Mindfulness of Breathing - Ānāpānasati

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 1:13:48

Tonight we're going to look at mindfulness of breathing. This morning we were doing some exercises, experiments in using breathing as meditation object. And tonight we're going to have a look at a standard paragraph of the Buddha's instructions on breathing meditation. It appears in the Satipatthana Sutta but it appears in other discourses as well. So we're going to go through this and unpack it.

When you write it out as a paragraph, of course this was not written, it was chanted, but it's what's technically called a pericope. It's a kind of unit or a bundle of text that's memorized and then is put into different discourses where it's appropriate. So if you're an early Buddhist reciter and the topic of breathing meditation comes up, you can recite this bit. This is the standard bit on breathing meditation and then you've covered breathing meditation. So it's like a module that fits into different discourses depending on its purpose.

It's a Greek term, P-E-R-I-C-O-P-E. It's a term used by scholars of historical criticism when they're taking ancient texts apart. It was first used with the Bible, but the methods of reading that were developed for the Bible were then transferred to early Buddhist texts. And this is generally called historical criticism. So the terminology that people use when they study the Buddhist teaching is actually borrowed from biblical study. And the methods are borrowed as well, and a lot of the attitudes and assumptions are borrowed from biblical studies, including the idea that we have to get back to the original Buddha and the closer we get to the original Buddha the more authentic it is. This is borrowed straight out of New Testament studies - we've got to get back to the original Jesus and the closer we get to the original Jesus the more authentic it is. That's where the very idea came from. There's a lot of Christian assumptions underneath the way that we read these texts.

But anyway, the point is that this is a kind of standard way in which the early tradition talks about breathing meditation. When you write it out, it's only a paragraph. And we're going to go through the paragraph. And I'm going to give an interpretation of this. But I do emphasize this is my interpretation. So don't take it seriously. It's one way of reading this. And these - it's not gospel truth. No, it's not Buddha's truth. Definitely not gospel.

The text provides a kind of idealized template of how breathing meditation works. And I think the way these function, these templates, is that they're meant to be interpreted and to be played with. I think it's a mistake when reading the Buddha and he lays out all these little schemas, it's a mistake to take them too literally. They're structures which are literally memorized. And then once you've got them in your memory banks, you can play with them, you can riff, as it were. And this is the way an oral tradition

works. You have a kind of memorized template, you know that, you've got a certain structure, and so long as you stay within that structure you can then play with it in different ways, and different groups and different individuals would play with it in different ways. But when they would recite, they do cite the same text, because all these different ways would fit into this one template. So this is my particular spin on it.

So, let's begin. The first sentence: "Here a practitioner goes into a forest or to the root of a tree or to an empty place, sits down, crosses her legs, straightens her back and establishes her mindfulness directly."

This is the beginning. Wherever you see this sentence, from this point on, the Buddha will start talking about a formal meditation practice. Now in this case he's going to talk about breathing meditation, but in other contexts he'll talk about another form of meditation, but it's always this sentence that indicates the beginning. "Practitioner" of course is a translation of bhikkhu, because that's what, as we discussed last night, that's what bhikkhu in the sutta context means.

And you notice that the Buddha begins with location. Where should one do one's meditation? And I find it interesting that way back then this was an important issue. So you need the right place to do this. And of course today we find the same thing.

We need the right place to do this. Some places are better than others—some work well and some don't work so well.

For the Buddha, the first place he mentions is a forest. I find this interesting because he assumes if you're going to be doing any serious practice, you would naturally head there. Like, what are you doing here? There are trees out there—lots of trees down that direction. What are you doing here? It's an odd place to meditate. So presumably he would have just assumed everybody would be heading out to the bush, which is what they did in those days and what he himself did.

So there's a forest, or the root of a tree. Maybe there aren't too many trees around at this point, but still, it's underneath a tree. Trees are good for meditation. Or an empty place. According to the tradition, this would be the third option—an empty place. So a meditation center is an empty place. In other words, it's empty of usual, normal humdrum activity, and therefore available for meditation practice.

So the meditator sits down, crosses her legs, and straightens her back. This is all the advice the Buddha ever gives about posture. But you notice that he begins with posture. He doesn't leave it out. He doesn't say, "Okay, you're going to start meditation, so here's the first jhāna, the first absorption, and second, third, fourth." No, he says first find the right place, and then set yourself up with good posture. So posture is important.

Now he doesn't give much instruction about it, I think for two reasons. One is that, again, what's chanted and remembered is a kind of template, and it's necessarily dense and brief because this is being memorized. So there would have been a lot of understanding about posture—āsana—within the

community. But they wouldn't have memorized that. That would be more commentary when you're unpacking this sentence. Okay, so how do I set up good posture? Well, this is how you do it. So this kind of practical, everyday practice information would not have been in the sutta, but it would be part of commentary once you start to expand the sutta.

