# Mindfulness of Breathing

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 55:47

So it's nice to see you all are still here. First days of retreat are often tough, and especially so when many of you have traveled from across the country. I can tell you from experience, the jet lag lasts a few days, in my case anyway. So it's not surprising if some of you are feeling tired today and took it a little easier on yourself. And of course, those of you who have been practicing, you'll just ramp up and show everybody what the real thing is, right? We're all easing into the retreat now.

Just one announcement before I start. If you haven't seen it yet, we will begin the one-to-one meetings tomorrow. I put a list on the board for the people whom I'll be meeting with tomorrow, so please check that out this evening if you haven't already. We've divided the group into three, so there will be ten people who we'll be meeting with on each of the interview days. It'll become clearer as we go along, but everyone should be seen in the next three days of meetings.

Tonight I'd like to talk about mindfulness of breathing. This is such an interesting topic because it is the one practice—the only practice I know of—that is offered in all the three main meditative schools in the Buddhist tradition. Obviously it's offered in Theravada, it's offered in Zen, both Rinzai and Soto, and it's offered in all the schools of Tibetan Buddhism. I don't know of any other meditation practice that is common to all the major schools. So there's something quite special about mindfulness of breathing.

Within our tradition especially, it is the premier meditation practice over the last 2,500 years. With all the senior Vipassana teachers that I've practiced with and learned from, all of them emphasized mindfulness of breathing. They not only taught it, they made it somewhat central in the way that they taught meditation. So we are in the stream of a very strongly established lineage—many lineages—in practicing mindfulness of breathing.

One of the reasons is because it is such a refuge. When it is undertaken, cultivated, and developed, it is such a refuge. It's really a blessing.

I was just reflecting today that all of us have recently come from the wider world into this very special retreat environment. Coming from the wider world, you all know that a refuge is needed because the winds of samsara are blowing as strongly and with as much difficulty now as ever in my lifetime. I won't go into the details because some of you don't know them, but the level of violence in the country, racially tinged, has continued. The climate crisis that we're facing is not being solved on the level that it needs to be solved at. COVID cases are rising across the country. The war in Ukraine, which I think all of you probably by now know about, is not winding down. And the political world is ineffective and getting more so.

If we look on the societal level, from my perspective, there's not a lot of good news. But if I look on the individual level, I see a lot of good news. I see a lot of growth in the Dharma, both individually in people that I'm in contact with, and in society as a whole. I see it making inroads and becoming more popular. So on an individual basis, there's a lot of hope for us. I feel a lot of optimism about all of you and us finding refuge through these practices.

If we can find refuge and clarity and some stability in a time like this, then I think we're doing well. We're obviously not in the most difficult situation in the world—there are wars in Ukraine and beyond. But given the general lack of stability and the rising level of violence and racism in the country, if we can find some mental stability within that and offer that stability to others in our circles, I think that's a real contribution. So that's something that I think is possible, and it's one of the reasons why I so much appreciate a place like this. Because we can find some peace of heart, peace of mind, and take that back into the world.

Just remember that we're not practicing only for ourselves, but to the extent that we can open and clear our own hearts and minds, that is a very big and perhaps rare gift to be able to take back and offer to the world. So our practice isn't just about getting quiet here, but it's about tapping deep reservoirs of understanding and compassion and then offering those back into the world. It's a refuge that we find and we ourselves can become a refuge to others.

Although as we enter more and more into the silent retreat space, we will probably talk less and less about the specific events of the world, please know that Sally and I are carrying those and care a lot about them. We're not forgetting the role of meditation within the broader social setting that we find ourselves in. The ripples from each of us will go out, have gone out before, will continue to go out, and we never know how far they'll reach. So I hope you'll remember that too—that your practice is to benefit others, and in the broadest sense, to benefit the whole world. May it be so.

In this section of the retreat especially, we are really dropping into a very powerful tradition that's 2,500 years old when we take up mindfulness of breathing. The development of this practice goes back not only to the Buddha's teachings, but to the Buddha's own practice, as I'll mention later. There are two main places that he talked about this in the Discourses.

One is in the cornerstone of the Vipassana world, which is the Discourse on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, the Satipatthana Sutta, Majjhima Nikaya No. 10. Mindfulness of the body is the first foundation, and mindfulness of breathing is the first part of the first foundation. That's how fundamental it was in the Buddha's teachings.

