, the Anguttara Nikaya, where there are fifty discourses in a

row in praise of the benefits of mindfulness of the body—fifty discourses in a row. So that's very encouraging, very inspiring.

Here's one of the things the Buddha said in one of those discourses: "They do not partake of the deathless who do not partake of mindfulness of the body. They partake of the deathless who partake of mindfulness of the body." The deathless is a synonym for nibbana—the state of unshakable peace that the Buddha discovered in his enlightenment and passed on to us through his teachings.

Here's another beautiful statement from those numerical discourses: "When one thing is developed and cultivated, the body becomes tranquil, the mind becomes tranquil, extraneous thoughts subside, and all wholesome qualities that pertain to true knowledge reach fulfillment. What is that one thing? Mindfulness directed to the body."

So the Buddha encouraged us again and again to be really in touch with our direct experience in the body—as he said, to feel these experiences in the body, not as thoughts, but what's actually happening in the body.

I find this really interesting because ultimately meditation is about the mind. If we want to understand the mind, we sit down and observe it. We want to understand what mental actions lead to happiness and what lead to suffering. And if you look at some of the most important lists, you'll see how mental they are: the five hindrances, the four right efforts, the seven factors of enlightenment, and the five spiritual faculties. These are all about qualities of mind, and it is qualities of mind that liberate.

The body can be completely free of pain, the body can be completely healthy, and yet it does not of itself have liberating potential. If it did, babies would be pretty much done—healthy babies might be enlightened! But it's really about our challenge to wake up the mind and its wisdom. That's what truly frees us.

So why is the body so central, so emphasized in the Buddha's teachings? Several reasons.

First, mindfulness of the body is always available. We can always drop in and feel the body and know what's happening. As a ground, it's always there for us—a great support in that way. If you're not sure what to pay attention to, just feel the body.

The Buddha himself said that while the body is changing, it's not changing as fast as the mind. So if you want someplace a little more stable to land, the body is a little more stable than the mind. That's why it grounds our attention, and you can feel that as you sit.

As you sit in stillness in the meditation hall, feel how the grounded calm of the body communicates to the mind. The mind absorbs the stillness that the body's manifesting. It's quite beautiful. We sometimes give the instruction to sit like a mountain, and you feel how the body can just sit through all kinds of storms. There could be mental storms, there could be bodily restlessness, and to some extent—it's one of the

beautiful things I appreciate when I look out—you all are sitting still and letting it go. The body stays there unmoved in a way.

This quality of unmovedness communicates to the mind. It's one of the reasons that sitting meditation has a certain power. Of course, we need to discover this unshakable attention in all the postures, but the sitting posture does communicate something of that unshakability.

Ajahn Buddhadasa, who was one of my teachers in Thailand when I was in robes, said, "Don't do anything that takes you out of the body." This is an interesting practice instruction for the day. See what it would feel like to stay in the body most of the time, to really inhabit it, as Annie mentioned in the walking. Can we really inhabit our body all day long?

This is a very helpful practice direction, and it's in such sharp contrast to much of Western culture. I think about James Joyce, the Irish author. One of his characters in Ulysses was a man named Mr. Duffy, and Joyce's description was: "Mr. Duffy lived a short distance from his body."

When you feel into that, you get the sense of a withdrawal from life—separation from the vital energy of the body into some kind of headspace, too much thought.

Disconnected in some ways.

As we stay in touch with the body, one of the great benefits is that we remain connected to our emotions. Often it becomes difficult to stay in the body because the emotions have grown too uncomfortable. Particularly for people who have experienced trauma in life—whether from personal incidents, physical abuse, verbal abuse, sexual abuse, racism, or homophobia—the body can become full of trauma's residue, making it challenging to inhabit. Longstanding racism and homophobia can be traumatic as well, leaving their mark in the body.

Mindfulness of the body isn't always available to all of us. If contact with bodily energy feels overwhelming or threatening because of this residue, then mindfulness of the body may not be the preferred anchor. In such cases, speak with your teacher to find the best approach. Mindfulness of sound might serve as a helpful alternative.

