Mindfulness with Breathing

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 47:14

This morning we looked at mindfulness of breathing as a practical meditation exercise, and in particular at a style of mindfulness of breathing which suits the Insight Project. Tonight we're going to examine the Buddha's instructions on mindfulness of breathing.

These instructions are very brief. They represent a kind of idealised template of the practice, not something to be taken literally as "I must do this and in this order." It's more like an executive summary—we can be guided by it but use it creatively. This is actually true of a lot of the suttas, because they're so dense, so brief. You tend to get tangled up in knots if you take everything to be absolutely literal and to be applied to every person and every situation.

The Buddha begins: "Here a practitioner goes into a forest or to the root of a tree or to an empty residence, sits down, crosses her legs, straightens her back, and establishes her mindfulness directly."

This is a standard sentence that introduces whenever the Buddha is talking about formal meditation practice. Notice that the first thing to do is find the right place in which to practice. For him, it's pretty obvious that the correct place to practice is the forest. So what are we doing here? There's lots of forest out there. But if you can't find a forest, then find a tree. Actually, there is a big tree out there that sometimes people use for that very purpose. And if you can't find a tree, then one could use an empty residence or an empty place.

Notice that "empty" does not necessarily mean that no one else is around. It can also mean that it is empty of any purpose other than the meditation practice. So this hall is an empty place or an empty residence. If you have a corner in your house set aside for meditation practice, that's an empty place. First find the right place.

Second, establish posture. As we have mentioned, meditation is a physical activity. We tend to see it as spiritual, I think partly because in the European tradition we inherit an understanding that sees the essence of a person, their soul, to be somehow radically separate from their body. This understanding is traditional to Europe but completely alien to the Buddha.

From the Buddha's perspective, we are bodies. We are not souls trapped inside a body. We are bodies. We are sentient bodies—bodies that are aware, but bodies. Ānāpānasati is part of mindfulness immersed in body, kāyagatā sati. It's one aspect of mindfulness of body. Our connection with our sentient body is central in this practice, and one way that we get in tune with it is through posture. The body is always in a posture. As the Buddha says, there are four postures: moving, standing, sitting, lying down. The posture is

how the sentient body expresses its inner nature, its inner structure, as it is now.

To establish a posture is to settle body and mind into their natural state. When the body is balanced, it's easier for the mind to become balanced.

First we find the right place, then we establish posture, and then finally we establish mindfulness directly. The language the Buddha uses and the similes he employs to talk about mindfulness are always very earthy. When he says "establish mindfulness directly," he's talking about the directness or groundedness that characterises mindfulness. We plant ourselves in a meditation posture and directly confront the reality of our physical situation. For example, it hurts. We also, within this posture, directly confront our own minds. Our mind might feel trapped in this posture, might feel uncomfortable, might want to get out of here.

We establish mindfulness directly through posture. We plant ourselves into this position, and then we're ready to confront what's going on—perhaps through a chosen meditation object. In this case, the breathing.

Find the right place, establish posture, and within that posture establish mindfulness directly, confronting the reality of body and mind.

And then the Buddha goes on describing the practitioner. This is typical of the Buddha when he's talking about meditation practice. Often what he will do is describe someone doing it, rather than give an abstract definition. He says, "Mindfully she breathes in, mindfully she breathes out." So establish the posture and then find the movements that indicate breathing and breathe mindfully.

So far it's all very simple, very basic, very natural. For starters, we are already breathing. We don't have to do anything extra in this practice. The only difference is that we are now breathing with mindfulness, which means we are remembering the breathing.

We are already breathing. But do we know we are breathing? Not know intellectually, but are we directly experiencing breathing? Can we remember that we are already breathing? Can we notice our tendency to forget our breathing? All of this is bound up with mindfulness. The key here is the mindfulness, and mindfulness is sustained awareness, the felt continuity of awareness over time.