The second place that you probably know about is Majjhima Nikaya 118, which is the Anapanasati Sutta, the Discourse on the Mindfulness of Breathing, where the Buddha gives detailed instructions on how to practice with the breath for many, many benefits.

The Buddha wasn't keen on giving a huge number of explicit meditation instructions. Despite 45 years of teaching, despite basically 20 volumes of his translated words in English, specific meditation instructions don't occur all that often. And so for mindfulness of breathing to be so central in these two suttas is quite a strong statement. In tonight's talk, I'd like to go into why that is. To get into it, I want to discuss mindfulness in general, then mindfulness of the body, and then some details on mindfulness of breathing and some suggestions.

So the first thing I want to highlight is the question: what do we mean by mindfulness? It's everywhere now in society. Mindfulness-based stress reduction has gone all over the country and in other countries as well, gone into hospitals and therapeutic settings and many treatment facilities. When I was beginning my practice here many years ago, I would never have imagined that there would be a magazine called Mindful. And yet there it is on newsstands. Mindfulness on newsstands. Wow.

And yet, if somebody asked you to define mindfulness, could you come up with something? Let's say your mother or father or one of your kids tapped you on the shoulder and said, "I hear you're doing this stuff called mindfulness. What is it?" I've heard a lot of different definitions of mindfulness, and most of them seem to me a little too complicated.

So I want to read a section from the Satipatthana Sutta, which is the Buddha's main discourse on mindfulness practice. It's in your study guide. If you are interested in following along, it's on page 3, "Excerpts from the Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness." I want to read just a few lines from each foundation.

This is from the first foundation on the body: "Breathing in long, one knows I breathe in long. Breathing out long, one knows I breathe out long. When walking, one knows, I am walking. When standing, one knows, I am standing."

Second foundation, which is on vedana, feeling: "When feeling a pleasant feeling, one knows, I feel a pleasant feeling. When feeling an unpleasant feeling, one knows, I feel an unpleasant feeling."

Third foundation, which is on mind or mind states: "Here one knows a lustful mind to be lustful and a mind without lust to be without lust. One knows an angry mind to be angry and a mind without anger to be without anger."

Fourth foundation, which is Dhammas, or I like to translate it as dharmic principles: "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."

These are excerpts from all four foundations in the Satipatthana Sutta. Is there one word that stands out to you in this reading? Yes, "knows." One knows. That's the key, isn't it? To me, this is the operative definition of mindfulness: one knows.

When Bhikkhu Bodhi translated this passage, he used "one understands"—this is Venerable Analayo's translation here. Either way, one knows or one understands, it's a similar pointing. The Pali term that's being translated is pajanati. Pajanati is very closely related to the word sampajanya, which means clear comprehension. So you get that comprehension, knowing, understanding. Mindfulness is connected with knowing and understanding.

Put very simply, and I'd like to offer this as our working definition really throughout this whole retreat—because we'll come back to this a number of times—mindfulness is knowing our present moment experience. The parenthesis is that's in the Buddha's language, which is the six sense bases, the five aggregates. Knowing one's present experience in the Buddha's frame of reference, in the Buddha's foundations.

And I've heard countless lengthy definitions of mindfulness that use terms like non-judgmental and fully accepting and without greed, aversion, or delusion. I think that's gilding a lily. What we really need is this simple understanding: knowing our present moment experience. That's really simple, isn't it? And that's enough. The amazing thing is that it's so simple and it's enough.

For in the same discourse, Majjhima 10, if you want to look again at your study guide, quote number one: "This is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the surmounting of sorrow and lamentation, 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." Knowing our experience in the present moment does all of that.

How does it do that? Well, one of the ways we can understand how it does that is to look at the alternatives. What's the alternative to knowing our present experience?

There's a cartoon from The New Yorker that I like. It's in three panels. The first panel shows someone working at their desk on a PC, typing away, reading the screen. And there's a thought bubble above their head that indicates their daydream. The daydream is they're out on a golf course about to drive a ball. The subtext is, "That's really where I'd rather be."