But if you're able to rest attention in the body without too much difficulty, it serves as a wonderful channel for staying in touch with emotions. If the mind is agitated, the body will likely be as well. If the body feels calm, the mind will often be calm too. It's an excellent place to check in and feel what's happening.

When any strong emotion arises, it manifests in the body. Happiness brings an uplift. Joy creates a surge of energy, perhaps in the chest. Fear appears as strong contraction. Anger might tense the neck and shoulders. By staying in touch with the body, you know what's happening in the mind when these strong emotions are present. This contributes greatly to self-knowledge and self-understanding.

As Annie mentioned, when we bring attention into the body and truly inhabit it, we notice the impact of breathing. Sitting and feeling the body, you begin to sense what breathing in and breathing out actually feels like.

Now we enter the terrain of mindfulness of breathing, the innermost of these nested practices. Looking at the modern history of Vipassana practice—I don't know if it's always been this way—but in the last fifty to seventy-five years, mindfulness of breathing has become the most emphasized practice. In my observation, among the teachers I've sat with, the books I've read, and the talks I've listened to, the first instruction is most often mindfulness of breathing. It has come to occupy a central role in our lineage, and there are very good reasons for this.

But as Annie said this morning, mindfulness of breathing isn't the right anchor for everyone. Just as mindfulness of body sometimes isn't helpful, mindfulness of breathing isn't always the best place to settle.

Let me share a few reasons why, before exploring what makes it so beneficial. If you've had difficulty breathing at some point in your life—perhaps childhood asthma or a life-threatening situation where you felt you couldn't breathe—mindfulness of breathing may reconnect you with that experience and bring up the fear and anxiety you felt then. In such cases, it might not be the best primary focus.

Another situation where mindfulness of breathing might not work well: if, like me, you were a perfectionist or striver in life or early meditation. When I started with mindfulness of breathing, I thought I couldn't miss a single breath or it wouldn't work. I stayed really tightly focused, trying to catch every breath that passed. Of course, I couldn't. But attempting this made me incredibly tense. Only after extensive meditation with other objects did I learn to relax enough to return to the breath in a truly easeful way.

Notice your relationship to the breath as you begin connecting with it. If you find yourself becoming tense around it, speak with your teacher. Perhaps there are ways to bring relaxation into mindfulness of breathing, or maybe a combination of breath with another focus would be most helpful. Talk with your teacher and see what makes sense for you.

The central discourse in the Buddha's teachings on this topic is called the Anapanasati Sutta, the discourse on mindfulness of breathing. It appears in the Middle Length Sayings, like the Satipatthana Sutta, and contains a long section describing all the benefits of mindfulness of breathing.

One thing I find particularly interesting: at one point in his teaching career—the Buddha was fully awakened at thirty-five before he began teaching, then taught for forty-five more years—he went into retreat for three months. This meant: don't talk to me. I'm not coming out to give talks. I'm staying in seclusion and doing my own practice.

When he emerged, what do you think he had been practicing? For three months, he practiced mindfulness of breathing. I find this fascinating—someone already awakened still found it helpful to abide in

mindfulness of breathing. If it worked for the Buddha, it must be beneficial for us as well.

In mindfulness of breathing, notice where you feel it most clearly. This varies greatly from person to person. Some feel it most clearly at the nose, others in the chest, still others in the belly. Some experience what's called whole body breathing—settling into the torso and feeling the expansion and contraction of the rib cage, like bellows.

Or some people like to follow the breath as it enters the nose, goes down, expands the chest, expands the belly, and then reverses on the way out.

So that was what? About half a dozen different techniques for mindfulness of breathing. And there are many, many more. You can add mental noting to that or not. There are lots of ways to feel the breath. All of them are good.

I'll give some more suggestions tomorrow morning in the instructions, but there's one particular aspect of mindfulness of breathing I want to talk about: connecting and sustaining. These are translations of two Pali terms called *vitaka* and *vichara*. They are the first two factors that go into developing strong concentration, and they are factors to some extent under our control. This is the beauty of connecting and sustaining.

