Mindfulness of Breathing: Ānāpānasati Practice and Its Central Role in Buddhist Meditation

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 57:14

In this evening's talk, I'd like to explore mindfulness of breathing in greater depth. While we've already discussed mindfulness extensively, I want to focus specifically on this foundational practice.

Most of you probably know that mindfulness of breathing stands as the premier meditation practice in the entire Vipassana lineage. Virtually every Vipassana teacher I've practiced with has placed it at the center of their instructions. The Buddha positioned it prominently in his teachings as well, as I'll discuss shortly. Moreover, this is the only meditation practice I know of that is shared in common among the three major Buddhist meditative traditions: Theravada, Tibetan, and Zen. All three traditions regard this as a primary practice, and I know of no other meditation technique of which this can be said. This widespread adoption speaks volumes about its significance.

Regarding the Buddha's teachings, he actually didn't offer many meditation techniques. Having read through more than 2000 pages of his discourses in English translation, I find relatively few devoted to specific meditation instructions. However, two discourses are most central for understanding mindfulness of breathing: the Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness, called the Satipatthana Sutta, found in the Middle Length Discourses or Majjhima Nikaya, and the Discourse on Mindfulness of Breathing, also found in the Middle Length Discourses, called the Anapanasati Sutta.

I realize many of you may not be interested in becoming Buddhist scholars, but I will offer some scholarly details along the way for those who are curious. There aren't many opportunities outside the three-month course where you'll encounter this material. We'll discuss the sutta names in Pali and these collections of discourses in their original language. Once you hear these terms a few times, they become familiar, and perhaps subversively, you become a Buddhist scholar yourself.

The Satipatthana discourse, which is the central teaching on the foundations of mindfulness and truly the foundation for Vipassana practice, contains a crucial clue to the meaning of mindfulness. The Buddha never explicitly defines mindfulness—as Sally mentioned the other night, if you asked around, we could probably generate a hundred different definitions. Search the web and you'll find dozens more. When I examine the Satipatthana Sutta, however, I discover an interesting point that points to what I believe is a central understanding.

The Buddha describes four foundations in that discourse: the body; feeling tone, which can be pleasant, unpleasant, or neither; the mind and mind states as the third foundation; and the fourth foundation,

somewhat mysteriously called dhammas, which I think of as dhamma principles—like mini-dhammas within the fourth foundation.

Let me read excerpts from all four foundations. From the first foundation, when the Buddha describes practicing mindfulness of breath: "Breathing in long, one knows 'I breathe in long.' Breathing out long, one knows 'I breathe out long.'"

From the second foundation on feeling tone: "When feeling a pleasant feeling, one knows 'I feel a pleasant feeling.' When feeling an unpleasant feeling, one knows 'I feel an unpleasant feeling.'"

From the third foundation: "One knows a lustful mind to be lustful and a mind without lust to be without lust."

And from the fourth foundation: "If sensual desire is present in one, one knows 'there is sensual desire in me.' If sensual desire is not present in one, one knows 'there is no sensual desire in me.'"

Having heard these excerpts from all four foundations, one word stands out that links them all. That word is "knows."

This word "knows" is crucial. The Pali word being translated is pajanati, which shares a root with the Pali term sampajanya, meaning clear comprehension. This word pajanati indicates that something is being understood. When Bhikkhu Bodhi translated this discourse, he rendered pajanati as "understands," while Bhikkhu Nanamoli translated it as "knows."

This key word pajanati, used throughout all the mindfulness instructions, reveals that we understand what's happening to us.

And this is what Sally was pointing to last night in her talk on samasati—we know what's happening. We understand what's happening.

So I'm going to suggest that we take this as our working definition for mindfulness. At least I do. And that is: mindfulness is knowing our present experience. That's it in brief. And then the postscript to that would be: in the context of the Buddha's view of reality.

You notice this knowing is connected with the four foundations. The four foundations are the Buddha's own categories, so it's in relationship to these categories of experience.