And also, of course, in those days people would not have had much problem with posture. They were raised without furniture. Houses didn't have furniture. So people were raised sitting on the floor. The necessity to give detailed instruction on how to sit would have been roughly equivalent to, in our culture, having to write down and transmit detailed instructions on how to sit in an armchair. If you buy an armchair, do you get detailed written instructions on how to use it? No. Why? Because it's bleeding obvious. Everybody knows how to use it because we've been using them all our lives.

I think it's the same here. There's not much said about posture—about setting up a posture—not because it's not important, but because for them it was so much easier than for us. So we have to struggle to get a posture. We have to go to yoga classes and do stretches and so on and so forth. And we have to do it because otherwise we're fighting the body.

A lot of meditators do fight their bodies, especially when—I mean, my generation, when we started, we had absolutely not the foggiest idea of what we were doing. And then we trot off to Asia, and of course the teachers have absolutely not the foggiest idea of who these weird people are, and no comprehension of where they're coming from—geographically, culturally, psychologically. They're in a society in which people just routinely sit on the floor, so they just say, "Well, sit there and meditate. And then, please report your experience."

"Well, it was incredibly painful."

"What's the matter with you? You only sat there for fifteen minutes."

So what is being established? This firmness, this groundedness of awareness is being established "directly" - and this is another word that conveys this quality of firmness and directness. The term is *parimukham*. Usually it's translated as "in front" - are you familiar with that? "Establishing mindfulness in front of you?" The Pali is *parimukha*. *Mukha* - who knows what *mukha* means? Yes, mouth. And sometimes it can be face, or opening, entrance. And *pari* means "around" or "all around."

Now, this bit is really 100% me. All the authorities disagree with me. I'm warning you.

So the usual interpretation is that you establish mindfulness in front of you, which gives you this sense of mindfulness being somewhere out there in front of your face. But to me, that doesn't make sense at all. If *mukha* is mouth, and *pari* is all around, then *parimukham* means all around the mouth. And if you think about it, when you're really present, when you're really here, where is your awareness? It's right here, right around the mouth area, around the face. It's intimate, it's close, it's direct.

This isn't some abstract positioning of mindfulness somewhere out there. It's immediate. It's *right here*. When you're fully present, the awareness is gathered right here, intimately connected with the breath, which comes in and out through the nose and mouth. There's nothing theoretical about it.

So the practitioner establishes this mindfulness *parimukham* - directly, intimately, right here around the face, around the breathing. Not projected out somewhere, but gathered, concentrated, immediate. This is what I think the text is pointing to - this quality of intimate, direct presence that's grounded right here in the body, right here with the breath.

Of course, you can take it or leave it. All the commentaries will tell you something different. But to me, this interpretation makes much more sense of what we're actually trying to do in practice. We're not trying to put our mindfulness somewhere out there in front of us. We're trying to gather it right here, intimately, directly, where we actually are.

means around—it can mean around as in circling, or it can mean around as in complete. The prefixes have bundles of meanings.

So one of the interpretations that was picked up early in the Theravada orthodoxy was that mukha means opening, as in the opening at the face—the nostrils. Pari means around, so around the nostrils. So if you do breathing meditation, you follow the breathing here, at the nostrils.

This interpretation is first written down in the Patisambhidamagga, the Path of Discrimination, which is a Theravada text. It's not found in any other school. It's very early—so it's classified as Sutta, but it's an Abhidhamma text and it's in the Khuddaka Nikaya, the collection of miscellaneous discourses. So it's kind of an add-on towards the end. Modern scholars think it's definitely after the Buddha, but it's very early.

And this interpretation that you establish your mindfulness here is very, very early, but it's peculiar to the Theravada. It's just one interpretation of this. But that's why if you go to an orthodox Theravada teacher and you say, "I want to do anapanasati, mindfulness of in and out breathing," you'll be told, "Sit down and focus here, at the entrance. And this is parimukha, because Buddha says so. He says so right here."

I think here that parimukha, first of all, is an adverb, not a noun, and it's an idiom. And this is one of the problems with translation.

Imagine you are an archaeologist living 2,000 years in the future, and you're digging under the ground in this particular obscure part of the planet, where once upon a time there was a city called Sydney. And as you're digging up all these artifacts, you come across a fragment of text. And it's like, "Hallelujah, this is fantastic. We're getting an actual text from these people." And you're puzzling over it. It's very brief, and it's something about catching a cab.

And you realize that other people have discovered other documents, other fragmentary documents, which also refer to the catching of cabs or taxis. So you get together—what would all this be about? Well, you

find these fragments, particularly in urban areas. So the taxi or the cab must have been some kind of creature which was found, especially in urban areas, and which was a problem because they had to be caught. So there was probably organized hunts that people had. And so you could write learned articles and publish them in archaeological journals.