Perhaps this point might be useful to remind ourselves that mindfulness of breathing is not about breathing. It's about mindfulness. What we translate as mindfulness of breathing, ānāpānasati, is a compound. Sati is mindfulness, ānāpāna is in and out breathing. Grammatically there are different possibilities of how you connect those two words when you create a compound. Traditionally it's regarded as "of." Ajahn Buddhadasa of Thailand translated it as "with"—mindfulness with breathing. Notice how this gives it a whole different flavour. It shifts the emphasis and makes it clear it's not about the breathing. It's about the mindfulness. It's about our relationship with breathing.

A mistake we can easily make is to assume that mindfulness of breathing, or with breathing, is about breathing. In other words, we can assume that what we're being asked to do is something special with our breathing—for example, to make it more spiritual. This attitude often results in problems.

One thing that can happen is that I might find awareness being sucked into the breathing, with the breathing becoming increasingly distorted. Over time, this can be accompanied by a sense of claustrophobia and tightness. Sometimes the breathing really becomes very strong, stronger than necessary. This happens because when I focus deliberately, it's easy to interfere with the breathing by breathing deliberately. This is why this morning we had that last exercise: Am I interfering with the breathing? Because it's a very common thing.

The effort I'm supposed to be making in this practice is the effort, the commitment, to remember my breathing. That effort, that commitment, is entirely in the mind. But it leaks out into the body and I find myself breathing deliberately, breathing with effort. I easily forget that I don't have to breathe deliberately—I have to attend deliberately. I have to aim my awareness deliberately.

In other words, if we're talking about mindfulness of breathing, I've forgotten the "mindfulness of" and I've got sucked into the breathing. I'm projecting into the breathing far more importance than it would normally have. Instead of just being what I'm already doing, it becomes something very special which I have to be careful about. Because I might do it wrong. And if I do it wrong, I can never be enlightened. I can never even get samādhi.

Have you ever had the experience when you're doing breathing meditation and you just think at the back of your mind, "This kind of breathing will never get me into concentration"? Have you ever had that feeling? And if we have that feeling, what are we doing? We're projecting an importance into the breathing. We think it's about the breathing. But it's not about the breathing. It's about the mindfulness.

And this brings us to something that we've already talked about here. We're now moving away from breathing specifically into awareness in general.

We've mentioned how the mind is structured when we practice meditation. What we're dealing with all of the time is awareness and its object. We could call this structure a dyad of awareness of X, where X is the meditation object.

Now this dyad is completely natural, it's just part of nature. And it's certainly not a problem, but it can become a problem when my conceptual mind starts working on this simple elemental dyad.

What I notice is that normally my interest and my concern lies in X. Every experience has the structure: awareness of X. Now in that structure, what do I think is important? It's X. That's what's important. What I am aware of is important. So if I'm thinking, what I'm thinking about is important. If I'm seeing, what I'm seeing is important. And so on.

When I'm wrapped up in what I am aware of, my background sense of the one who is experiencing all this—the one who is seeing, the one who is thinking—this grows stronger. And this sense of someone in the background who's actually experiencing this, this is what the Buddha calls the self: the one who is aware, the subject who's located just behind the awareness.

And so this natural partnership between awareness and its object—awareness of X—turns into a sense of subject-object duality. Me in here, the world out there.

Let's say, for example, I am working hard to focus on the object of my awareness. Let's say breathing. If I'm doing that, then I'm developing a sense, a concept, of what this object means to me—to the one who's doing the focusing. So if I'm mindful of breathing, I develop a sense of the one who is breathing, and the one who wants to get something from this extra activity of being mindful of breathing. And this creates all sorts of complications.

For example, is this breath good enough for my purpose in practicing mindfulness? Or do I have to discard it in favour of something better? I find myself judging and comparing. And in all of this, what I've done is I've lost the intimacy with breathing that I was born with.

But if I'm simply mindful of X, what am I doing? I'm keeping X in mind. And this implies opening into a wider field of awareness. When I'm mindful—in this case mindful of X, or mindful of breathing—my interest is not simply in X, in breathing. My interest is in my continuing awareness of X, my continuing awareness of breathing.