I find this a really beautiful thing to understand from two points of view. One is it's really simple, isn't it? To know what your present experience is. Let's say you're in the middle of a thought storm. The thought train has been running for a while and you've been to Bali and your home and your future work and your marriage relationship. Then you come back into the meditation hall and you go, "Wow, where am I? Where have I been?" All you have to do to get back is to notice what's happening. You can just ask, "Oh, what's happening now?" That restores mindfulness. It's so simple—what's happening now. And you take a

look.

The other thing that's beautiful about this approach is this word pajanati has understanding within it. That was Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation related to sampajanya. And what that means is there's intelligence there—there's intelligence in mindfulness. It's a native intelligence that we all have. All human beings have it. And when we're mindful, we're manifesting it.

This intelligence is the opening point of wisdom. This is how wisdom starts to develop in our practice, because it's an intrinsic part of mindfulness. And then it grows. Based on the properties that mindfulness brings along, the wisdom grows. But it's really right there in mindfulness—that's the start of wisdom.

So it's amazing that something this simple—"Oh, I know what's happening right now. I'm breathing in. I'm breathing in long. My mind is full of lust. I know what's happening"—it's so powerful.

This is a section from the end of the Satipatthana Sutta: "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."

How does this simple thing do all that?

The first thing I'd like to mention is this cartoon in the New Yorker that I thought was really quite insightful. It's in three panels. The first panel shows someone on their PC at work—they're sitting at a desk, working on their PC, typing away on the keyboard. But there's a thought bubble above their head, which is an image of them out on the golf course playing a round of golf. So that's kind of where they'd imagine themselves being.

The next panel shows them out on the golf course playing a round of golf. But there's another thought bubble, and that thought bubble is of them at home making love to their partner.

And then there's a third panel. The third panel is the person at home making love to their partner, and the thought bubble is of being back in their office at their desk on the PC.

This is kind of the opposite of "be here now," right?

This is what we might call "be anywhere but here" rather than "be here now." And this is precisely where our thoughts tend to take us, as Sally also spoke about last night. They transport us into past and future, into places where we are not.

When we engage in this mental time travel, we sometimes call it a distraction. We hop on a thought train—it's a kind of distraction that pulls us away from the present moment. Sometimes these fantasies can even be quite enjoyable; it doesn't seem too problematic.

But I invite you to take a closer look. When you've been riding a thought train and then return to the present, how is your mind? Is it calmer? More harmonious? More peaceful? More loving? More attuned to

what's around you? Or is it agitated? Stirred up?

Has that past and future thinking brought up uncomfortable emotions? Often when we journey into the future, we might feel anxiety or desire. When we drift into the past, we might feel grief at loss or embarrassment about something we did. These thought excursions open us up to genuinely disturbing emotions. This is the price we pay for not being present.

Mindfulness undoes this pattern. It keeps us here and prevents these disturbances. They're not merely distracting—for the most part, they're genuinely disturbing in their effects. This is something you can notice in your own experience when you return from a thought excursion: What has the effect been? To calm or to stir up? You can investigate this for yourself.

This is what the Buddha called unwise attention. He taught that it's unwise attention when we direct our awareness to things that will lead to more suffering. It's wise attention when we give our attention to things that will lead to wholesome states of mind, beautiful states of mind. Mindfulness is one of those most beautiful qualities, and it brings other beautiful states along with it. It's a very wholesome seed for further development.

This is mindfulness in general. Within this broader understanding, the Buddha identified the four foundations of mindfulness. The first foundation is mindfulness of the body—truly the foundation of the Satipatthana practice.

In the Anguttara Nikaya, the numerical discourses, there's a remarkable passage where fifty suttas appear in sequence, all in praise of mindfulness of the body. This represents a powerful statement of emphasis. The Buddha truly highlighted this practice, saying: "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 mindfulness of the body was truly central to his message. This is fascinating because ultimately meditation concerns itself with the mind. The qualities that cause suffering originate in the mind. The beautiful qualities originate in the mind. The hindrances are there. The enlightenment factors are there. The Brahma Viharas are there. They're all elements of the mind.