And of course, they've missed the point because catching a cab is an idiom. It's not meant to be taken literally.

And I think this is an idiom. I think parimukha is rather like the English idiom if you say something is "in your face." Boom. Or "get out of my face." What are we conveying? We're conveying a directness and a closeness.

And I think this is what's being conveyed here. Establishing mindfulness, bang, like this, in your face. You know when you do intensive meditation practice, the experience can be like that. It's like, vroom. Sometimes you want to take a break because everything is too close. You just, "Okay, I've just got to get out of here. Give me some space, man," because meditation has that character, and I think this is what it refers to: to establish mindfulness bang, directly, face to face.

When we talk about noting, it's a face-to-face encounter with the experience. We talk about the secondary object—I am distracted. So often the relationship to the distraction would naturally be, "Oh, there's something buzzing around here and I'll just kind of vaguely swat it away while I'm struggling with my meditation object." But Mahasi Sayadaw says, "No, note the secondary object." In other words, turn to it, bang—a face-to-face encounter with it, a direct encounter.

So I think this is actually what the Buddha is talking about: to establish mindfulness directly. And again it conveys this direct, solid, grounded face-to-face encounter with the experience which is characteristic of mindfulness meditation.

Does that make sense? You're not going to burn me for heresy?

Anyway, that's my interpretation. So here you could sum it up: be firmly grounded and established in the physicality of the experience. You notice everything so far is physical.

Be grounded in the location, the place, the body that's there. Bang. Direct. And so far no mention of any specific meditation object. It's just the body so far.

Then the Buddha says, "mindfully she breathes in, mindfully she breathes out." And this is describing the practitioner. So, then, find the movements that indicate the breathing and breathe mindfully. That's it. Very simple. Just breathing as per normal, but doing it with mindfulness established directly. In other words, remembering the breathing.

Breathing in. Breathing out. Breathing in. What was that? Out. Breathing out. Breathing in. Breathing out. Now there was something I was supposed to remember. Breathing in. Got it. Then what comes after it?

Breathing out. Breathing in. Breathing out. Keep remembering. This is mindfulness. Remembering the breathing.

We are already breathing, but do we know we are breathing? Are we aware of the breathing? Can we remember that we are breathing? And is there a continuity of that? Can we notice our tendency to forget our breathing? Because part of mindfulness is remembering, but of course part of remembering is noticing when we forget. Becoming aware of that.

You notice that the key here is mindfulness. "Mindfully she breathes in, mindfully she breathes out." It's not about breathing. It's about mindfulness. This is the crucial point here. It's not about the breathing. It's about our relationship to breathing.

For example, if I'm doing breathing meditation, sometimes I find that my awareness can be sucked into the breathing itself. And when this happens, the breathing becomes increasingly distorted. We were talking this morning about whether you find yourself interfering with the breath as you're tracking it, as you're being aware of it. If we forget the mindfulness and just obsess with the breathing, this is what can happen. The breathing becomes incredibly important. It's got to be just right. And we get tangled up in it. Often there's a sense of claustrophobia or tightness associated with this. But certainly a sense of strain and often a sense of an exaggerated breath in some form or another.

I find myself breathing deliberately, but the point is I don't have to breathe deliberately. What I have to do is attend deliberately. What's happened is I've forgotten, in terms of mindfulness of breathing, I've forgotten the mindfulness and I've got sucked into the breathing, into the physicality of it.

But mindfulness of breathing is fundamentally about the mindfulness, not the breathing. It's about the relationship to the breathing. And the relationship is one of remembering and becoming sensitive to the forgetting. All of this is what's going on in the mind, not in the breathing.

Similarly, with thinking, if we're practicing mindfulness of thinking—which we will be doing, playing with it in a couple of days—our tendency is to forget the mindfulness of and get sucked into the thinking. So we get caught up in the content of our thoughts. But mindfulness of thinking is about mindfulness. It's remembering the fact of thinking, the flow of it, the process of it.

We talked about how in meditation practice we're always dealing with a dyad of mind and its object. So we could call it awareness of X. We're always dealing with that, and it's got two parts. Awareness of X has two aspects. There's X, what we are aware of, and the awareness of. We're always working with that dyad.

Normally, my interest and my concern is with X. That's what's interesting. I see something—I'm interested in the something that I'm seeing. I think something—I'm interested in what I'm thinking about. I'm eating something—I'm interested in the food. I'm reading something—I'm interested in the book. It's obvious, isn't it? That's our normal relationship, our normal habitual relationship.

But when I am mindful of X, aware of X, I am keeping X in mind. And that means that my interest is not simply in X but in my continuing awareness of X. So there's a shift in the interest. It's not the object which is of prime concern. It's the awareness of the object. You see the difference? It's this subtle but important shift.

