Mindfulness of Breathing - Read by Finola O'Siochru

Noirin Sheahan · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Noirin Sheahan · 37:29

Tonight I'd like to look at the exercises for mindfulness of breath given in the Satipatthana Sutta.

Satipatthana usually translates as a foundation or support for mindfulness. Joseph Goldstein also suggests the word pasture—a fertile field where attention can safely graze. I like that pastoral image. It suggests a restful approach as an antidote to our habitual striving.

There are four satipatthana: body, feeling, mind, and dhammas. The last one covers the main teachings of the Buddha. The first satipatthana, where mindfulness explores the posture of the body, starts with the breath.

Here's the passage:

Having gone to the forest, or to the root of a tree, or to an empty hut, one sits down. Having folded one's legs crosswise, set the body erect, and established mindfulness in front of one, ever mindful one breathes in, mindful one breathes out.

Breathing in long, one understands "I breathe in long." Or breathing out long, one understands "I breathe out long." Breathing in short, one understands "I breathe in short." Or breathing out short, one understands "I breathe out short."

One trains thus: "I shall breathe in experiencing the whole body." One trains thus: "I shall breathe out experiencing the whole body." One trains thus: "I shall breathe in tranquilizing the bodily formation." One trains thus: "I shall breathe out tranquilizing the bodily formation."

Just as a skilled turner or their apprentice, when making a long turn, understands "I make a long turn," or when making a short turn, understands "I make a short turn," so too, breathing in long, one understands "I breathe in long," or breathing out long, one understands "I breathe out long."

And so on for all the following exercises.

The first few sentences clarify that this is formal practice, not simply relaxation or a distraction for a few moments when we've nothing better to do. We're making time in life specifically for this practice, going somewhere secluded and taking care with our sitting posture. The phrase "established mindfulness in front of one" can be taken to mean that we've clarified for ourselves that our job is to be mindful, to attend to present moment experience.

Having done all that, we focus on the experience of breathing. Mindful, one breathes in. Mindful, one breathes out. This is our usual starting point for Vipassana—bringing attention into the body, into the sensations that accompany breathing. When the mind has steadied, the next step in the Mahasi approach is to broaden awareness, allowing attention to rest wherever it is called. To follow the Satipatthana approach, we instead take up one or other of the exercises suggested here.

This could get confusing. Should I be practicing Mahasi or Satipatthana? The same question could be asked of the exercises in any other parts of the Satipatthana Sutta: feeling, mind, dhamma. The Satipatthana exercises are more challenging than normal Mahasi practice. They often show up some unacknowledged attachment, tweak our understanding. However, we can't push ourselves too far. We have to let any new understanding integrate. We do that by reverting back to our normal Mahasi practice as we work through whatever hindrances have been stirred by the exercise.

My advice, therefore, is to clarify that Mahasi is our basic practice and that we only take up one of these exercises on occasion as a means of tweaking our practice. The moment we feel ourselves straining or getting dull or distracted or confused, we immediately go back to the Mahasi approach, allowing attention to go wherever it is called, letting go of any attempt to follow the Satipatthana exercise.

This is especially important because most of us are influenced by modern culture of individual achievement, and so we turn these Satipatthana exercises into another arena where we have to achieve, become expert. To counteract this, we must be willing to revert to the more straightforward Mahasi approach whenever we feel ourselves coming under pressure, trying to get the exercise right, trying to do things perfectly. We can see all this as purifying our addiction to achievement, and therefore very beneficial.

So please keep that in mind throughout the rest of the talk. Our principal aim is to be mindful without any interference. The Satipatthana exercises are only used when things go quiet and we're feeling the breath anyhow as part of Mahasi practice, and we feel steady enough to give ourselves a challenge, tweak our practice in the right direction.

Having said all that, let's look at the first exercise. When we notice ourselves taking in a long breath, we understand, "I breathe in long." The Buddha doesn't ask us to deliberately take in a long breath. We're breathing naturally. It's only when we notice that the in or out breath is unusually long or short that we reflect in this way.