Yet the Buddha strongly encourages us to direct our attention to the body. Why might this be?

The body offers several profoundly positive aspects for meditation practice. One key quality is its constant availability. Mindfulness of the body can always be accessed, and it grounds our attention in a reality that's relatively stable.

The Buddha once said that if you're going to identify with anything—that is, create a sense of self around anything—do it with the body rather than the mind, because the mind changes so much more quickly

than the body.

You can get a sense of this. I think one of the reasons that sitting meditation is so powerful is that we take our seat and don't move for long periods of time. It's not that it's wrong to move if you're in pain or getting sleepy—you may need to adjust the posture or stand up. But there is a virtue to having the body be still. The virtue is that stillness of the body communicates a stillness to the mind. It's almost like the mind soaks up, through osmosis, the stillness of the body.

Sometimes I've often felt in sitting that the body is there relatively like a rock, and the thoughts and emotions are just crashing, crashing, crashing. But the body is a rock that just stays steady. Over time—and it may be over years—that stillness communicates a sense of stillness to the mind and becomes a source of equanimity to us. We have the sense we can sit through anything. We're not afraid of sitting through anything because we've done it so many times and come out the other side.

One of my teachers in Thailand was Ajahn Buddhadasa, who was a great master from the twentieth century. He had a saying: "Don't do anything that takes you out of the body." He was a great scholar who loved to study, a great meditator who loved the mind. Yet he said, "Don't do anything that takes you out of the body." That's how important it is.

Being in touch with the body also keeps us in touch with our emotional life. When a strong emotion comes, it will be felt in the body. Sometimes that's the first thing we notice. Oh, the body's feeling shaky—maybe there's some anxiety. Oh, the body's feeling tight—maybe there's some anger. Or the body's feeling really soft—maybe there's relaxation in the mind. The body tells the truth. There are books: "The Body Doesn't Lie," "The Body Keeps the Score." It's becoming well known. We can use it to find out what's going on in the mind as well. It's very helpful that way.

Within the mindfulness of the body comes mindfulness of breathing. In the Satipatthana discourse, mindfulness of the body is the first foundation. Within the first foundation, mindfulness of breathing is the first paragraph, the first pointing. That's how central it was in the Buddha's teaching.

The Buddha himself—this surprised me when I found this out—after he was enlightened, he still went into retreat. That could have just been because he was the administrator of a large and growing body of unruly bhikkhus and bhikkhunis. It was like, "Let me have some peace and quiet here." But he still went into retreat, and he came out of a three-month retreat where he had practiced mindfulness of breathing for the whole thing. He said, "If anyone could say of anything that it is a noble dwelling, a divine dwelling, the Tathagata's dwelling, it is of concentration by mindfulness of breathing that one would rightly say this."

That's high praise. If it was good enough for the Buddha, maybe it's good enough for us.

So I want to talk about why breath can be a really useful focus. I'm going to talk in praise of mindfulness of breathing. But I also want to point to some of the obstacles that can come up with it. I don't want to sell it as the be-all and end-all in meditation. It's really good for some people, quite good for a lot of people,

and not the best for a lot of people. So I want to talk about both the strengths and some of the potential pitfalls in mindfulness of breathing.

Why is it so useful? Number one, it happens by itself. Breath is part of the semi-autonomous system in the body, so it's always there. It's always happening, and we don't have to do anything to make it happen. So it's a focus that's always available to us. It takes care of itself.

It is basically a neutral object. Breath is not strongly pleasant, it's not strongly unpleasant—it has a neutral feeling tone. So it's not objectionable, but we also don't develop a lot of desire for it. That helps keep the mind in balance. Although it's not intrinsically pleasurable to a high degree, it brings pleasure with the mindfulness of it.