Then the next panel shows the same person out on the golf course about to drive a ball, and there's another thought bubble in their head. That thought bubble is they're at home making love to their partner in bed. Of course the subtext is, "Wow, that's really where I'd rather be."

And then there's a third panel. In this panel, the same person is at home, in bed, making love with their partner. And there's another thought bubble, which is of being in their office, working on their computer at their desk.

These are the alternatives to mindfulness. This cartoon quite succinctly sums up the force of the distracted mind—always somewhere else than where we are. It's not necessarily that where we are is somewhere that's not good to be, but there's this distracting movement of attention that thinks there's more

somewhere else. This is the core of restlessness. Restlessness is really thinking there's something better somewhere else and leaning toward that.

So when we're not connected to the present moment, take a look at where the mind goes. The attention goes into these distracting thoughts of past and future and planning and remembering and analyzing and rehearsing conversations and so forth. What I think is sometimes not fully grokked by us in looking at this situation is the impact of those distracting thoughts. Because often in meditation we'll talk about returning from a distraction, bringing the attention back into the present moment. It's just a distraction. It sounds fairly neutral.

But take a close look in your meditation. When one of these distracting thoughts arises, is it emotionally neutral? It's not generally, is it? It wanders off into wanting or regret or blame or resentment or fear or insecurity. It wanders into places that have emotional charge. That's where our thinking is drawn. That's where our thoughts go.

When we come back from a distraction like that, are we generally calmer than when we took off? No. Generally these distracting thoughts stir us up. So it's not just a matter that we're missing the present moment experience. We're giving up a present moment experience, which is generally okay, to get involved in some kind of extended fantasy about past or future that's generally emotionally tiring and stirring.

One of the beauties of mindfulness is that it saves us from those kinds of disruptive and disturbing thoughts and emotions. The Buddha's term for getting lost in these unwholesome thought patterns is ayoniso manasikara—unwise attention. Unwise attention is that which leads into stirring up the unwholesome states of mind. Yoniso manasikara—wise attention—is that which wears down the disturbing states and leads to states that grow in the Dharma, that lead to our happiness and our wisdom. Attention to the present moment is one of those things that leads to our happiness and wisdom.

So mindfulness is making a clear choice moment after moment to be in the present for our own welfare and ultimately the welfare of others. And pursuing the distracting thought trains is a choice to stir the mind up and bring forth unwholesome emotions: shame, blame, regret, worry, anxiety, longing, fear, and so on.

So we are really, as meditators, learning how to choose the wholesome moment after moment after moment with this devotion to mindfulness and this renunciation of all the thought excursions.

Of course, we can't control this by an act of will. We may have tried for a long time. These thoughts will continue to arise, and sometimes we'll jump on the train. But we can tune into how it feels afterwards. When we've been on the train for a while and we come back to the present moment, how has it felt to be on the train? How does it feel to be back here? This is how we learn, moment by moment, what leads to our suffering and what leads to our happiness and contentment.

Within the overall field of mindfulness, the Buddha emphasized mindfulness of the body a great deal. It's the first foundation in the Satipatthana Sutta. In the Anguttara Nikaya, there's one point where there are fifty discourses in a row in praise of mindfulness of the body—fifty in a row! Here's just one:

"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. Unwholesome qualities decline and the qualities that lead to true knowledge arise."

I find it really interesting that the Buddha puts so much emphasis on mindfulness of the body because, when you get down to it, our meditation is all about the mind. We're not freeing the body—it's going to do what it's going to do. Our goal is to free the mind. That's why so much emphasis is placed on states of mind: the hindrances, greed, aversion, delusion, craving, clinging, and then the wholesome mental states—the seven factors of awakening, the five spiritual faculties, the brahmaviharas. These are all qualities of mind. It's mental cultivation that we're about.

Why then is there so much emphasis on the body? Here are a few reasons.

Mindfulness of the body has been probably my central practice over all the years I've been involved in meditation, and here's why I've found it so helpful. It's always available. Like it or not, the body's always here, so it often gives a very clear experience that we can pay attention to, and it's very valuable in that way.

Also, the Buddha said if you're going to identify with something—if you're going to say "I am this"—it's much better to identify with the body than with the mind. Why? Because the mind changes so much more rapidly. In the course of a few breaths, you can go from here to around the world, on a vacation, having your baggage lost, meeting your soulmate in a remote airport, and come back to here in a few seconds. But the body stayed right here.