So it's not the breathing that's important. It's my awareness of the breathing. It's not the thinking that's important. It's my awareness of the thinking which is important. There's a turn in the point of interest and attention, which is not our habitual habit. It's not what we normally do. We're not used to this. And this is why it's so weird when we start to do it and why we have to keep pulling ourselves up. We keep getting lost in the object of awareness. And again and again we have to pull ourselves back. No, it's not that. It's the awareness of that that I'm interested in.

So it's the relationship to that we're interested in. What is that relationship? Let's say, when you're talking about breathing as a meditation object, what's my relationship to the breathing? Am I fighting the breathing, for example? Am I forcing the breathing? Do I like the breathing? Am I satisfied with the breathing? Do I dislike the breathing? Is it easy to find? Or is it hard to find? Is the mind that is aware of the breathing distracted?

Or is the mind that's aware of the breathing unified?

So these are the issues that are of interest. It's not the breathing itself. It's the relationship. Does that make sense?

Breathing in a long breath, she understands she's breathing in a long breath. Breathing out a long breath, she understands she's breathing out a long breath. Breathing in a short breath, she understands she's breathing in a short breath. Breathing out a short breath, she understands she's breathing out a short breath.

Now you notice that the project has changed. In the previous sentence, the verb was to breathe. She breathes in, she breathes out. Added to the breathing was the mindfulness. So you're breathing in and out, or you're already breathing in and out, but do it mindfully.

Here, it's not about the breathing—it's about understanding. And the verb here is pajanati, from which we get the noun panya, wisdom. So, understanding. And what's being understood are the varied characteristics of the breathing. Now here, in particular, is it long or is it short? Which is one of the exercises we did this morning, wasn't it? Which one is longest? Which one is shortest?

But again, this is a template. This is an idealized template. And I think this is shorthand for the kind of exercise that we were doing this morning. What are the different characteristics of the breathing? How does it appear? What are the different things that it does? What are its various characteristics over time? So we don't take breathing for granted, but we start to explore it, as we were doing this morning.

Now this implies anupasana. This is a term that we haven't talked about yet. We'll be talking about it more later on. But anupasana is the basic activity of satipatthana, of mindfulness meditation. And I translate it as tracking. It's basically following an experience over a period of time. This is about cultivating a continuity of awareness of the object, whatever it is—in this case breathing. So I'm studying it over a period of time.

And as I do that, I can see it's changing all the time. So I can get a sense of how it behaves over time. Sometimes it's like this, then it does that, then it does this other thing, and then it swings back and it's doing what it was doing before, and then it does something completely different. So it's changing all the time. And this sentence is all about understanding these changes as they take place over time. Understanding the varying characteristics, the behavior of the breathing over a period of time. Getting to know it.

And as we do that, understanding or wisdom develops. And it's basic ground level understanding. This is what the breath does under certain circumstances. And this is what it can do. If I do this, that happens. If I do that, this other thing happens. When I'm tired, it's like this. When I'm alert, it's like that. So we're studying something over a period of time and getting to know it, which means getting to know how it behaves.

Does that make sense? And this is the beginnings of wisdom.

The next sentence: "She trains herself to breathe in, sensing the whole body. She trains herself to breathe out, sensing the whole body."

So here it gets really complicated. We've got three activities: training, breathing, and sensing. There's a pattern emerging through these instructions—basically, an increasing sophistication and deliberation in the relationship to the meditation object. Again, it comes back again and again to the relationship to the experience. That's what we're working on, and this relationship is developing.

It starts with breathing, then breathing mindfully, then from breathing mindfully to understanding the breathing, and then from understanding breathing to training the breathing. The verb here is *sikati*, to train.

Now, the breathing itself is natural. It just happens by itself. It's just part of nature. But when we practice mindfulness of breathing, our relationship to the breathing becomes part of the picture. It's not just breathing anymore—my relationship to it is part of the picture.

Over time, an understanding develops—an understanding of the breathing and of the mind that's following the breathing. This relationship becomes more sophisticated. We start to see the patterns of breathing, the patterns of the body influenced by the breathing, the patterns of the mind as we breathe, the interrelationship between breathing, body and mind. All of this starts to become apparent.

And then from there we move on to training. This implies that our understanding becomes more deliberate. Training implies deliberation. I'm making decisions in maintaining this relationship of mindfulness. I'm doing something. I develop a strategy: How will I practice this? I'm making choices all the way, and I can see some choices work, some don't. I try this—no, it doesn't work. I try that—ah, this seems to work. I'll keep exploring this one. No, it's stopped working now; I've got to try something else. Ah, this seems to work.

And so we recognize what we are doing and we start to do it more deliberately. There's a sense of direction in what we're doing. There's a craft beginning to emerge. There's a skill that's beginning to develop. We're not simply aware of whatever is happening. We are deliberately taking the practice in a chosen direction.