The first thing we notice when we can be with the breath is that we've stepped out of the disturbing thoughts. And in time we find, oh, that's kind of pleasant not to be bombarded by those thoughts and emotions. As we settle into the breathing, there's a sense of being able to relax more and more with it. So it does bring a sense of comfort and ease and some rest. That has a certain pleasant feeling in the body.

Once we discover the possibility for enjoying the breath as a focus, that enjoyment will bring us back to meditation more and more often. And that's a very helpful thing. To want to meditate is a wonderful opening. One other thing is that this quality of pleasure—the Pali term is *sukha*—is the proximate cause for concentration. As *sukha*, this feeling, develops in the body and mind, we become more contented. We're happy to rest there because it's pleasant, it's peaceful, and it's satisfying. So it's an opening for concentration.

As we tune in to the rhythm of the breath, we let the rhythm be natural. There's something calming about the rhythm. There's something soothing in it. You might just feel this for five seconds, but you can start to notice the breath has a soothing quality. That's part of its draw. That's part of its pleasure.

When I've done long retreats focused on the breath, what it reminds me of—the rhythm of the breath, and I may be making this up, but it's the image that came to mind—was being rocked at my mother's breast. Sally and I were in the San Francisco airport on our way here on Sunday, sitting around at the airport, and there was this young couple with a young daughter with them. I watched them for a while because I didn't have a lot to do, and they seemed like a kind family. The mother was often touching the daughter, just establishing that physical contact.

Then the mother sat down, leaned back in her chair a little bit, and the daughter crawled into her lap, put her head on the mother's shoulder and just kind of clung to her. The daughter was about three, I'd say, so she was still small, and she could fit on the mother's chest with her feet on the mother's legs. Her head was on her mother's chest, turned in my direction. The look on her face was one of absolute ease and comfort and trust. It was like there was nothing wrong in the whole universe for that little girl because she was on her mother's chest and being held. It was really a beautiful thing to see.

So that starts to come in—that sense of being rocked, being calmed, being soothed. The more we can let go of any attempt to control the breath, let the breath find its natural rhythm, and then that soothing quality starts to come through.

In the beginning, that's hard to do. It's hard to be mindful of breathing and not control it a little bit. We find ourselves directing: now breathe in, now breathe out, now breathe in. You may not say the words, but there's some intentionality often going on. That's okay. Don't worry about that. A little bit of control in the beginning is not a problem. But as the meditation deepens, the more that can be let go of, the more the natural rhythm of the breath can come through, the more we can let go and just be rocked by that.

Once we make a commitment to a certain focus in meditation, we know where we want to be when we are in the moment. That commitment really highlights when we're not there. So we'll know, oh, I wasn't with the breath for this period of time, which means I was away in some distracting thoughts, images, etc. The breath focus highlights the times we're away. And so it provides a very clear reflection of how the mindfulness is doing or not doing. We learn from that. We want to know when we're mindful and when we're not. The breath focus really reflects that in a very skillful way.

Breathing is a very elemental event. In the Buddha's language, one of the four elements is wind, the wind element. You could say air, the movement of air. Breath is all about the movement of air, which is nature, right? The air all around the planet—it's just part of nature. So an interesting question is, when does the air start being part of the planet and start being part of us?

We breathe it in, and there's a point at which coming in through the nose or through the mouth, it changes from being nature to being us, and then we breathe out, and it becomes part of nature again. How far does it go in before it becomes us? How far does it go out before it's not us anymore?

We start to see that us and nature, which we normally think of as external, not-self, are permeating each other all the time, going back and forth. This offers some interesting insights into anatta, not-self. The boundaries are to some extent constructed, conceptual.