Because of that relative stability—and it's only relative; the body's changing, cells are being born and dying, subject to illness, aging, and death—but relatively, compared to the mind, it's more stable. You feel this in meditation as you sit still, as we sit still in our meditation posture. That stability and stillness in the body transmits something to the mind. It transmits a sense of groundedness.

In a way, what we're doing is taking our seat, and the emotional waves come and go. Sometimes they crash like big breakers against a rocky cliff. Sometimes they're smooth, very pleasant. But we sit through all that wave activity because the body is still. And that says something. It says to the mind, "I can be with this." So the body ends up being, despite its vulnerability and being subject to pain, a grounding place and a source of stability and balance.

Ajahn Buddhadasa, who I spent quite a bit of time with in Thailand, had a nice saying: "Don't do anything that takes you out of the body. Stay in touch with the body all the time."

Now, I want to acknowledge, because it's a reality, that the body may not be inviting at times. If you've had past trauma that's stored in the body, if you have a lot of physical pain, if you have an injury, if you have an illness, it's not so pleasant to bring the attention into the body again and again. Then you'll need to figure out, you'll need to find your way of how to connect with the body at times and how to open to something more neutral—perhaps to sound, perhaps to images, perhaps to space—at other times.

Work with your teacher to find a way to navigate that kind of situation.

But if the body is relatively okay, it serves as excellent grounding. Being in touch with the body also keeps us connected to our emotions. If there's a strong emotion arising, we'll feel it in the body. When the mind is agitated, the body is usually agitated. When the mind is calm, the body is usually calm.

Sometimes we may not be so attuned to the subtlety of emotional movement, but if we check in with the body, we can recognize agitation or calm. Trust that awareness. As the books say, the body doesn't lie. The body keeps the score. It's real.

So when there's agitation in the body, take a look. What's going on in the mind? Sometimes you'll find it's old karma playing out in the body and not actually agitation arising from present-moment mind activity. But sometimes it is present moment. Even if it's old karma, there's often mental agitation accompanying the physical agitation.

So, mindfulness in general, mindfulness of the body, and finally mindfulness of breathing—the primary practice in 2,500 years of Vipassana. "When mindfulness of breathing is developed and cultivated, it is of great fruit and great benefit." This is quote two from the Anapanasati Sutta in your study guide.

Even after the Buddha was enlightened, he kept going on retreat. I find this so interesting. All his afflictive emotions had been uprooted. He wasn't suffering. And yet he still went into retreat, sometimes for three months at a stretch. On one of these three-month retreats, he practiced mindfulness of breathing the whole time. He came out and told the monastics, "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 for three months, it's good enough for us for ten days.

So why is breath such a useful focus? I want to list several special qualities of this focus.

One reason is that breathing happens by itself. It's part of the semi-autonomous nervous system, so we don't have to do anything to make it happen. That means we can relax. And in the long run, we learn to have that relaxing turn into resting. We can rest in a very receptive frame of mind, let the breath come and go, and provide a clear focus for wise attention.

Breath is always there. You can always find it on a meditation cushion, when walking, when doing the

dishes, when eating food at home, preparing a meal—it's always there. So it's a reliable companion.

Another great strength is that it's basically neutral. It's not going to be hugely provoking of desire or aversion. Basically neutral. So it's kind of easy to be with something that's neutral.

But it has the potential for a lot of pleasure. This takes some practice, but the potential is there. The first thing we notice with the breath is when we're in good relationship with it, there's an absence of disturbing thoughts. So there's a quality of peace that accompanies being with the breath.

As we get familiar with the relaxation that Sally was talking about this morning, and the sense of ease and comfort that can come with the breath, that creates a very pleasant feeling. So that's the opening to the pleasure of the breath—that sense of relaxation and ease.

Once we find that in our meditation, that becomes real motivation. We stop resisting the meditation. We know it's good for us, but we don't really want to do it. But when this pleasure element comes in, we kind of want to do it. And that will bring us back more and more to undertaking the practice.