Attachment to breathing symbolizes attachment to life itself. Without this vital movement we quickly die. When we're breathing with long deep breaths there's often a sense of ease and satisfaction. But attachment can add to this with delight, with pride, with the habit of fantasizing and making great plans on the basis of feeling good. We can't get too carried away with those when we're noting that the breath is longer than usual.

Thus the exercise keeps us grounded in the body, prevents us drifting into a cloud of hazy delight and delusion.

Sometimes a long breath comes from a sigh or yawn that preludes sleepiness. In this case, noting "I breathe in long" or "I breathe out long" helps keep us awake, alert to these signs of drowsiness.

When the breath is shallow and rapid, there is often some negativity behind this. Fear can make for a jerky, uncomfortable breath. Anxiety can make the breath shallow and rapid. Anger might tense the body so that we take short, forced breaths. Often we're so fixated on the thoughts driving the emotion that we hardly notice the breath. Here, we're being asked to deliberately reflect that we're taking short breaths in and out. This takes some attention away from the thought fixation, and might show us underlying aversion, desire, or emotional turmoil.

Note there's no judgment involved in this exercise, no preference that the breath be long rather than short. Our only job is to know when it becomes unusually long or unusually short. The exercise makes us more aware of how emotions affect the breath, grounds attention in the body while the emotion is passing through.

Remember that at any point we can go back to our usual Mahasi practice. We note whatever predominantly calls attention, let the breath go at its own pace. We stop asking ourselves whether it's going in or out, whether it's long or short. Tracking the emotion mindfully is to purify our attachment to breathing, or to doing the exercise properly, or whatever has stirred us up.

The next exercise is described as training, as opposed to our usual approach in Vipassana, which is to be mindful without having any agenda. "One trains thus: I shall breathe in experiencing the full body. I shall breathe out experiencing the full body."

Sometimes "the full body" is interpreted as the full body of the breath. For instance, we track beginning, middle, and end of the breath. Another interpretation is that we have a broad awareness of the full body, with the breath as one component within this. I find the second interpretation more helpful. Instead of focusing closely on the sensations of breathing, we have a more spacious awareness of the body.

It's interesting that this exercise is described as training. The natural tendency is for mindfulness to focus down on one sensation or another. We have to put some effort into maintaining the more spacious approach. The teacher Rob Burbea describes it as blowing up a bubble of mindfulness. Whenever we notice the bubble deflating and attention closing down onto some particular sensation, we very gently blow up that bubble again so that mindfulness encompasses the full body.

The point of this training is to help us develop a more spacious awareness. This can at times be very useful. We can get lost in detail, overly delighted by pleasant feelings for example, or fearful around unpleasant ones. This is no problem when we have enough equanimity to remain mindful and objective despite these strong emotions. However, when we feel ourselves being overwhelmed by emotion, it can be

helpful to broaden awareness. This promotes objectivity and equanimity, lets the emotion burn away without overwhelming us completely.

This exercise—to breathe in experiencing the full body, breathe out experiencing the full body—develops our ability to stand back and see the bigger picture. If we deliberately practice this from time to time, we'll find it creeping naturally into our Vipassana practice when we're being threatened with overwhelm and need to strengthen equanimity.

The next instruction also involves training. "One trains thus: I shall breathe in tranquilizing the bodily formation. One trains thus: I shall breathe out tranquilizing the bodily formation."

The Pali word for formation is sankhara. We're more used to thinking of sankhara in terms of the mind—the habits of mind we develop every time we think, speak, or act. But there are also habits of body. Each of us walks in our own way. Our posture and facial expression are likewise individuated. Every time we frown, our facial muscles get another chance to perfect their ability to frown. Thus our physical makeup is based on habit.

When we tranquilize the bodily formation, we are allowing the breath to calm the body. We might be amazed at how much tension we hold until we consciously try to relax. The face, the jaw, the shoulders, the stomach—all these can hold knots of tension. The habit of tension runs deep. As soon as we relax a muscle, we might notice it's tensing up again. That's why this instruction is also a form of training. We're cultivating a new habit, trying to teach an old dog tricks, and we have to have a lot of patience.