Another fascinating aspect of mindfulness of breathing: the Buddha says in the Anapanasati Sutta that it actually fulfills all four foundations of mindfulness. It fulfills the body foundation right away—that's where it's based. In the second foundation, the sutta says, "I shall breathe in or out experiencing pleasure." There's the pleasant feeling tone of vedana, the second foundation. The third foundation of mind appears when the text states, "I shall breathe in or out gladdening the mind." Here's the mind state of gladness arising through contact with the breath.

For the fourth foundation of dhamma, "I shall breathe in or out contemplating impermanence." Wisdom can arise based on the changing nature of the breath. Is there anything really solid there? When you look closely at the physical sensations of breathing, is there anything solid or is it just like a ripple of tiny sensations? Up and down, in and out. Gone. Breathing lends itself to insight into anicca, impermanence.

And I love this instruction: "I shall breathe in or out, liberating the mind." Liberating the mind. Freedom in impermanence. The practice of breathing, mindfully breathing.

It's interesting—there's some new technology around these days to help train people in mindfulness of breathing. The whole breathing thing has become very secular. There's a company that has a headset you put around your forehead. It's basically an EEG machine, an electroencephalogram that measures your brain waves. There's an app on your phone that connects to the headset and tells you how your brain waves are doing.

A friend of mine had one of these on loan from the manufacturer. Sally and I were having dinner with them, and he offered to let me try it. I said, "Sure, I like technology." So I put this thing on and he revved up the app. He said, "Okay, now be mindful. Be mindful for five minutes. When you're mindful at a certain level, the app is going to make birds sing. That's the auditory feedback that tells you you're in some kind of a groove."

I started out and there were not many birds, but I thought I'm going to try mindfulness of breathing. I went to my nose where I've spent a lot of time in meditation, got very focused inside the nostrils. The birds really started going. The birds just went on and on while I was in touch with the air moving in and out of my nostrils.

Then at one point I thought, "I'm going to try kind of expansive awareness, sounds." The birds shut right up. It was so interesting. In a way, I thought, well, it's really measuring concentration because I was still mindful. I don't have 100% reliability on what the app claims to be measuring, but they definitely were on to something with those birds. It could be a really useful training device for a particular kind of meditation—not the be-all and end-all, but a very interesting pointing.

These are some of the beautiful things about mindfulness of breathing. Now I want to talk about some of the difficulties that can come, some of the obstacles. The first thing to say is breath may not work for everyone as a primary focus. I think we said that in the beginning. That's why we offered body posture and sounds as alternate anchors.

Because for some people, the breath is not the right choice. This doesn't mean you're a bad meditator or lacking some essential quality for awakening. It simply means that your particular system, the way it's constituted, will find some other focus more skillful for deepening practice. There's no blame or judgment in this.

One group I often see having trouble relating with the breath is people who have had asthma. If you've experienced asthma, especially as a child, and gone through that fear of not being able to get enough breath when young, paying attention to the breath can trigger that fear again and lead to panic. In such cases, focusing on breathing wouldn't be skillful, and there are other excellent focuses available.

Similarly, if you've had an injury—perhaps from a car accident that left an impact in your chest, whether

from hitting an airbag or steering wheel—the memory of that trauma can be triggered by placing attention on the breath in the chest. This would also indicate that breath focus isn't the most skillful approach right now.

There can be other sources of trauma as well, whether from childhood or adult experiences. When focusing on breathing becomes triggering rather than calming, it's not helpful.

In such cases, we offer other focuses. One is the whole body posture. Perhaps the area affected by trauma recedes when breath isn't being focused on there, allowing you to be with the sense of the whole body sitting and gain stability from that practice. The stillness comes into the mind from the stillness of the body.

Alternatively, there may be a part of the body unaffected by past trauma, illness, or injury where you can place your attention. I remember one Asian master giving instruction to a student whose mind was too restless: "I just want you to be with the touch point of your seat in contact with the cushion. I want that to be your primary object for a long time." This approach successfully calmed the thinking mind.

There are many ways to move forward skillfully.