This pleasure is not just a nice feeling—it's onward leading. The pleasure, the Pali term is sukha, which sounds like sugar and has the sweetness of sugar. It's said that this kind of pleasure, which includes relaxation and ease and contentment, is the proximate cause for concentration to arise. And I'm sure you all know how that works.

When you start feeling easy in the moment and can deeply relax into your body and into the present, you don't want to be anywhere else. This habitual restlessness of looking elsewhere for satisfaction or gratification, or to ward off the difficult, can rest, can relax. Just dropping into that ease brings contentment. And it's that contentment that allows the mind to collect and unify the way Sally was describing it this morning in the meditation instructions.

The other thing that is beautiful about the breath is its natural rhythm. When we're learning to let go of past and future and come into the present, letting the breath be natural, letting it come and go on its own, it finds a very easy rhythm. We're not controlling it. In that natural rhythm, we find there's a calm that comes from it. The rhythm itself is calming, is soothing.

I'm speculating a little bit, but I wonder if some of that soothing quality of the breath's rhythm takes us back to being on our mother's chest when we were babies and feeling that rise and fall, rise and fall in that position of absolute safety and nourishment. That's what it makes me think of anyway, back at my mother's breast.

So we want to open up and allow the breath to find its natural rhythm, but that's not so easy. As Sally mentioned this morning, it's always not so easy to relax in meditation or outside. When I first got into mindfulness of breathing, I would notice that I would be controlling the breath more or less all the time. There would be this little signal—it wasn't so much verbal, but it was: now breathe in, now breathe out,

now breathe in, now breathe out. I would sort of be telling myself when to breathe in and breathe out, following some rhythm that was an idea in my head.

So it took a while to trust and relax enough to let go of that. In the beginning, as you're with the breath, if you find a little bit of control coming in, don't worry about it. It's something that will fade as the relaxation deepens. You don't have to fight it. Just saying "stop controlling" is just another form of controlling. It'll come with the relaxation.

The other wonderful thing about paying attention to the breath is that it has its own balance. The in-breath feels one way and the out-breath feels another way. So tune into this. This becomes interesting to investigate. How does it feel when you breathe in? How does it feel when you breathe out?

Take a look at this word: *ānāpāna*—in and out breathing. *Pāna* is the Pali term. You know what the Sanskrit is? *Prāṇa*. It's not just a clothing line. *Prāṇa* is an ancient yogic term that denotes the in-breath, but it has connotations of the life force and energy. What keeps us going is *prāṇa* or *pāna*.

You'll feel that as you get quiet. You can feel how each in-breath picks up the energy. You can feel it ripple throughout the body. It energizes. It wakes us up. It lifts us up. And then the out-breath lets it all go. On the out-breath, we empty. Going out into space, the mind settles. Let go. Relax. So the uplift and the out-go are both there in one breath—a beautiful balance of energy.

Another thing that's powerful about mindfulness of breathing is that once we make a commitment to this kind of focus, it very clearly shows us what's not with this focus. As you get connected to the breath and its rhythm, when you go away from it for any period of time and you come back, it's really obvious. It's really clear: I wasn't with the breath. It may be just two seconds or three seconds, but it's very obvious. We were somewhere else for those three seconds.

It's interesting because in doing an open practice like choiceless attention, which we'll touch on later in the retreat, a lot of people love choiceless attention because it's not hard work. Being with the breath is hard work. When we're with choiceless attention, thoughts will often drift through and we won't even notice them. There will often be a subconscious line of thinking that is actually stealing our present moment attention, and we hardly notice because we're just open.

So when we commit to a focus, then what's not of that focus stands out really clearly. We see the mind's movements and we see the mind's habitual tendencies very clearly.

There's something funny I want to share here. Committing to a focus takes some courage, takes some discipline, takes some energy, takes some ardor. Ajahn Suchito made an interesting and rather ironic comment about it. He said anytime you commit to a focus, craving is going to come in. I find this really true, because we're going to find things we like and we're going to find things that are difficult in that focus. I'll touch on that again a little later.

Another beautiful aspect of the breath is that it's the wind element. It's an elemental kind of practice. The Buddha talked about four elements: earth, water, fire, and wind. Here we're with the wind element, possibly all day long. We start to realize the body is made up of the natural elements—of solidity, of fluidity or cohesion, of warmth or coolness, and of movement or wind. We begin to understand the connection between the body and the whole material world. This body has the same elements as the entire material world, and this is our moment-by-moment experience of the wind element.