For example, as we were exploring this morning, sometimes I will focus in on the precise detail of the breathing. Sometimes I'll step back and have the whole pattern revealed with no attempt at getting detail. That's one obvious fundamental choice that we make. We discover through understanding that sometimes it's best to focus in, sometimes it's best to pull out. We get to understand ourselves: I'm much more at ease when I focus in and I have something specific to hold on to. Then I can keep the mindfulness going, I can keep the mind clear, I can hold the meditation object over a period of time.

Or alternatively, I discover that when I do that, I just get really tight and tangled up. For me it's best to step back as much as possible, open up the field, and let the whole thing flow.

Or the same person might find that in the first few years of practice, focusing on detail was essential because they needed something to hold on to. So they would follow the breathing in the abdomen because they could find that, could hold on to it, or at the nose tip, or whatever. But later on they discover they actually don't need to stay in any one particular location. Wherever the breathing appears, they can just go there.

So you see these alternatives. I get to know the patterns of the breath. I get to know me, the way my mind works. And at some point, it's like I deliberately steer the ship in a certain direction. I'm going to go in this way with my meditation practice. And this is training—*sikkhā*. It implies a deliberation and a sophistication in the relationship to the breathing which wasn't there before, but now it's beginning to develop.

She trains herself to breathe in and breathe out, sensing the whole body.

Now this verb, "sensing," is *paṭisaṃvedayati*. In the P.T.S. dictionary, this means to sense, to experience, to feel. The root is *vid*, from which we get "verity," from which we get *vedanā*, feeling. So sometimes you see this translated as... what do you say? Does it feel? Sometimes translated as that. So *vedayati* can be translated as feeling. And then you get *paṭisaṃ*, which I think it's impossible to translate literally, but basically it adds an intensification to it.

What this verb suggests—when you see this verb appearing and look at the context—is a greater intimacy. It's like it's getting closer and closer and closer and closer. More intimate, less cognitive.

Let's say when I start meditation and I'm told what you must do is sit down and follow your breathing and then you get enlightened. It's pretty much what I was told. So, okay, breathing. Okay, this could be a bit delicate. I haven't done much of this before, but I'll try. So I set up the posture and I'm feeling very self-conscious. Now I feel like a meditator. I've got a good cushion. Now I've got to get a bit of breathing going. So, go for it. It's got to be clear. I've got to hang on to it. And it's all very cognitive.

I often realized at one point in my meditation career I was following the breathing—I did five years of Zen and they do the breathing down here—and I realized it was like I was aware of breathing down here from up here. Basically, I think I will follow the breathing, and this is the decision made up here. Where do I find it? I find it down there. So I'm up here and the breathing is down there.

Have you ever had that kind of experience? Is it just me?

But this *paṭisaṃvedayati* is suggesting, no, you're getting over that. The awareness is down here. The breathing is down here, and the awareness is down here. There's an intimacy in the mind, which we'll talk more about tomorrow.

So the relationship—again, it's the relationship to the breathing which the Buddha is talking about. And this relationship is changing. It's becoming closer, more intimate, less heady, less cognitive, more feeling-based.

And as he says: *She trains herself to breathe in, breathe out, sensing the whole body—sabbakāya.*

Now this is weird, because apparently the breathing just disappeared. I mean, this is supposed to be about breathing meditation? Where's the breathing? Absolutely no mention of it. It's the whole body, the *sabbak āya*.

The geography of the breathing is changing. We've been emphasizing the relationship to it—remember, we're always dealing with that dyad. You've got the mindfulness of, the awareness of X. So the mind and its object. These are in an interdependent relationship. If you change one, you change the other. If you change the relationship, you will find that the object itself changes. And this is, I think, what the Buddha was talking about.

The very geography of the breathing changes. Remember we talked about concepts. When I started doing breathing meditation, I had a certain concept about the breathing. For example, if you had asked me back in the day, "Where do you breathe?" I would have said, without too much thinking about it, the lungs. And if you then said, "So, where are they?" I wouldn't have had a great deal of difficulty in saying, "Well, they're here."

Therefore, if someone says, "What I want you to do is to be aware of breathing," then where would I put

my awareness? Obviously, here. But that's not the instruction. The instruction is, put it down here. Steady on—that's my bowels, mate. I don't breathe with my bowels. It's all wrong. What's the matter with you people? Haven't you studied science?

So there's a certain conceptual framework that we have with the whole thing, and that includes our sense of where the breathing is, but also even what it is. Well, it's in and it's out. I inhale, I exhale, that's it. Cool air comes in, warm air goes out. I read that in my high school science textbook. It's quite straightforward. But when you actually practice breathing meditation, it's not that straightforward. It's much more diverse than that.

