Mindfulness of Breathing: 3 Sensations in Inbreath & Outbreath

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 56:27

In the meditation this morning, we'll continue to explore our relationship to breathing. As we've said a few times, one of the key things is finding interest. Because the breath is so neutral and so repetitive, it's very easy to lose interest in it. We have to take some active steps often to keep the interest up. Otherwise, we tip into apathy and boredom.

Let me say one brief thing about boredom. Boredom is merely the aversion to the neutral. That's all it is. Things aren't exciting enough to grab our attention either in attraction or repulsion, so we need to overcome it. The antidote really is interest.

Part of interest is motivation. If we find ourselves becoming a little apathetic, losing interest, then it's time to reflect on what drew us here and to refresh that motivation and keenness of learning to help spark the interest.

This morning I'm going to suggest one more way to encourage interest. This is an instruction Sayadaw U Pandita used to give to the yogis who were meditating with him: investigate the in-breath and investigate the out-breath to find three distinct sensations in each one.

Focus for a while on the in-breath. Just explore the in-breath and see if you can notice three distinct sensations that occur in the process of one in-breath. Make them physical, really bare physical experiences. It could be expansion or contraction or tension or touch or something like that. Don't just say, "Oh, I noticed it was hard." Those aren't physical sensations. Look for direct physical experience.

An in-breath goes on quite a while. An in-breath is not just one thing—it's lots of little sensations. Wherever you're feeling, even in the nose, there are lots of little sensations, definitely in the belly, chest, the whole breath. See if you can identify three on the in-breath. If you can notice those three with each in-breath, that will really help keep up the interest. And then on the out-breath, the same thing: notice three distinct sensations. If you can find them on each out-breath, that will also help with the interest.

This is not something that I'm suggesting you should do at every sitting, to find three or track the three. But honestly, when a yogi would come back to Sayadaw U Pandita and report their three sensations, he'd say, "Good, now go back and find one more. Report that next time." So this is something that can be ongoing, but that's going to be up to you. Play with it and see. I find it really brings my curiosity and the attention right into the direct physical experience.

Be relaxed and comfortable and also upright. When we find this balance in the body through the posture, we're also setting a balance in the mind between being too loose and being too tight—having a certain degree of firmness at the same time as we're feeling relaxation, both in mind and body.

Again, going through these short preliminaries: feeling the whole body posture in sitting, letting go of any obvious places of holding or tension, opening the attention in a wide way to sounds inside and outside to bring in a sense of pure receptivity. And from that place of receptivity, returning the attention to the body and feeling the sensations of breath—again, where it's most comfortable for you or where the experience is clearest. It may be a narrow focus: nose, belly, chest. Maybe a broad focus: the impact on the whole body.

As you start to connect with breathing in and breathing out, first bring attention to the experience of the in-breath. In the course of one in-breath, can you notice three distinct sensations that occur in the process of one in-breath? It can be helpful to name them because it will help with memory—it will help you to remember what you've discovered. So it could be something like tingling or pulsing or pressure or warmth or coolness, expansion, something like that. But having named it once, you don't need to name it every time. It can be helpful in the beginning to name the sensations. Three sensations occurring in an in-breath.

And if you've noticed these three sensations, can you find them on each in-breath? Bring that same attention to detail every time there's a breathing in.

Now turning to explore the out-breath. In the same way, can you find three specific sensations that occur during the course of one out-breath? If you've recognized three sensations that occur in an out-breath in the area where you normally feel it, see if you can find those three sensations in every out-breath. It's a way of bringing interest, and interest brings continuity, and continuity brings settling.

Then finally you can try putting these two together. Recognize three separate sensations on an in-breath, three sensations on an out-breath, breath after breath. It takes quite a bit of attention and interest to sustain seeing that. See if it's possible. See if it helps you stay connected to the bare experience of breathing.