The idea is this: let's say we take the breath as an object. When an in-breath begins, we connect our attention to it. This is the exercise in wise attention—I'm going to be mindful of the breath. So on the start of the in-breath, we make the effort to connect the attention to that experience of breathing in. That's connecting. That's *vitaka*.

And then once we've connected, we make the effort to sustain the attention there for a bit. This is the effort of *vichara*.

So the question becomes: how long should you sustain? What if I told you that you were no good unless you could sustain the attention for ten minutes? Would you succeed? No. So we're not going to say that.

The right length of time to sustain, according to us, is one half a breath. Can you connect at the start of the in-breath and sustain the attention for the duration of the in-breath? Then can you connect at the start of the out-breath and sustain the attention for the duration of the out-breath? That's enough. Is that doable? Sometimes, right? Sometimes you might just touch it and then off. But often you can sustain for half a breath.

Play with these two factors: connecting the attention at the start of an in-breath, sustaining it for the in-breath. Connecting it for the start of the out-breath and sustaining for the length of the out-breath. See what happens in your practice. It's the continuity of mindfulness that leads to the development of *samādhi* . These are two factors that help the *samādhi* to grow, and they are factors to some extent within our power.

Focus on developing these two qualities as you're engaging with the breath and see what happens.

Of course, you'll go away. Of course, you'll be gone for a while. Of course, you'll come back. When you come back, can you land with grace? Instead of saying, "Oh, I messed it up again. I was away. I was away for so long."

Here's a place you could ask: what's the right length of time to be away? What's that bar? Do you have one? No, but whatever time you were away, it was too long, right? We don't know the right length of time to be away, but whatever time it was, it was too long.

So we can't control the length we were away. When you're back, you can't really control how long you're back before the attention goes away again into thought and the loss of mindfulness. That's okay. The thing is that this is the training.

As we practice connecting and sustaining, we will be present more and more. We will be away in thought, lost in thought, less and less. That's the way it develops.

Now another name for this connecting and sustaining, which I really like, is aiming and rubbing. These are just different translations of the same words, vitaka and vicara. Think about it in this way: you aim your attention toward the first contact with the in-breath, and then when it lands, you rub it. Rub it with your mindful attention. When the in-breath ends, you let go of that. Then when the out-breath starts, you aim again and you rub for a bit.

This has a lovely kind of physical, almost sensual feeling of intimacy between the attention and the direct experience in the body. When we learn to aim and rub, we get some very nice results.

One is, of course, that you're staying connected to the present moment. You're not going off into the unwise fields of attention. The second is that when you rub any experience—whether it's a body sensation, an in-breath, an out-breath, an emotion, or a thought—when you rub it with mindful attention, you start to know it better. You start to learn about it because the wisdom is there in the middle of the rubbing. Mindfulness is learning at the same time that you're rubbing.

What do we learn? We rub the sensation of an in-breath. Maybe it feels like expansion. Maybe it feels like pressure. We rub that and one of the things we see is that any sensation within an in-breath has certain qualities. Expansion feels a certain way. Contraction feels a certain way. Pressure feels a certain way. These lead us into really understanding the bare physical nature of our bodies.

Formally, we would talk about these in terms of the four elements. By rubbing a sensation, by rubbing an in-breath, we start to get to know the body in terms of the four elements that make it up: earth, water, fire, and air. We start to see its primal nature—that my air element is just like yours, my earth element is just like yours, my earth element is just like the rocks and the trees. We start to see that in our direct experience.

We learn the individual nature of bodily sensations, the individual nature of the breath, but we also start to see its universal characteristics. We see that every sensation of expansion that arises also is of the nature to pass away. Every sensation of contraction that arises also is of the nature to pass away. Every in-breath passes away. Every out-breath passes away. We start to see this as we rub our experience with mindful attention.

We start to understand these universal characteristics of impermanence, of unreliability. Nothing stays the same connected with the breath. We might always like the breath to be smooth and comfortable and calm, but it's not always like that. It's not always reliable. We start to see all these things are coming and going on their own. We don't make the sensation of expansion be the way it is. We don't make the feeling of pressure be the way it is. The body is doing its own thing and to a large extent it's out of our hands. The body is living its own life.