It becomes interesting to investigate self and not-self with the wind element. When air comes in, it comes from outside, so it's not me. Then it comes into the nose. Is it me yet? It goes into the lungs, and then the oxygen attaches to the blood particles. Now is it me? Okay, now it's in the blood, now it's me. Then it goes to the body, and the oxygen gets used, and then it comes to the lungs again, and then the wind gets filled with carbon dioxide. Is that me? And then it gets breathed out, and then is it not me?

We start to realize we're porous to the world. There's no firm barrier, even between the body and the world, much less between me and not me.

The other beautiful thing about mindfulness of the breath is that the Buddha said it fulfills all four foundations of mindfulness. This is quite remarkable, and I would encourage you to look at your study guide again if you have it, at quotation two on page two.

You know the second foundation is feeling tone. In the bracketed section that's indented in the middle, you'll see a line that says, "I shall breathe in or out experiencing pleasure." So here we have pleasant feeling tone, pleasant vedana, coming as a result of the breath. We're into the second foundation of mindfulness through the breath.

A little further on, you'll see the next stanza: "I shall breathe in or out gladdening the mind." Gladness of mind is in the third foundation. It's a state of mind. It's part of citta. Here, mindfulness of breathing is satisfying the third foundation of mindfulness. What is the mind state when breathing in? What is the mind state when breathing out?

Then in the final stanza: "I shall breathe in or out contemplating impermanence." Impermanence is part of the fourth foundation. It's ground for insight, wisdom. So here mindfulness of breathing is fulfilling the fourth foundation.

All four foundations are complete—can be complete—within mindfulness of breathing. That's a powerful statement.

These are some of the qualities that are so rich about mindfulness of the breath and why it's worth spending ten days or three months practicing, learning, and developing this. There are many ways to approach relating to the breath. Sally gave beginning instructions this morning. We will offer many other alternative approaches over the days to come: where to be with the breath in the body, whether to use noting or counting, whether to combine the breath with different parts of the body. There are many, many

ways to approach it.

And all of them are fine in this context. In the context of these ten days of retreat, they're all fine. So we're not going to tell you that you have to practice being with the breath in this particular way, but we hope to offer some alternatives so that you find the way that works best for you.

I wanted to share one rather fun experience I had with mindfulness of breathing a couple of months ago. We were at a friend's house for dinner, and this friend was playing with one of those headbands that acts like an EEG. It monitors your brain waves and transmits the results to your phone. If you get into a certain groove, it can tell whether you're in a calm state, a neutral state, or an activated state. For meditation purposes, this is used to train yourself to be in a calm state.

I had never heard of anything like this—I didn't know there was such a thing. You can buy it on Amazon and pair it with an iPhone or Android phone. So my friend put it on me, turned on his phone, and the other three people sat around watching me meditate for five minutes to see whether I was going to be calm or active or what.

The cool thing about the app—what I thought was cool about it—is that if you get into a calm state, it plays bird songs. The bird songs are such positive reinforcement; you really want to make them happen. So I tried a few different kinds of meditation, and none of them were really producing many bird songs. Then I went to the nose and put all my attention on the sensations in my nostrils with in and out breathing, and the birds just went crazy.

I could sustain it for a while, and the app gave me a score of eighty percent at the end, which was rather gratifying. I could see how something like that could train someone through repetition to really get into a strong relationship—to get into a real groove—with mindfulness of breathing. At one point near the end, a distracting thought came up, and the birds went away. Oh, so disappointing! But I knew what I had to do to get them back.

These kinds of tools are out there, and they can be fun. I wasn't so interested in using it to train my mind because I've practiced this kind of breathing meditation extensively. But it was wonderful to remember what it feels like to really be on, to be in the breath and really give all one's attention to it in the present moment. It did accomplish that.

So those are the beautiful things about the breath. I also want to acknowledge that there are some real difficulties with the breath—some of which apply to all of us, some of which apply to specific situations. I want to mention these briefly and encourage you to talk with us, with Sally and me, if you run into them.