Beyond these physical considerations, there are particular mental reactions that commonly arise when we commit to focusing on breath. I want to discuss four of them: striving, aversion to thoughts, judgment, and boredom. Sound familiar?

Striving is very common. By striving, I mean the desire force—the force of wanting in the mind when it connects to the field of meditation. For instance, you may have had wonderful retreats in the past, or even good experiences with breath in this retreat, but they've passed. Then what happens? "I want them back." We'll do anything in our power to recreate that former experience.

Or we pick up experiences we've heard about from friends, read in books, or seen on social media, thinking, "That person had that experience. I want that one too." We try very hard to make it happen.

This represents a fundamental difficulty. Because the breath can lead to states of calm, peace, and pleasure, we often develop lovely meditation experiences through breath practice. But when they go away—which they always will—we desperately want them back. So we try hard to recreate that experience.

But trying hard is acting out of desire. When desire is present, we won't have peace and calm—these are counter-tendencies. All the good movements in meditation, all beneficial unfoldings, come from acceptance of the present moment just as it is. When we're dissatisfied with our current experience and trying to make it different, we're in conflict. Reality is one way, our desire another. Guess who wins? Reality always wins.

We must learn to recognize striving and do our best to let it go.

Continue beautifying this talk (part 8/11). Maintain the same tone and style as previous parts.

Some years ago, I went to Burma to practice for six weeks with a Sayadaw I'd heard wonderful things about. His name was Paok Sayadaw. He had a monastery in the southeast of the country and was a deeply respected master of both concentration and insight. He had developed very powerful systems for both. I especially wanted to explore the concentration aspect with him.

When I arrived at his monastery and met him, he already knew I was coming. He'd heard that I was a teacher—though he didn't know whether I was a good teacher or a bad teacher, which was probably for the best. But knowing I was a teacher, he saw me every day for practice meetings where I would report my experience to him.

I want to say a word about Paok Sayadaw. He was a wonderful being and a wonderful teacher. He was always kind in every interaction I observed with him—with students, with other practitioners there. He was consistently kind. He had these twinkly eyes, and there was nothing he loved more in our relationship than to hear a good report on my meditation. That's what made him happiest—when I came in and reported some degree of progress.

We would have these practice meetings outdoors on his porch in the warm weather when it wasn't raining. I would often be behind other people waiting to speak with him, so I could hear their practice reports. I'd hear this young Burmese monk say, "Oh, I just spent yesterday in the meditation hall sitting for three hours in third jhana." Then I'd deliver my report, which was not quite so impressive.

Because he knew I was a teacher, I felt like I wanted at least for him to think I was reasonable. When I would go to sit, I'd notice this striving tendency come up. I wanted to experience something really positive that I could report to my teacher. I knew I was striving—I could feel what was going on in my body. My body got tight.

So I went to him to report this because I thought he would have a really good solution for my striving, really good advice for how to solve it. I explained that I was striving for a particular experience. His reply: "Don't do that."

Okay. So I went back to my little kuti and had to learn by myself how not to do that.

What I saw—and you've probably seen this a million times too—was that I was looking for a particular experience instead of just being with the breath the way it was. To be with the breath the way it is—this is innocence. This is our innocent interest in being with the present moment exactly the way it is, without trying to make it anything other.

When I could do that, just come back to the present moment with that innocent mind, things unfolded beautifully and the deepening started to happen. When I was with the breath in order to get somewhere

else, nothing would happen. Caught.

Look at this "in order to" mind state. We aren't with the breath with that kind of motivation in the moment. We're with the breath partly out of an understanding that it leads to wholesome states, but in order for it to lead onward, we have to approach it with innocence, openness, and acceptance. Then everything opens up for us.

This is the first thing—striving—because the breath can lead into pleasant experiences and we want them to happen again.

Another thing that develops is that we can develop an aversion to thinking. We start to realize that we're with the breath except when we go off on these thought trains, and we might be gone for quite a while. While we're away on our thought trains, we're not developing the relationship with the breath. I can't tell you how many times I've thought, "Oh my gosh, if it just weren't for these thoughts, I'd be doing great."