Many people have practical challenges such as financial pressure, ill health, deadlines at work, relationship difficulties. All these can result in physical tension. Even if there are no obvious challenges, we carry stress because of our unenlightened nature.

We keep expecting the world to make us happy. If only we could get away on holiday, get a pay rise, become more confident—surely then we would be happy. But the world cannot satisfy. Life is dukkha, the Buddha proclaims in the First Noble Truth. No job, relationship, or achievement can provide a secure basis for happiness. All of these are unstable, changing, unreliable. To be deluded is to be constantly disappointed.

Retreating into cynicism or hopelessness is no help either. Life has its ups as well as downs. We cannot prevent pleasant feelings from registering. To maintain cynicism, we have to tense up, suppressing the smidgen of joy and hope that follows each pleasant experience.

The exercise of relaxing the body can therefore be challenging. We are asking ourselves to trust that, at least for now, for this meditation session, there is no need to worry. We are in a safe place. We have nothing to achieve apart from remaining mindful.

The instruction links relaxation with the breath: "I shall breathe in tranquilizing the body formation. I

shall breathe out tranquilizing the body formation." The Vipassana teacher Bhante Sujeeva suggests imagining the breath flowing through whichever part of the body we are relaxing. We could even imagine a wave of breath flowing the full length of the body.

But we cannot force relaxation. If tension gets even tighter as we think about relaxing, then we need to let go of the exercise, return to Mahasi practice, feel the tension as sensations without judging these as wrong. This is to give the underlying emotion the time and space it needs to be acknowledged.

The Buddha gives the simile of a woodturner for our work with the breath: "Just as a skilled turner or their apprentice, when making a long turn, understands, 'I make a long turn,' so too, breathing in long, one understands, 'I breathe in long.'" He is saying that we are to regard breathing as a skill, one that needs devoted practice, an activity we can respect and esteem.

James, one of Bhante's students and a skilled woodworker, sent me a video of a man carving out an ornate chess set using a traditional instrument similar to those used in the Buddha's day. One hand turns a bow which determines how quickly the wood spins. The other hand, or sometimes a foot, holds a blade that cuts into the spinning wood, carving out a pattern. It really is an impressive skill. With a sharp knife in one hand and a delicate bow in another, the turner has to be very alert to what he is doing.

Would it be possible to see the breath in a similar fashion? Long, slow breaths help us relax, gain stability, resource ourselves, while rapid breathing often accompanies emotional release. Rather than preferring one to the other, could we, like the woodturner, learn to see which was appropriate? At times we take long, slow breaths with flow throughout the body. These steady the mind and promote equanimity. At times the breath grows short and rapid as strong tensions emerge along with a storm of emotion. If awareness can track the physical sensations, we feel the underlying emotion more objectively, allowing old fears and grudges to heal. Just as the woodturner carves out a beautiful shape from rough wood, so mindfulness of breath carves out wisdom from raw physical sensations.

We have to be careful that the emphasis on skill doesn't lead to the wrong attitude. We might start getting uptight, putting ourselves under pressure to have the perfect yogic breath or to release all our fears and phobias. But this is to cultivate dukkha. In truth, we are not in control of the breath. Any semblance of control is delusion. It is only when we can surrender, allowing the breath to come and go just as nature intends, that we find ourselves in tune, that the breath follows the pattern we also think is best. Training ourselves to breathe mindfully is a humbling process.

To help ourselves through these times, we can remember that the Buddha's analogy also includes the apprentice: "Just as a skilled woodturner or his apprentice were to make a long turn." The Buddha gives us full permission to be the apprentice, having barely a clue how to get a breath into tight lungs.

Having described these exercises for mindfulness of breath, we then come to what is termed the refrain of the Sutta. The Buddha repeats this refrain after each set of exercises in all four Satipatthana. Here is how

it goes for the first Satipatthana, mindfulness of body:

"In this way, he abides contemplating the body as a body internally, or he abides contemplating the body as a body externally, or else he abides contemplating the body in its arising factors. Or he abides contemplating the body in its vanishing factors. Or he abides contemplating the body in its arising and vanishing factors. Or else mindfulness that there is a body is simply established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and mindfulness. And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world. That is how a bhikkhu abides contemplating the body as a body."