If you find it too complicated, if it makes you think too much or use too many words too quickly, just go back to the basic feeling the in-breath, feeling the out-breath. Then if the interest needs to be perked up, you can try this exercise again.

This kind of investigation, as I mentioned, is not something that you need to do in every sitting. But if you ever find your interest is low and you need to pick it up a little bit, this is one of the ways that we recommend—along with the one Sally introduced yesterday, which was beginning, middle, and end, a way to feel different parts of the breath and bring in continuity. It's helpful to have a few of these little tools because for all of us, the interest in the breath will come and go.

A student asked about the difference between effort, striving, and motivation. She described how in the day, sometimes she drops into a stream and there's a lot of peace—not rapture, but deep peace, and she'll take that. But then she bounces out, and there's more agitation, more easily distracted or looking for distraction. She was thinking about this and realized there's some way you need to surrender into the practice. So her inquiry became about resistance to the surrender—some fear, she thought, of really abandoning herself to the joy. She also noted that when it gets too complicated, it becomes joyless for her.

I had a little trouble hearing all of it, so let me repeat what I understood. She started off framing it as the relationship between effort and motivation and striving. Then she described how in staying with the breath—and it's helpful for her to keep it kind of simple—she's often able to come to a place of peace, and sometimes more joy comes in, but peace is kind of good enough. And yet, once that's there, there's an invitation to surrender and go deeper and really let go. But there's some pulling back from that.

And yet there's something in the makeup of the mind that doesn't quite trust it or isn't quite ready. Honestly, I find it a little bit similar to the quandary of falling asleep at night. You're lying in bed, you know you're ready to go to sleep, and the mind's just a little more active than one would like it to be. How does one move from that activeness to a place of deep rest and sleep? There's an invitation and there's a little bit of still holding back.

I haven't found any way by an act of will to make that transition. All I can really say about it is that the quality of relaxation is what really allows it to happen, and the relaxation is based on trust. This trust in the present moment is something that just has to grow by itself over time.

Trust is a really fundamental topic in Buddhism. We don't talk about it in these terms a lot, but it's one translation of the Pali word *saddha*, which is more often translated as faith. In a way, it's asking: do we have faith that if we let go completely, there will be a good outcome? That we will be taken care of? That it will be okay?

Honestly, I think all the mind's incessant activity—this restlessness which expresses itself through thoughts and emotional overtones—is really a manifestation of a lack of faith. It's kind of our project to keep the self as comfortable as possible. The mind's main activity with all these distracting thoughts is concerned with what's going to make it safe and what's going to keep the danger away. The only thing that really allows for the release of that is the deepening of faith.

In some ways, it's really learning to trust in the present moment, in our ability to relate to the present moment, no matter what's there. Sometimes there's this concern: if I let go, I don't know what's going to happen, I don't know what's going to come up. One of the virtues of our practice is that over time, we explore almost every corner of the mind. As we sit quietly through months and years of sustained meditation practice, almost every corner of the mind comes up to be looked at. We get more and more

confident—oh, I can be with whatever comes. I've been with fear before, I've been with the void before, I've been with anger before, I've been with grief. I can be with it. That deepening trust in our capacity, I think, is ultimately what allows us to let go more and more.

There's one other thing that I think really supports it. In my experience, deepening concentration has really helped. The deepening concentration starts to quiet down the mind's thought excursions more and more. Sometimes they'll just stop for a while. And when the mind has settled to that degree, when the thoughts have settled to that degree, it becomes easier to drop and let go.

But I can't resist bringing in this quotation from Ajahn Chah, which is one of my favorites: If you let go a little, there's a little peace. If you let go a lot—I know you all know this—there's a lot of peace. If you let go completely, there's complete peace.

We approach that—a little, a lot, complete—over the course of our practice. It gets easier.

