Mindfulness of Breathing Combined with a Body Scan

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 49:44

So today in the meditation, we're going to do something radical. We're going to control the breath. This is along the lines of Sally's response to the question yesterday morning about three different ways of relating to the breath. Sally emphasized that especially in doing concentration practice, where the qualities of piti and sukha are definitely to be cultivated front and center, we are going to use the breath in a way that may make the experience of sitting more comfortable.

This is just something for you, again like all our instructions so far, for you to try on and see if you like it. If it doesn't work for you, there's no need to continue it. If it does work for you, it's something you could do in every sitting. I do it quite often in my daily practice and in my retreat practice, because I've found it helpful.

This is not just some new age yoga innovation that we're bringing in and dumping on you to mix traditions. This was taught, I think I mentioned the other day, to Ajahn Thanissaro by his Thai teacher, Ajahn Phuong, who learned it from his teacher, Ajahn Lee Damodaro. We'll put out a book list at the end of the retreat, and I'll highlight both the books by Thanissaro Bhikkhu and by Ajahn Lee that explain this in more detail and why it's helpful, why it has been passed down.

With that, we can go ahead and move into the meditation. We're going to do the preliminary entry into the meditation the way that we've been doing it, with body, sounds, simple attention to breath, because I think this is just such a useful way to go into any sitting. Then I'll add the instructions for some degree of directing the breath.

Please sit comfortably. Find that balance in your posture of being upright, energetic, alert, and at the same time relaxed, grounded, supported. Become aware of your whole body posture and sitting, as it were taking it in with a glance from the top of the head right through the feet. So you have the sense of the body as a unit, an organic unit. Not so much watching the body as feeling the body throughout. The attention is throughout the body. Sensations are being known.

Then open the attention wider in a 360-degree way to take in all the sounds that are coming and going. Sounds from inside, sounds from outside. If there aren't any sounds at any time, just be aware of the extent of the silence. When a sound does arise, notice that it's heard without any effort on your part. It just arises and hearing takes place. If we just rest with a receptive attitude, all the sounds are heard spontaneously.

Then bring that same receptive attitude back into the experience of the body, taking in the fullness of the sitting posture felt from inside. As you feel the body, start to notice the sensations that are connected with breathing. With an in-breath, certain sensations take place and the body feels a certain way. With an out-breath, different sensations arise and the body feels differently.

Notice that the impact of a breath can be felt beyond the simple areas where you know the air is entering or leaving—nose, throat, lungs. The influence of the in-breath in a way spreads the energy throughout the body. Remember that pana in Pali links to prana in Sanskrit, which is an ancient term for the life force or energy. We can feel that energetic upswelling with the in-breath. On the out-breath, feel some energetic calming or release.

Now let's play a little bit with these energetic qualities. The first thing that I'll suggest you do—you can just try it on—is to take several long and deep in-breaths and relax fully on the out-breath. Try a few deliberately long inhalations, fill the lungs with air. Then consciously let it all go and relax on the out-breath. Breathing in long and feeling the energy rise. Breathing out long, feeling the release and relax.

In your own meditations, if this is interesting, you can keep this deep breathing going for a while. I sometimes have done as much as five minutes at the start of a sit to help with settling. Here we'll make it shorter so that we can play with the other instructions. Take one last big inhale and full exhale.

Now in this next part of the guiding, we're going to take the breath into different parts of the body, covering the whole body in connection with breathing. This is a little bit of a combination of a body scan with breath. Again, this comes from Ajahn Lee.

I'm going to use a term like "breathe into" an area of the body. Of course, we don't breathe in through any other area but the nose or mouth.

But the sense is, as you take an in-breath, direct your attention into the part of the body that I'm going to name. And as you have the out-breath happen, also feel that part of the body. So I might talk about breathing into the head and breathing out from the head. Just take a nice breath in and feel how it's impacting in the head. You almost have a sense that the breath is traveling from the nose or the lungs up into the head during that instruction. And breathing out, it travels down from the head and out through the nose or feeling the lungs.

So we're just playing with this to see how it works, how it's felt, how it changes our energy, our presence, our ease. What will help the body feel more comfortable and more at ease as we begin a period of meditation?

So on the next breath, have the sense that you're breathing into the head. On the in-breath, let your attention cover the whole head area. How is that felt? As the breath comes in, how is that felt in the head? As the breath exits, how is that felt in the head? Breathing in and out through the head.

And then the neck. Breathing into the neck. How does that feel? Breathing out from the neck, how does that feel?

Breathing into the right shoulder and out. It's as though we're rubbing this part of the body with the energy of the breath. The right upper arm. The right lower arm and hand breathing in and breathing out. The left shoulder. The left upper arm. The left lower arm and hand.

The upper half of the back. Breathing into this area and breathing out. Lower half of the back. The hips and touch point of the sitting bones with a chair or cushion. Bathing this area with the energy of the breath. The chest and heart center. The heart center is that area just below the breastbone in the center of the chest. The diaphragm. And the abdomen, breathing in to the belly, breathing out from the belly. In the lower abdomen, breathing in and out.

The right thigh. The knee, the right knee. The right calf and foot. The left thigh and knee, the left knee. The left calf and foot.

And now just a brief review, expanding the areas a bit. Breathing in with attention in the head. Breathing out with attention in the head. How is the head touched by the energy of the breath? Both shoulders and both arms. The whole back, breathing in, breathing out. The chest and belly. The hips and lower abdomen. Both legs and feet.

And now again, just taking up the whole body as your focus. Feel the whole body with the in-breath. Feel the whole body with the out-breath. Feeling the energy change. Uplift and release. Invigorate and relax.

And now allowing the breath to be natural and find its own rhythm. You can stay in touch with the whole body if you find that helpful.