Once we're no longer tethered to our concept of breathing, what we find is what the Buddha calls air element, or what in other traditions is called prana. We discover that this is actually throughout the entire body and beyond the body. The whole body—things are opening up now. The object of my mindfulness is not restricted to what I think breathing is, or where I think it should be, or how I think it should behave. It's completely different now.

We've dropped beneath concept. We're in the elemental realm of experience, and along with that, the rule book just got thrown out the window and suddenly everything is bigger than it was. So this is the whole body. Everything is opening out like it hadn't before.

And the body is the body of felt elements. It's not the solid two legs, two arms, torso, head that I used to think it was. I still think it is—but it's not necessarily the way that I directly experience it. Does that make sense? I'm glad to see that some things I'm saying are making sense. It's very encouraging.

"She trains herself to breathe in, calming the body construction. She trains herself to breathe out, calming the body construction."

So here again, we have breathing in, breathing out, but the focus of interest has actually passed beyond the breathing. The focus here is no longer the breathing. Here it's about calming, and calming the body construction, the kāya-saṅkhāra.

We've moved to the whole body, and from there we've moved to the body construction. Now the question is, of course, what the hell is the Buddha talking about? There are different interpretations you get for this. First of all, we have the term construction—this is saṅkhāra.

This is a key technical term that the Buddha uses again and again. It has different meanings in different contexts, which makes it more confusing. But in every context, what it refers to is the fact that whatever we experience is constructed, made up of parts, and in turn constructs and makes something up.

So, for example, this body is constructed. It's made up of different parts. This building is constructed. It's made up of different parts. All the bodies in it are constructed, made up of parts. But all of these things in turn construct and create something else. In this case, a dharma talk in a meditation retreat.

So there's this particular building made up of these particular parts with these particular group of people sitting in a particular way, looking in a certain direction, a fellow waving his pieces of paper around and talking about Buddha. And what you have constructed is a dharma talk in a meditation retreat. So this situation is a construction—it's made up of parts, and it in turn is constructed by different things, and each of those different things is in turn constructed by something else. You're starting to get the pattern? Everything's this complex network of systems and subsystems all relating together. This is saṅkhāra, this is construction.

So she trains herself to breathe in, calming the body construction. She trains herself to breathe out, calming the body construction.

Now usually the body construction is taken to mean simply the breathing, and it can be taken as that. Breathing is a construction, and in fact there's a reference in the suttas, in the Cūḷavedalla Sutta, that explicitly says exhalation and inhalation are the body construction. So you can read this quite legitimately as she trains herself to breathe in and out, calming the breathing. But I think there's something more to it than that.

Breathing constructs the body. Now especially—well, first of all, when the Buddha talks about the body, he's talking about the sentient body, the alive body. Sometimes he uses the term sa-viññāṇa-kāya. Kāya is body, viññāṇa is awareness or consciousness. And sa means with—a body with awareness, a conscious body, a sentient body. So this is a body, but it's a sentient body. It's a body that knows, that awares.

And this body is constructed—this being, and the world within which this being exists. So this sentient body sees, hears, smells, tastes, touches, minds. In doing so, it creates a universe, a physical and mental universe in which it occupies the center. I don't know if you've noticed, but all of you are just bit players in my drama. Have you noticed that? You probably think that I'm a bit player in your drama. This is the nature of the sentient body. Each body is the center of its own particular universe, which is constructed.

So we construct ourselves as body, but this body is necessarily connected to a world. This body sees—there's a visible world out there. This body hears—there's an aural world out there. This body smells, and so on. So this sentient body by its nature occupies the center of an experienced universe. And this is a universe, a world that belongs to me. Because what's constructed out of this is me. Here I am in my world. And this is the construction.

Calming the body construction. The body calms because everything is connected. Everything bounces off everything else. When the body calms, the mind calms. When the mind calms down, the body calms down.

Have you ever, when you've meditated, gotten caught up in some emotional storm which is associated with a lot of thinking in which you create this vividly real world in which someone did something or will do something or is doing something? Ever done that? And have you noticed that there's one characteristic that this whole construction does not have, and that's calmness. There's a lot of energy to it.

When everything calms down, what happens to that world? It drops away. It ceases.

This, I think, is calming the body construction. It's like all of that drops away. And when it drops away, what we're left with is pure intimacy.

So when we go through this little paragraph, just a few sentences, and again it's an idealized template, what we see is a journey into the nature of experience using breathing as the vehicle, as our pathway.

If we were doing a meditation practice, what are we trying to do? We're trying to gain access into the sentient body, into the body-mind process. And we're trying to go as deep as possible into it. We need a vehicle. We need some way of getting in there. And that's our meditation object or objects as the case may be.

Now here the Buddha is talking about using breathing as the vehicle. And the journey is one of ever deeper and more refined awareness. So we bring awareness to what we normally don't even notice: breathing, which we take for granted. And then we cultivate mindfulness. We train ourselves to remember our awareness. So the continuity, the felt continuity of awareness. Then we develop understanding. We get to know the details of what is happening, in this case with the breathing. We learn the patterns over time, how it behaves over a period of time.