This can develop into an attitude: "They shouldn't be happening. If I'm meditating, I shouldn't be thinking." Because thinking is obviously what's causing the problem. That's a real bind, because none of us are going to stop thinking anytime soon. If we think that we shouldn't be thinking, we're going to tie ourselves up in knots.

Asaida Utajaniya says very directly: our practice is not to stop thinking.

Thoughts aren't the problem. The problem is our not seeing them. Thoughts will continue to come—there's nothing we can do about that. If we get the idea they shouldn't be happening, we're going to try to suppress that energy, and that's going to bottle it up. Eventually, it's going to explode. So we have to remain open to the arising of thoughts, but the aim is to see them soon enough that we don't get on the train. That's where mindfulness plays this protective role—it's a guardian of our mind states. We don't take those trains because they eventually lead to more dukkha.

This is where that phrase Sally introduced last night comes in: "not now." We see an appealing thought coming and we say "not now." Joseph Goldstein has a very nice phrase: "Nothing is worth thinking about." Take that to heart.

Now, of course, that's in a certain context. If nothing was worth thinking about, we wouldn't have made it here for this retreat together—we had to think to get here. But in the context of formal meditation practice, it's not worth thinking. Your most brilliant creative urges? Not now. Great insights that you want to explore further with long dharma reflections? Not now. Any kind of thought that comes up, you can say "not now" for the purpose of developing mindfulness.

There is a place for reflection in dharma practice, for sure. There are times to reflect on the teachings and how they relate to our own experience. On retreat, I tend to do those reflections during informal times—meal times, going for a walk after a meal, lying down before I go to sleep. And I tend to do them

briefly, making sure to keep the thought on a short leash. A few reflections, then come back. Check in with the breath, check in with the body.

Sometimes we think that if we think about a problem long enough, we'll solve it. Meditation can look like a really good place to think objectively about our problems in the hopes that we'll solve them. I like this quote from Einstein—I'm sure you've heard it: "We cannot solve our problems with the same level of thinking that created them."

Basically, conceptual thought doesn't solve emotional problems. Where emotional problems get solved is from a deeper level of stillness. Then we take a new look at them. We see things in a new way—we're seeing with new eyes, we have a new view. To get to that level of creativity, we need to let the mind still, let the conceptual mind drop into a deeper place of heart and mind and body that is more like our real home. From that kind of place, emotional problems can be seen in a new light and resolved or softened or let go. They don't get solved by thinking.

The next area that becomes difficult with mindfulness of breathing is the problem of judging ourselves—self-judgment in relation to the meditation. It's very easy to think as we settle down for a period of connecting with the breath, "I want to be with every breath this sitting. I'm going to try really hard. I'm not going to let one breath get away."

I used to notice I had an anxiety in meditation around missing a breath, because I thought it was bad to miss one breath. That was making me tight. Finally I understood: I can't get every breath. So missing some is okay. That helped me to relax.

When thoughts take us away, we feel badly—both that they take us away and how long we were gone.

Especially that harsh inner voice saying, "Oh, I'm such a crummy meditator. I was gone for so long." We judge ourselves for not living up to some imagined standard.

So I want to ask you: what's the right amount of time to be gone? Do you know? Is it in your control at all? This is what's so silly about this kind of judgment. We're assuming that we're failing or falling short, but falling short of what standard exactly? What standard? Has anybody ever told you what the right time to be away is? No, there's no answer to that.

And then we feel badly because we're only with a certain number of breaths in a row and we think we should have been with more. What's the right number of breaths in a row to be with? Has anybody ever told you that? No. But we judge ourselves for not measuring up to a standard that is entirely unarticulated. It's never been spoken. And yet we're convinced we're falling short. Oh, this is sad.