So if I'm thinking, I'm more interested in the activity of thinking than what I'm thinking about. If I'm seeing, I'm more interested in the activity of seeing than what I am seeing. I'm absorbed into the activity. And if I'm absorbed into the activity, I lose my preoccupation with the one who's doing the activity.

It's like when I'm absorbed in a game. If I'm playing a game and what I'm really concerned with is what the scoreboard says and who's going to win—and therefore who's going to lose—then my sense of myself as a player, separate from the game, gets very strong. And if it's a team sport, my teammates will be strongly tempted to dump me because I'm not playing very well at all.

But if I'm really absorbed in the activity, in the game, I lose my sense of being somehow separate from the game. And I lose my sense of someone who's looking for a result from the game. And this is awareness of X, mindfulness of X.

So it's about becoming intimate with the activity. And when I am intimate, I lose my sense of something to lose and something to gain. I drop the web of habitual concepts that stand between me and my life. There's just intimacy. And when we are intimate, mindfulness actually emerges.

So our relationship to breathing changes. When we're getting started on this, we may become interested in the quality of our awareness—not so much what the breath is doing, but what the awareness is doing.

What is my relationship to breathing? Am I fighting the breathing?

Trying to pound it into submission and force it to do something else? Is the breath easy to find or difficult to find? Is the mind distracted or unified? We discover that breathing is part of a wider field of awareness and activity, and we learn to rest in that field.

Now this is an expansion of "mindfully she breathes in, mindfully she breathes out." The Buddha then says, "Breathing in a long breath, she understands she is breathing in a long breath. Breathing out a long breath, she understands she is breathing out a long breath. Breathing in a short breath, she understands she is breathing in a short breath. Breathing out a short breath, she understands she is breathing out a short breath."

Notice that the verb has changed here. There's breathing, but there's also understanding. This is the verb *p ajanati*, from which we get *paññ*a—wisdom or understanding—and also *sampajañña*, clear understanding. The Buddha often links *sati* with *sampajañña*; often they appear as a compound. So what are we practicing? We're practicing *sati-sampajañña*, mindfulness and clear understanding.

As the practice develops, we're not just mindful of breathing but understanding breathing. The Buddha uses the shorthand of length—is it long or is it short?—but I think that's just shorthand for understanding all the varied characteristics of breathing when we start to explore it. This is what we were doing this morning.

What this suggests is what the Buddha calls *anupassanā*, tracking the breathing over time. We learn to remember the breathing. We learn to remember that we are already breathing. As we do that, the continuity of awareness becomes more apparent. As awareness becomes continuous, we see and understand more of the breathing and how it changes—and even what changes it. We begin to understand its conditionality.

In understanding, we're bringing intelligence to the mindfulness and to our relationship with breathing. We're interested in patterns, in how things unfold over a period of time, including the breathing.

Then the Buddha says, "She trains herself to breathe in, feeling the whole body. She trains herself to breathe out, feeling the whole body." Again we have a shift in the activity. From breathing, to breathing mindfully. From breathing mindfully, to understanding. From understanding, to training. This is from the verb *sikkhati*, to train.

A pattern is emerging—an increasing deliberation and sophistication in our relationship to the object of experience, to the meditation object. In this case, the breathing. From breathing to breathing mindfully, from breathing mindfully to understanding breathing, from understanding breathing to training breathing.

We start with just breathing. Breathing is natural; it just happens by itself. But when we start to practice

mindfulness of breathing—or mindfulness with breathing—our relationship to the breathing becomes part of the picture. As understanding develops, our relationship becomes more sophisticated. We learn to see the patterns of breathing. We might see, for example, how the state of the body influences breathing, and how breathing influences the body. Or we might see how the state of the mind influences breathing, and how breathing influences the state of the mind.

Then training comes in. In training, what the Buddha is getting at is that we start to recognize the decisions we are making in maintaining awareness of breathing, mindfulness of breathing. It's a training. We're making choices along the way in order to get a certain result. We have a sense of direction to what we're doing. It's not just being aware of whatever is happening, but taking the practice in a chosen direction.