One other thing I'll say is that for me, the jhana practice really helped develop an openness to that kind of complete letting go. In entering into even the first jhana, one finds that that state sustains itself. That's why it's called an absorption. The effort can really go out at that point. So just another encouragement: if that's of interest, it's a useful avenue to pursue. And having explored that to some depth in the past, this reservation to let go still comes in. So there's no magic cure. But all these elements add up to support it.

Thank you for that question and observation. It's a deep one.

Another question came up about whether there's a difference between mindfulness of breath and mindfulness of the body breathing. For some practitioners, "breath" feels a little bit conceptual, but "the body breathing" is a direct physical experience.

This points to a really interesting question. My perspective is the latter. Feeling the body breathing is what I'm looking for. That's the way I practice and it's the way Sally and I tend to teach.

Pauk Sayadaw's approach is a little arcane, but it's at the center of the way he teaches mindfulness of breath. He says that if you go into the sensations of the breath, from his point of view, you're moving into four elements contemplation, which is his entry into Vipassana. And so what I was instructed was to stay with the breath in the area of the upper lip, but not to feel strongly or directly the sensations in the upper lip. That threw me for a while.

There's a couple who used to practice with Sayadaw—Tina Rasmussen and Stephen Snyder. Some of you may have read their book. Stephen said that the way he eventually came to understand Sayadaw's instruction was almost to visualize a little cylinder right under the nose and to almost visualize the breath coming in and out through that cylinder. Once he had the place, he didn't have to visualize anymore.

The way Sayadaw described it is that in the Samatha practice, one comes to meditate on the concept of the breath—which is exactly what you were saying. The concept of the breath. And so for Samatha, this is a

really skillful move. Why? Because the concept is stable and the sensations are changing. This is a really interesting point, and you can play with it if you want.

Now, I found that "concept" wasn't a word that worked for me very well. The way I interpreted Sayadaw's instruction was as the rhythm of the breath. There's this image from the Visuddhimagga—it's from the commentaries, not from the suttas—of mindfulness of breathing as being at one point and having a saw go back and forth across a log. What you're interested in is that point of contact of the saw with the log. That suggested to me the rhythm of the breath. But Sayadaw used the word concept. Your interest is in the concept.

I would say from a Samatha point of view, concept can work really well because it's stable. I found the rhythm works the same way. Vipassana would emphasize the changing nature of the sensations in the body. I find that works well also. So maybe I'm being disloyal, but I tend to teach more on the experience in the body than on the concept, because I find the concept a little hard to grok and to explain. But you could use either one.

For Samatha, that quality will develop more strongly out of seeing sameness. The insights from Vipassana develop more strongly from seeing change—that's what leads into seeing impermanence. But in practicing Samatha, you're not so interested in seeing impermanence. If you can see something that's less changing, that's actually more onward leading for Samatha.

I will leave you all to play with that. If concept works for you, that can be a good way to practice. If the physical sensations speak to you more directly, that's also fine. In my experience, that works, regardless of Sayadaw's instructions.

A few announcements today. The first has to do with the different dialects of Pali that are going on in our group. When we get to the refuges, I don't know if you've noticed, there are different pronunciations happening. I see it as a West Coast versus East Coast thing. On the West Coast, the way we say it is "Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi" with the uplift. At IMS, the way it's said is "Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi."

I don't have a preference personally, but I tend to believe when in Rome, do as the Romans do. Because we're on the East Coast, I'm going to encourage the East Coast dialect. I know the West Coasters will miss the uplift—it's kind of soaring, a little bit like an Adele song. But we're going to go for the equanimity of the East Coast. Actually, I think it's a descendant from Thailand or from Burma that has brought this about. The East Coast is more Burmese, the West Coast is more Thai. So we're going to go with the Burmese pronunciation.

It may be a hard adjustment for the Californians, but I know you can do it.

Now, the good news and the bad news, as you've seen on the board: it's a beautiful day for practice, and it's going to be really noisy. There's a water tank in the garage.

Note: This appears to be the end of the transcript. The final portion contains primarily logistical announcements about noise during the retreat rather than dharma content.

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