You all are here because you've received tremendous benefit from this meditation practice. You wouldn't have come and committed your six weeks or three months if you hadn't experienced huge benefits. What this means is the meditation is working for all of you. All of you are successful just the way you are right

now. You're succeeding in the meditation.

This retreat is going to be like your other retreats—you're going to succeed. You're going to learn a lot and grow in the Dharma. There's no possibility for failure with people who are committed the way you are, who have received the benefits the way you have. So simply don't believe those judging thoughts. You're making a good effort.

Steve Armstrong has a beautiful saying: "Make your best effort and let that be enough." It's a very good guideline.

The last challenge that comes with the breath is boredom. Anyone ever experience boredom with their breath? Because each breath looks suspiciously like the last one, doesn't it? "I've already been here ten thousand times today. What am I doing here again?" This is really common.

A couple of things to understand about boredom: boredom is basically aversion to the neutral. It's really important to see this because the breath is neutral—which is what makes it a good object—but we will occasionally get averse to it precisely because it's not enchanting us with desire or terrifying us with threat. It's so right in the middle that we think, "Who cares?"

Just notice that boredom is aversion to the neutral, so it's in the realm of aversive reaction. But the other component inherent in boredom is not enough interest. The antidote is to find a way to become more interested in your breath, in your breathing. Sally suggested a couple of approaches this morning with noting and counting. Over the next couple of days, other teachers will add more techniques so that you can truly come to rely on what Dawn spoke about—that spirit of gentle perseverance.

Just keep coming back, moment after moment, sit after sit. Keep returning to the breath. It may not be the most exciting object, but your relationship to it will deepen. You will discover things of genuine interest in it. We'll provide specific techniques in the morning instructions to help with that.

But there is always so much going on with one breath. Just look a little more closely. This means looking for more subtlety and looking for more detail. This is part of a factor of investigation, which is one of the enlightenment factors here, that really will help support and encourage your meditation and bring in energy. We need to bring in an appreciation for the fact that we're breathing.

So these are some of the really beautiful qualities about being with mindfulness of breathing and also some of the obstacles. We will mostly hit those obstacles at some point in our practice if we go long enough.

I also want to mention one other thing. This is a quotation from Ajahn Suchito, who was the abbot of Chithurst Monastery in England for many years. He's an English bhikkhu with a good sense of humor. He says that anytime you commit to a technique, you are eventually going to run into cravings. That is really true with mindfulness of breathing. You will want it to be a certain way. Of course, craving is difficult. But

we need to learn to work with it in the context of our meditation practice.

Just because there are these obstacles doesn't mean you should throw it out unless there is something in your constitution that makes it not a suitable object, not the best object for your focus, in which case there are other excellent objects. So please talk to your teacher if breathing is bringing up particular difficulties as a focus, and your teacher can help you find something that just works better. That's totally fine.

In the beginning, we have to do this mindfulness stuff with a lot of prompting. We have to keep bringing our attention back and encouraging ourselves: come back and connect with the present moment. Over a long time, this habit develops a lot of momentum of being in the present moment. There can be more and more of a sense of resting in the present moment and then opening to all our experience. We'll open up the instructions as we go over the next ten days and move in that direction.

Then you can have a sense of what Ajahn Sumedho calls an intuitive awareness. You trust in this awareness that is just able to know and respond to all the changing elements of our experience and still stay in balance and still stay peaceful. This will come.

Let me close with a quote from the Buddha: "Mindfulness of breathing is peaceful and sublime. It is an abiding in happiness that breaks up and calms unwholesome mental states whenever they arise."

This is where we're heading. At the end of the talks, we'd just like to sit in silence for a few moments and let the words settle.

Thank you all very much for your care around the COVID protocols. Hopefully in another twelve hours, we can relax them and watch each other smile. That would be sweet.

We have about half an hour now for walking. Then at the last sitting of the day at nine, Greg will lead chanting again. I really encourage you to come. It's a beautiful text that he's going to be teaching. Thank you for listening.

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