So for example, the mere fact that we've chosen to focus on breathing means we're already making a choice which is sending the awareness in a particular direction. And then even with breathing, we may choose to focus on breathing sensed in one specific part of the body. It might be the classic rising and falling of the abdomen. It might be the breath at the nostrils. It might be something else. Or we may choose to open up to the whole body and get a sense of movement of the air element throughout the whole body. Or we might make some other choice.

But in making these choices, we are deliberately moving along a path. We are developing a path, which means we have a sense of aim, a sense of direction. We're managing our relationship to breathing, or any other meditation object, in order to bring about a particular result. And here, according to the Buddha, the aim is to feel the whole body.

So let's get a sense of what this is all about. We'll be talking about feeling tomorrow morning, but in the relationship with breathing, we're becoming intimate with breathing. And this intimacy is conveyed by the verb *paṭisaṃvedati*, when the Buddha says, "She trains herself to breathe in or out, feeling the whole body." The verb is *paṭisaṃvedati*—to feel, to experience, to sense.

Now this is more than just awareness. What it's conveying is a felt intimacy. There's something going on in our relationship to breathing which is closer, more intimate, less cognitive than just awareness. Awareness itself, when we're aware of something, can have a sense of distance. It's like I'm aware of it from afar—I'm here, or my awareness is here, and the object of awareness is over there. Feeling suggests getting closer to the object, becoming intimate with it. It's like touch. When we touch something with the hand, we are intimately close to it. And the verb feeling, *paṭisaṃvedati*, conveys this sense of intimacy, directly touching our experience.

So we're not distant from our breathing. We're not separate from it. Awareness and breathing are intimately intertwined. And as intimacy develops, our concepts about breathing drop away. What we discover is its elemental aspect. So the object is no longer our concept of breathing, but what we've learned to call air element, *vāyodhātu*, or in other traditions, *prāṇa*, or in other traditions, *chi*.

Any ideas we have about breathing fall away, and all we have is the elemental quality of movement itself. And this changes the geography of the breathing. If I ask, "Where do I breathe?" well, the answer is in my lungs, and my lungs have a definite location within my body. But where do I find air element? I can find it anywhere in the body. I can find it throughout the body. I can find it extending beyond the body, because it is movement itself.

With this intimacy, any idea I have of where my breathing should be or what it should be doing no longer applies—it all drops away. In fact, any idea that I have of my breathing drops away, and I've entered into a different world. At this point, what we may find is that we open up to what the Buddha calls the whole body, *sabbakāya*. Where body, of course, is the experienced body. And this implies a complex network of felt elements, not the solid form that we suppose it to be. Even this whole body might extend way beyond the form that I see in a mirror. The familiar world of me, my body, and my breathing is falling away the more intimate I become with it.

Then the Buddha says, "She trains herself to breathe in, calming the body construction. She trains herself to breathe out, calming the body construction." Here we have a technical term: body construction. In Pali, this is *kāyasaṅkhāra*. So what is this all about?

Well, firstly, when the Buddha talks about body,

What he means is our experience of body. And secondly, construction or formation—sankhara—refers to the fact that all experienced events are constructed or conditioned by other events. And in turn, they construct or condition the next events. In other words, this introduces the Buddha's teaching of dependent arising.

So what forms or conditions or constructs our experience of body? Certainly one aspect is air element, the experience of movement. Let's take just one example. Have you ever felt relaxed and open to the world? If you have that experience, you notice that your body moves easily and your mind is sensitive and open. Have you ever felt defensive and threatened? You might have noticed that when you do, your body tightens and stiffens, and your mind becomes focused on a sense of threat felt in the body but conveyed by concepts.

When the air element moves easily and freely, the body is open. And when the body is open, the mind is relaxed and engaged with what's going on here and now. When the air element is blocked, the body is blocked. And when the body is blocked, the mind is tight and usually lost in a world of concept.