So our relationship to the meditation object, here it's the breathing, changes, becomes more sophisticated. And therefore the meditation object itself changes. The breathing changes along with the relationship, because everything is connected. If we change how we experience, we change what we experience. So breathing itself ceases to be what we think it is, and it becomes something quite different. When we get beneath our concept of breathing, that takes us into the realm of what the Buddha calls vayodhatu, air element. And this spreads throughout and beyond the body.

And this relationship is one of increasing intimacy, from just breathing, to being mindful of breathing, to understanding breathing, to sensing breathing. And the sensing conveys getting really closer and closer and closer and closer to it.

And this intimacy takes us to other aspects of experience. When we're completely intimate, well, when we start this process, there's someone here, there's a self, there's a meditator or someone who wants to be a meditator or someone who wants to be a good meditator or a successful meditator or an enlightened meditator. So there's a self that stands apart from this process. I'm the one who's going to manage all this and at the end of it I'm the one who's going to be enlightened. So here is the process and here is me who's doing it and who's going to get the benefit at the end. And this self is constructed by the process.

How is it that I think I'm a meditator? Because there's this process going on and it's happening to me. So I'm a meditator. But as we become increasingly intimate and as everything spreads out, we realize there's nothing separate from this process. There is no one here who's doing this. It's just the process. And the self constructed by this whole process falls away, disappears. There's only the process.

So I think that's enough. I think we've come to the destination.

Any questions or comments?

"So when the self falls away, we don't have the dyad anymore?"

That's right. It depends. The dyad is just part of nature, like awareness and what we're aware of, what is present and the presence to it. What we don't have is the subject-object structure imposed on it. So me, my experience. We don't have that.

That's completely unnecessary. The dyad is still there, but it's no longer of any significance. I mean, the dyad is just a concept, and like every other concept, it gets tossed out with the garbage. So in that sense, we don't have it anymore.

But in particular, what we have is the dyad, but the way that we normally experience it is: there's me here and there's the object of awareness there. This is the subject-object duality. We impose that on top of the dyad. But actually, it's not necessarily part of it. It's something that we do—it's a construction. We add that to it.

And that's becoming intimate. When we become intimate, all of that starts to crumble. It just falls away. It can't be sustained. It cannot be sustained without a sense of separation, without a sense of distance—here's me and this is the show. Once that falls away, then that whole structure necessarily falls away.

And you get this cluster of terms that the Buddha uses, built on the root vid—sometimes vedati, sometimes vedayati—and they all convey this sense of intimacy, of getting closer and closer. But we'll explore this a bit more tomorrow night.

This also opens up the whole realm of affect, of the heart. It's like when I start, it's all up here. I've read the right books and I've got the right technique and I've got the idea of what I'm supposed to do, and it's all up here. But when I get into it, all that eventually drops away and it's here. This is the journey into intimacy.

"So do you see there's a persistent state where this subject-object duality is broken down? Or do you, like the Buddha said—there's nirvana with remainders and nirvana without?"

There are experiences where it just completely drops away. But of course, you can't live like that. It's difficult to have lunch like that or drive a car like that. So you come back into the normal structures of experience, but you experience them quite differently. You know that they're fundamentally arbitrary and contingent, so you don't believe them. You use them, but you don't believe them.

If you look at the stories about the Buddha, the Buddha had a clear sense of identity. He knew exactly who he was, and he knew how people were supposed to behave towards him and how they weren't supposed to behave. So when he was dealing with recalcitrant students, he knew when a student was behaving

badly and he would respond appropriately, often just by walking away.

So he had a self-structure and he had a social world within which he played a particular role, but he didn't believe it in a fundamental sense. He knew this is just a game. But it's a game I play because if I play it this way, I can reduce suffering, and therefore I'm going to play it this way. Because he could have played it some other way—by just staying in the forest and not teaching and just enjoying himself. That would have been another game. But he chose a particular game to play because he wanted to reduce suffering. Out of compassion, he played this particular game. But it was just a game, as opposed to thinking "this is me."

"The instructions that one normally hears—I always heard 'the full body of the breath' means the full body of the breath, like it's up here, and you'll get the whole process of the breath, the full body of the breath, rather than being in the body as you were discussing it, as you were explaining it. I've never heard it like that."

In the Theravada orthodoxy, they ask the question: what is the sabbakaya? The whole body. And the commentator says, "Well, it's the whole body of the breath." It's like they're wrestling to keep the breath in there. And because the commentary says it, then any respectable orthodox Theravadin will say that, and therefore the meditation instructions coming out of the orthodoxy will repeat that, even if—let's say the person giving the instruction is an accomplished meditator and knows perfectly well that actually the experience is quite different. Their job is to hand over the orthodoxy.