Contemplating the body as a body internally is what we have been describing so far. We are looking inside, feeling our own sensations.

To contemplate is to think deeply, and it's interesting that this term is used here. We're not actively generating thoughts as we practice, yet the mind that can think is present, part of the watching process. It's taking in information, much as though we were at a lecture or watching a documentary. We might notice that the jaw tenses when we come to the end of the out-breath, for example. Even if this isn't processed into a grammatical sentence, the facts of the matter are now known and will make us more aware of our jaw tensing in daily life. Thus, mindfulness of breath is a form of deep thought, of contemplating the body, seeing how it works, what habits we're following.

To contemplate the body externally is normally interpreted as becoming mindful of other people's bodies. In the case of these breathing exercises, we are to be mindful of others' breathing. This is quite a challenge, but it may be possible to make a start here on retreat. If another person's breathing is quite loud, we can easily detect when they're breathing in and when they're breathing out. This might also help diminish any irritation that could otherwise develop—after all, at least now they're helping us concentrate.

At times, of course, it could make the irritation even more acute. But again, that's helpful. We often have a false expectation that meditation should be pleasant and peaceful. Noisy breathing can therefore seem an outrage. But of course our expectation is the real problem, and so we have an opportunity to work with the anger or sadness that follows dashed expectations. Going back to the woodturner analogy, we could regard this work as carving our body and mind into a new shape, one that fits in more easily with all the unpleasant stuff life dumps on our plate.

Sometimes the noisy breath goes quiet, just as we're getting interested in it. An alternative would then be to reflect that others breathe in and out just as we ourselves do. Feeling the sensations of breath in our own body, we reflect that those around us are feeling similar sensations. We can take this through all the exercises, reflecting that others breathe in long, breathe out long, and so on. We can, in our imagination, calm their body as they breathe in and out.

This is a form of metta practice. We're taking others into our imagination at quite an intimate level. It can

stir a feeling of friendliness and connection, perhaps even confidence, to know that we're not actually so very different from others. It can also show up attachment. We're all deeply attached to the breath—it means life, after all. At some level we're holding to the pleasant feeling associated with being able to breathe, thinking of this as mine. This exercise asks us to imagine the feeling as also being in others. When attachment is showing up, we might feel deeply threatened, like we're being robbed of our own breath and of life itself. If we can bear with whatever emotions surface while we do the exercise, this is an opportunity for us to work with what is possibly the deepest attachment in life.

The refrain then presents the option of contemplating the body in its arising factors. We know the body through physical sensations. No sensation lasts forever. Each one arises at some moment and then passes away. To contemplate the arising factors, we attend to the first moment we become aware of sensations. Tuning into the start of the in-breath is a good way to do this. The body relaxes after the out-breath, and then at some moment the tissues start moving and we feel the abdomen or chest starting to swell. Having detected the first moment of in-breath, it may become apparent that the rest of the breath is also composed of sensations that arise one after the other. We're getting used to the idea of the body as a series of sensations coming into consciousness.

Similarly, we contemplate the body in its vanishing factors when we notice that each of these sensations fades out a moment after it registers. One way to do this is to follow the out-breath till it stops. The chest or abdomen deflates. Sensations grow fainter till eventually no movement is detected, just stillness. Having detected that last sensation fading into stillness, we are more able to see the breath as sensations fading away, one after the other.

Next, the Buddha gives the option to contemplate the body in its arising and vanishing factors. As you can imagine, we are now tracking sensations as both arising and fading. Can we tune into both the start of the in-breath and its end? The start of the out-breath and its end? This can be quite a challenge, as the feeling is so different for starting and ending. It takes quite a degree of equanimity to embrace both.