So calming the body formation refers to a state of peace and openness to the felt reality of the world. We're open to the direct experience of whatever is happening here and now, with no conceptual overlay and no defense mechanisms setting up layers of armor. We're simply here now. Everything calms and we're left with pure intimacy. And we've used the breathing as a vehicle to get there.

This is one possible reading of the Buddha's passage, because it's not the only one, obviously. If you look at

how the Buddha's tradition is constructed, it's like having layers of teaching. At the bottom is what the tradition calls mula, the foundation—the Tipitaka, the discourses, the Vinaya, and also the Abhidhamma. These convey the words of the Buddha, and as I said, often the words of the Buddha are very compact. Then on top of that, you have atthakatha, which means explanation of the meaning—commentary. On top of that, you have the tika, the commentaries on the commentaries. On top of that, you have the anutika, the commentaries on the commentaries on the commentaries. And on top of that, you've got the dipani, the commentaries on the commentaries on the commentaries on the commentaries. So it starts to open up, and people play with it. What's being said here?

This is common to all the Indian traditions. What they do is play with it, and they play in particular with meaning. They play language games and draw out different meanings, and hence you have this huge variety of Buddhist traditions—because you have these different games that people have been playing with it, drawing out different meanings.

This is what we're doing in this retreat. So don't take whatever meaning I'm giving you too seriously. It's just my game, which I'm playing tonight, which may or may not be helpful. I hope it is helpful.

One way of looking at mindfulness with breathing or mindfulness of breathing is you can see it as a journey into the nature of experience, using breathing as the path. The journey is one of deeper and more refined awareness, which is another way of saying it's a journey into intimacy.

First of all, we bring awareness to what we normally take for granted and therefore don't notice—for example, breathing. Then we cultivate mindfulness. We train ourselves to remember our awareness, to maintain a felt continuity of awareness over time. Then we develop understanding. We learn the patterns of experiences, how the experiences come and go and under what conditions. In this case the breathing—we learn the patterns of breathing, what breathing does over time and how we respond to it. You could say we become interested in what breathing can teach us.

As our relationship to the meditation object changes—in this case the breathing—so too does the meditation object. As we change how we experience, we start to change what we experience. And so breathing ceases to be what we think it to be. We're getting beneath our concept of breathing, where breathing transmutes into vayodhatu, air element, that extends throughout the body and even beyond the body.

The relationship is becoming one of increasing intimacy—from just breathing, to being mindful of breathing, to understanding breathing, to the much more intimate feeling the breathing. And we take this intimacy to other aspects of experience. Finally, the felt openness and fluidity of the air element enables body and mind to calm, to become still and sensitive to whatever is arising in our experience.

The nature of mindfulness also changes. From just being mindful, which implies accepting whatever is happening, we move to training ourselves, which implies deliberately changing experience in order to

move it in a different direction.

So we're not just uncovering what is happening, but we work to move it in a desired direction—toward, for example, the cultivation of serenity and insight.

Any questions?

*Question:** My question relates to the last point about moving the breath. Does this come later in the discourse? Sometimes you just get this little passage and that's it for the breathing, but there is the Ānāpānasati Sutta, and that goes into a lot more detail. It talks about the development of serenity and outlines a very particular path.

*Response:** Yes, these are sometimes called the sixteen steps of ānāpānasati. But here we've just looked at the executive summary only.

*Follow-up:** But still, the instruction seems kind of neutral—probably not the right word—but you mentioned calm. And calm has a positive sort of flavour to it.

*Response:** That will give rise to a sense of well-being. And that sense of well-being in turn opens and relaxes the body. And that in turn affects the mind, and so on. So the whole process rolls on.

When we talk about calm, we're talking about the development of serenity. And when we develop serenity, we can see more clearly what's going on inside. So these two go together.