Being the impact of breathing in and breathing out. Or if you're more comfortable being in a narrower focus with the breath, that's fine—nose, belly, chest, whatever is most suitable for you. Again, the experience is not so much of watching from above, but feeling from within, feeling the body in breathing.

At this point, feel free to add any of the other techniques we've talked about, such as noting, touch point, counting, or none of them. Just staying with a bare, direct experience of in and out breathing.

This kind of approach of directing the breath, of deliberately breathing in long, deliberately relaxing on the exhale is something that I think is especially suited to the development of samatha. Because when the body can relax more easily, the mind relaxes more easily. The instructions from Ajahn Lee are: do what makes the body feel good in this exercise of breathing.

Now you realize from the point of view of vipassana, this is a very slippery slope. We are not sitting on our cushion just to feel pleasant feelings all the time. That's not the point. We want to develop an equanimity of mind in regard to pleasant and unpleasant feelings. But especially in the preparation for a period of sitting meditation, it can be really helpful to start by being as comfortable as we can, because it really

allows the mind to settle.

So I kind of regard this exercise as an aperitif. The main course is just paying attention to whatever arises. But of course, we're doing a period right now of specific concentration practice. So you may want to even expand the use of what I would call this preparatory or entry exercise into a period of sitting meditation, keeping an eye on what allows the body to feel comfortable. And if you can use the breath at times—and I would say in limited times—to support that, then that can be really helpful.

So play with it. In my own practice, I would tend to do something like this in the first five to ten minutes of a forty-five minute or hour-long period. So I would sort of keep it in that section. And then I would just settle into letting things be the way they are, letting the breath be natural.

The reason that part is important: first, to develop equanimity around pleasant and unpleasant. But second, you don't always want to have to be the meditator directing the experience. You want to get to a point where you let go of doing. We're going to see this even more when we get into the awareness practice. The letting go of any form of doing is really important for the self to step out of the way more and more completely.

So again, the reason preparatory is very helpful. Long-term, you want to diminish the doing. But we can learn, as senior practitioners, you can learn to balance these two halves of practice.

So I'll let it go there, and we have a few minutes for questions or comments, if there are any.

"I remember reading about slowing down the breath, like the length of breath, because in modern days we breathe very shallow and faster. And I practiced it. It was really interesting because when I slow down breath, I move slowly. So with my pace of my life, I cannot do that. I feel like I'm unbalanced constantly. So my conditioned way of breathing is breathing pretty shallow and fast. So what is your suggestion to slow down breath but move as fast as I can?"

The question is about the rapidity of the breath. She notices that when she slows down her breathing, it brings more calm. But in the midst of daily life, in the midst of moving faster in activity, it's hard to breathe more slowly.

I find the same. And so I often make a conscious effort in my daily life when I can to slow down the pace of my movement. I have to say that a lot of you did retreats at home during the COVID years—not that we're out of the COVID years, but we're back in person, which is great, a different phase. And one of the things that I really liked about practicing at home is I could go at my own pace a lot more of the time, because I wasn't engaged in so many outside activities.

So that became a lesson for me. It really is helpful to slow down the pace of my movement. It really supports the development of mental calm.

Now, can you slow down the pace of your breathing while maintaining rapid body movements? That's a

good koan.

Well, I can't resist passing on a quotation from Joseph—one of my favorites—which is: nothing is worth thinking about.

Now I have to stress that's in the context of formal meditation practice. Obviously in our daily life, you need to make plane reservations or get somebody to water your plants. You have to think about that. But in the context of formal meditation practice, Joseph's bottom line is nothing is worth thinking about, even the most seemingly important things.

There's a quality about the concentrated mind where it can almost feel like it's unlocking chambers in our psyche. It's as if layers of the mind that were previously sealed become accessible, and all this material starts flowing. It can feel very compelling—like "This is the key to understanding my whole life!" But from a meditation perspective, this is actually just another form of mental activity that we can learn to let go of.

What I've found helpful is to recognize that these important-seeming thoughts aren't going anywhere. If they're truly significant, they'll still be available to you after your sit. The concentrated mind has this beautiful quality of clarity and spaciousness, and when you maintain that state rather than getting pulled into the content of thoughts, you actually develop a much more useful capacity—the ability to relate to your mental activity with some perspective.

So my suggestion would be to notice when you're getting caught in the stream, even when it feels very compelling, and gently redirect your attention back to your meditation object. You're not suppressing or pushing away—you're simply choosing where to place your attention. This actually strengthens your capacity to work skillfully with mental patterns both in meditation and in daily life.

The concentrated mind itself becomes a refuge. When you rest there, you're not missing anything important. You're actually developing the very stability and clarity that will allow you to see more clearly when you do need to engage with thinking outside of formal practice.

So I would encourage you, as far as possible, to let the thoughts go and come back to the simple experience of breathing. This will continue to deepen the concentration.

The fact is that as we get concentrated, we become more sensitive. When thoughts do arise, they can have more impact. This is something we'll also explore in tonight's talk. And there is a Dharma talk tonight, by the way. Since it's Sunday, we have our evening teaching. I'm going to speak more about working with thoughts in concentration practice. Thank you for providing such a perfect lead-in to tonight's topic.

Now for some quick announcements. There is indeed a talk this evening. Sally will be conducting the one-to-one interviews today, so those of you scheduled for today will meet with her in the Council House Library.

I don't know if we made this clear at the beginning, but each of us will meet with you once per week for

these individual interviews. Today is Sally's day, and she'll meet with a third of you. I'll meet with those same people the next time their interviews come around. The way it works out, everyone will have four one-to-one meetings with each of us over the course of the month—four with me, four with Sally.

We have three Dharma talks per week. This may seem a little light if you're accustomed to normal group retreats, but you all clearly love the silence and know how to work with it skillfully.

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