Like all satipatthana exercises, strong emotions can be stirred. The point of all these exercises, remember, is to help us see through delusion. The exercise is only a means to that end. As soon as we start getting uptight, wanting to see the start or end of the breath more clearly, we need to relax, acknowledge whatever emotions might be building up, and let them blow off steam.

This is the purification process. Any emotions stirred during mindfulness of breathing need to be treated with respect. We've been taking the breath for granted all our lives, and it cuts deep to be shown how little control we actually have over this vital bodily function. We might feel small or stupid not to be able to do something so seemingly simple as feel the breath flowing in and out. But the mind holds tight to symbols, and deep down the breath symbolizes life. At some level we are all aware that there will sometime come a breath that flows out as normal but is not followed by an in-breath. It's not surprising, therefore, that tracking the breath from start to finish can stir all kinds of emotion. When this happens, remember, we

abandon the exercise and go back to standard Mahasi practice.

The final option is akin to Mahasi practice. The Buddha phrases it like this: "Or else, mindfulness that there is a body is simply established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and mindfulness, and he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world."

We're no longer trying to detect the beginning or end of the breath, nor trying to follow another person's breathing. We're not asked to register whether we're breathing in and out, whether the breath is long or short. It's a more relaxed form of practice. As in Mahasi, we have no agenda. We're not interfering in any way. However, we are to reflect: there is a body. This grounds attention in the body while making the body as a whole the object of meditation.

Just as we're attached to the breath without being aware of this, we can also be attached to the body without being aware of this. The reflection "there is a body" makes us see the body objectively, cuts across our usual habit of taking it for granted, assuming it's ours. At times the objectivity brings up gratitude toward this amazing, warm, sensitive entity that ferries us around, lets us see and hear and taste and speak. At other times we get uncomfortable, want to go back to our habitual assumptions that the body is mine to move around and command at will. Seeing it as something else, something out there in the world, can become confusing or irritating or sad or perhaps frightening. Whenever any strong emotions or feelings are evoked, we recognize these as part of the purification process and return to our normal Mahasi practice, allowing the emotion to develop and express itself, teaching us the Dhamma as it burns itself out.

In summary, the Satipatthana Sutta gives us a number of specific exercises relating to the breath. The first is to steady ourselves with mindfulness of breathing: mindful, one breathes in; mindful, one breathes out. We're also asked to reflect "I breathe in long" or "I breathe out long" when we notice ourselves taking a long, slow breath, and similarly for short breaths.

Two training exercises are described: training ourselves to experience the full body as we breathe in or out, and calming the body as we breathe in or out. The Buddha gives the analogy of the woodturner, indicating that we should respect breathing as a skill. He kindly includes the analogy of the apprentice for those many times when the breath is demonstrating that it is in reality totally outside of our control.

We normally do these exercises internally, examining our own experience. The refrain of the Sutta clarifies that it's equally valid to contemplate the breath of others in the same way. Alternatively, we can examine the transient nature of the breath, noticing that what we actually experience is a series of sensations, each arising and fading away. Finally, we have the option of bare attention, a more relaxed form of practice when we're not doing any of these exercises but reflecting "there is a body" as a means of working on our relationship with the body.

It is that final option of bare attention that is most akin to our usual vipassana practice. In turn, vipassana

allows insight to develop. A tennis player will occasionally do special exercises—for example, to strengthen their backhand—but the only way they can benefit from the exercise is by playing tennis. So too, we follow the Satipatthana exercises to develop specific skills, tranquility for example, or the ability to see the broader picture. To reap the benefit, however, we need to relax all effort, return to our main practice of bare attention, being mindful without interfering in any way. Bare attention allows for insight that leads along the path to the end of suffering.

To finish, let's listen to some of the Sutta's opening lines: "This is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the surmounting of sorrow and lamentation, for the realization of nibbana, namely, the four foundations for mindfulness. Having gone to the forest or to the root of a tree or to an empty hut, one sits down. Having folded one's legs crosswise, set the body erect and established mindfulness in front of one. Ever mindful, one breathes in. Mindful, one breathes out."

May our practice enable us to surmount sorrow and lamentation, to realize nibbana.

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