I think one of the problems that you find in, certainly in Theravada, but I suspect in other traditions as well, is that you get the great commentators, the famous names who have written the books. These people are academics. Maybe they've done meditation. Maybe some of them are even good meditators. But really, these are academic presentations.

"You're talking about the Abhidhammas and the Abhidhangas and all that sort of stuff?"

Yeah, and Buddhaghosa in the Theravada and so on. So philosophically, I think when you're working with Buddhist philosophy, you've got to take it with a grain of salt when you're coming from a practice angle.

What works philosophically doesn't necessarily work practically. So what we do, at least what I do, is study the text, study your own experience, and bring them together.

What you want is to be faithful to the tradition. That is to say, for me, I ground myself in the Buddha. But how do I know what the Buddha taught? Well, I've got these texts and I've got a living tradition. And I read that against my own experience and I bounce back and forth between the two. I check both and I ask myself, does this reading of the text work? Does it make sense of my practice? And does it give me somewhere to go? And when I go in that direction, is that helpful? Okay, then I'll use this reading.

Now, historically, I don't know if that's what the Buddha meant. Nobody knows. That's two and a half thousand years ago. Who knows what the Buddha meant? What we've got is these teachings and my

experience. And we bring them together. And when we do it openly...

Then you get the chance, like in this practice community. So I'm telling you, I'm giving you this riff, and I'm telling you straight out, this is my interpretation. And when I deviate from the orthodoxy, I will tell you that I'm deviating from the orthodoxy. Then you can make up your mind. You can decide, look, this guy is off on his own trip. It's very entertaining, but I'll stick to Buddhaghosa, thank you very much. Or you might say, oh, that's interesting. Maybe there's something else happening and maybe I should take a look and find out.

So when you have that—you have a dialogue in a practice community informed by the tradition—then you get something worthwhile happening and you have a practice community which is learning as a group, not simply obeying orders. And especially in a group like this where people have experience. You're not in kindergarten.

Just in terms of Mal's point, and to support your interpretation, the idea of the sabbakāya being the whole body of the breath, if that was what it meant, it's really just repeating the previous instruction. Breathing in the long breath, I know that I'm breathing in the long breath, not the short breath. If I'm doing that, I'm already following the whole body of the breath. So it makes sense that the next one has a broader meaning.

One reason I just avoided this passage for decades was that it just never made any sense to me. So I just didn't talk about it. And when I decided I was going to talk about it, I really had to kind of jump right into it. But the traditional interpretation doesn't make much sense to me.

I found it interesting in the two different translations, the Bodhi translations of the Majjhima Nikāya. In the 1995 version he says, "body of breath." And in the 2005 version he says, "the whole body." When you look at Bhikkhu Bodhi, you can see him evolving. And you can see, go back to his teacher, Nyanaponika. I used to read Nyanaponika's translations in little pamphlet thingies. And I'd be reading—this was the first time very early, back in the 70s—I'm reading the Buddha's words. And every now and again, this is a really obscure passage. And mercifully, there's a footnote. And I go down to the bottom, and Nyanaponika writes, "Commentary says, blah, blah, blah, blah." And it's all explained.

And after a while, I thought, wow, this guy "Comy," he seems to know everything. Every time Nyanaponika Thera's got a problem, he goes to "Comy." And "Comy" tells him what the answer is. And it took a long time before I realized that "Comy" was short for commentary.

So for Nyanaponika, operating in the 40s and the 50s and into the 60s and so on, what the commentary says it means is what it means. When you look at Bhikkhu Bodhi's early work, and some of it is with Nyanaponika, he's doing exactly the same thing. If you look at his later work, he'll tell you, this is what the commentary says. Personally, I think it means this. And he'll give you his own interpretation, but he'll always tell you what the tradition says it is. So he always treats the tradition with respect.

I'll give you what the tradition says. But if I think it's wrong, I'll tell you I think it's wrong and I'll tell you why I think it's wrong. So he's stepping out of the orthodoxy but still with this attitude of respect for the tradition.

I think that's really important. I think when people lose that respect and they just head off on their own tangents, you just get the fashionable stuff that floats around and you can attract a few students but...

Well, many years ago, Sayadaw Upandita had a room full of foreign meditators, and he knew that a lot of them were going to end up being teachers. And he said to us, "I can tell you how you can be enormously successful as Dharma teachers. You can have a huge number of students and make buckets of money. And the way you do it is very simple. What you do is you teach our Dharma. A-dharma. A is the negative prefix. You teach not-dharma. You teach anti-dharma. And you will have many students, be enormously popular, and make lots of money. On the other hand, if you teach dharma, you will have few students, not be popular, and not make much money."

And I think he's right.

Thank you very much. Thank you for listening.

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