The breath may not be a good focus for everyone. What makes it not a good focus for some people is if there's a history of trauma, injury, or illness in the chest or around breathing. Then the repeated attention to that part of the body or to the breath can reactivate that trauma or past injury. For example, if someone has had asthma in the past and has felt themselves struggling to breathe, then being with the breath in

that close way may remind them of the struggle to breathe. It may be counterproductive.

It may be something the person can work through, or it may be that another option would be better for them. This is why it's helpful to talk with your teacher about it. Whether it comes from an illness like asthma or from a past injury or trauma connected with the area of breathing, another focus might be more skillful. Talk with your teacher and see.

As Ajahn Sucitta said, if we commit to a certain practice, we're going to run into cravings. There's a particular name for the craving that comes from meditating: it's called striving. Striving means that you felt something nice in your meditation and you want it back.

Because all the nice things that happen in meditation do pass, right? You know that. No state of mind is lasting. The beautiful states of meditation also pass, but we want them back.

It's very common in doing some days of concentration practice with the breath that you will find yourself in very satisfying states of peace, calm, contentment, settledness, and ease—where the mindfulness is effortless for periods of time. It might be thirty seconds, it might be thirty minutes, but you may find yourself in these situations. And then it will change, as everything does.

The next time you come to sit, you might want it back—quite understandably, you might want it back. Then you might try really hard to make it happen again: "Oh, I can't let these thoughts come in."

I've really got to bear down and not miss a single breath. I'm going to rev up this state of concentration again! Of course, this completely forgets how we got there in the first place – which was by relaxing. We forget that relaxing and accepting was the way into that beautiful state, and instead we strive really hard to reproduce it by working harder and getting tenser.

When I was practicing in Burma with Palak Sayadaw, I fell into this trap over and over. I would go to see him every day in the afternoon for an interview. He knew I was a meditation teacher in the States, so I felt I had a little bit of an image to keep up. But I also had to just be honest with him.

I said, "Sayadaw, I've really found I'm striving in my practice. Do you have any advice for me?"

I thought that after all his years of helping beginning meditators through all the hurdles of concentration practice – deeply committed students from around the world – he would have just the wisest thing to say. So he replied, "Don't do that."

And that was it.

I had to go back to my kuti and find out for myself how not to do that. I got better at not doing it, but it was a lot of learning.

Another way we can get caught is judging ourselves when we're doing a concentration practice. We can get caught thinking we're not doing it well enough. "Oh, I'm not good enough. I was with the breath for a

few breaths and then I was away for ten minutes on this chain of thoughts about something that happened last week before I came here. It was ten minutes before I could come out of it and come back to the breath. That's terrible. I'll never get anywhere with this meditation."

Not helpful.

This is a very common thing to have happen for all of us. I've been there many times myself. The first thing that's really out of joint with it is we think we have some idea of how long we should be away. "Oh, if I was a good meditator, I wouldn't be away ten minutes."

Well, how long would you be away? What's the right length of time for a good meditator to be away? Is it like never? No. Is it like one breath? No. I mean, get real.

We have this standard that we think we have to meet, but we have no idea what the standard is or where it came from. It's just replaying our habitual tendency to find fault with ourselves. So beware of that. If it happens to you, ask yourself: what's the right length of time to be away? There's no answer to that.

You are all experienced practitioners. Every one of you has lots of meditative background and experience and confidence. You wouldn't be here if the practice hadn't been of tremendous benefit to you. You wouldn't come for a month. It's been of tremendous benefit, therefore it has already worked, therefore you're already a good meditator.

So take yourself as the standard. "I'm a good meditator and I'm away for ten minutes." Well, that's what happens for good meditators. That's just fine. That's just fine.

The growing freedom is when we realize that we've been away and we make the choice to come back. We say, "That wasn't so helpful. Oh, let me connect again to the present. Let me connect again to feeling the breath." That's where the freedom starts to come.

There's another whole set of problems connected with our relationship with thoughts, but I don't want to get into it – it's a little long for our remaining time. So I'm going to end here for tonight.

And I'll just close with this quotation from the Samyutta Nikaya: "Mindfulness of breathing is peaceful and sublime. It is an abiding in happiness that breaks up and calms unwholesome mental states whenever they arise."

Well, that's our potential.

So let's just sit for a minute together. Let the words settle.

---

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