One image that's used is like the two wings of a bird. Another image is this: let's say you go swimming in a deep pool, and you're just at the edge. You dive in and then swim around where you stopped, just underneath the surface. You're getting a certain view of what's going on. But let's say you climb onto a high diving board, you dive in, you go really deep, and then start swimming around. Well, you've got a very different view and a quite different experience.

The serenity represents the depth. And the swimming around having a look represents the insight. So they work together. If you want to have deep insight, you need a good foundation of serenity. And calm suggests that. But here we're not going into the detail.

*Question:** You talked about this process as a path, and we talked about lots of different meditation objects. I know you've said many times there's not a better one or a worse one, but are different meditation objects taking us along different paths?

*Response:** I think it's more the relationship to the meditation object. So there's not a hierarchy, there's not objectively better or worse meditation objects. But of course there are meditation objects that are better for this particular meditator at this particular time. So part of the training is working out what that is and then going with that one.

*Follow-up:** I think you mentioned the other day something about how if you're training your awareness

on the breath at your nostrils, your experience can tend to be more disembodied than using the breath at your heart. So by our choice of meditation object, is that shaping the nature of the experience?

*Response:** The choice of the meditation object, the choice of the relationship to the meditation, the choice of what posture I'm meditating in—all of these shape experience.

In my Zen days, the emphasis was just following the breathing, or the koan, or the breath count, and it was always very specifically located. The retreat was structured with a lot of sitting and a little bit of walking. And the talk was always about concentration, concentration, concentration.

So that all adds up to a package of developing concentration rather than what the Buddha would call insight. The insight side was taken care of by the koans—a very different approach to insight. With that structure of meditation practice, you are sending your mind in a certain direction.

I've got a vivid example of that. I once had a brief talk with Christopher Titmuss. He was teaching a retreat and we didn't know each other. I was introducing my practice to him, saying, "I've got a question about whatever it was, and I've been practicing Zen for so many years."

The way he responded was, "Oh my God, not another! Look, it's not about concentration. It's not just about concentration."

I got the distinct impression that he had dealt with a lot of Zen practitioners and they were all banging on about their concentration. Which is fair enough, because I was about to bang on about my concentration. But the culture that you're trained in teaches you, "Well, this is what's important. This is what you should be talking about."

This is how you should be talking about it. Then you shift to another tradition, and it's something else that's important, another way of talking about it, something else that you should be doing. So that sends the experience off in another direction.

Which is one of the reasons why it's important to find the right tradition—which for me essentially means finding the place where you feel at home, where it feels natural, and then going with that. But it's also another reason why people might, after a long time working in a particular tradition or lineage, change to another one. Because they feel, "I need an alternative look, I need an alternative view of what's going on."

When you talk to mature practitioners of pretty much any tradition, what you find is a commonality in their understanding and experience. There can be quite different ways in which they express it, the ways they talk about it. I have some Zen students and even Zen teachers who do my retreats. When I'm listening to a question from them or engaging in an interview, sometimes I've really got to focus to work out what on earth they're talking about, because the language is so different. Are they talking about something that I talk about, but simply using different language? Or are they talking about something completely different? It's not so easy to figure that out. But when you get to know people, you can see that the end

result in terms of how one's life changes—it's the same across traditions.

Many years ago when I was in India, I met a New Zealand Presbyterian minister who was wandering around in search of enlightenment. One constantly bumped into people wandering around India in search of enlightenment, but I'd never met a New Zealand Presbyterian minister doing this. We were having a talk about the different traditions, and he said the different religions or religious traditions are like silos—vertical structures. Most of it is just people who believe what they're told, go through the motions, and never really try to find out what it's about. And then at the top you have the practitioners, the meditators, the mystics, the yogis, who actually investigate: What is this about? What's going on?

If you line up these different traditions, what you often find is that the people at the top—the mystics, the yogis, the practitioners—have more in common with each other than they have with the people in their own tradition.

And I think he's right.

I asked him what he was going to do when he got back to Kiwiland. He said, "I don't think I'll get a job as a Presbyterian minister. I'll probably be a truck driver."

Thank you.

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