Classically speaking, by rubbing we start to really see the three characteristics of existence: the impermanent, unsatisfactory, and selfless nature of what makes up our experience—in this case, of the breath, or you could say of the body. This is because mindfulness comes with built-in wisdom and the rubbing lets us get to know our experience directly. The wisdom will illuminate those truths for us.

When the Buddha talked about mindfulness meditation, he described two broad effects that it has. One he called samatha, the other he called vipassana. Samatha is tranquility, vipassana is insight—that's how we usually translate them. This means that as you develop mindfulness, part of what happens is you get calm, and the other part is you get wise. The samatha aspects lead to greater tranquility in body and in mind. The vipassana aspects lead us to understand the way our experience is constructed.

It leads us to see these three characteristics, which lead us into letting go. And it's the letting go that leads us into liberation. So we really appreciate both these developments.

The tranquility feels good in and of itself. Sometimes we think tranquility is primarily of the mind, but tranquility is equally of the body. When we come into meditation, often we've accumulated twenty, thirty, forty years or more of life experiences that result in the body having tension, having stored emotions. And when we sit, sometimes those things come through and the body doesn't feel so tranquil and the mind doesn't feel so tranquil. The samatha aspects of mindfulness start to allow that energy to move through and calm the whole system, calm the body and calm the mind. And then we find that we can sit comfortably with some degree of ease of both body and mind. This is the beauty of samatha.

This samatha can be developed to great depths, and when it's developed to great depths, it strengthens to a high degree the factor of concentration, of samadhi. Having met teachers who have developed this element to a very high degree, it is very impressive. Someone like Dipa Ma, an Indian teacher who visited IMS in the late seventies, an Indian woman from Calcutta—really beautiful being, radiated loving kindness. Her mind was so still and her heart was just open. In her presence you always felt loved. Ajahn Chah, a Thai forest master, had strong unification of mind, strong samadhi from very early on as a child.

He said for twenty-five years he had never felt anger. And U Ba Khin, who was a teacher of mine, a samatha teacher of mine both in Burma and here, was such a steady being. I never saw a flicker of reactivity cross his face. So settled, so in his body and so peaceful.

So the development of samatha can go to great depths. It's very beautiful. But we are not primarily focusing on that development here. We are primarily focusing on the development of insight, of vipassana, and samatha will come as a side benefit. So it's a beautiful thing, but we're not primarily practicing just for samatha.

In taking the breath as an object to develop vipassana, we want to have an open and natural relationship with it. So we might say that we will develop a slight preference for being with the breath, but it's not an exclusive, attached relationship. We can have other partners. So we may like to come back frequently to the breath and aim in that direction, but we're not clinging to it. So when another experience comes that naturally draws our attention, the attention can easily move there—whether it's sensation in the body, a sound, an emotion, a thought, a sight if we're walking outside.

By staying connected with the breath in vipassana, you will continue to strengthen the quality of samatha, but not in an exclusive kind of one-dimensional way. So mindfulness of breathing within a vipassana context has a nice combination of settledness and calming effect, but also an openness to all our experience—very open, wide mind—and an ability to learn through that practice from all the different sense experiences that we contact.

So trust in this quality of mindfulness in general, in mindfulness of the body, in mindfulness of the breath. It will be a consistent place to dwell with wise attention. It will keep you away from all those troublesome avenues of unwise attention. And it's also the gateway to insight. Through the wisdom properties of mindfulness itself, it opens the door to insight.

So I just want to close with mentioning a few of the qualities that the Buddha said mindfulness of breathing leads to. I'm going to really condense it instead of reading a section from the discourse. I'm just going to hit the highlights. The Buddha said that mindfulness of breathing can be used to develop tranquility, rapture, pleasure, gladness, concentration, and liberation. All of these are in our path as we dwell in mindfulness of breathing.

Let's just sit for a minute and let these words settle: mindfulness of breathing will develop tranquility, rapture, pleasure, gladness, concentration and liberation.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.