Ānāpānasati (Practice)

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 46:12

This morning we're going to begin working with our grounding object, which is breathing.

The practice in Pali is called ānāpānasati. This is a compound word. Ānāpāna is literally "in and out breathing," or simply breathing. Sati is mindfulness. With compounds, the relationship between the different words grammatically can vary, so compounds are always ambiguous. This ambiguity is one of the ways in which the tradition plays with different possibilities of meaning. There's always a degree of creativity in how one interprets a compound.

This compound, ānāpānasati, is usually translated into English as "mindfulness of breathing"—sati of ānāpāna. Grammatically this is correct, but there is a problem with it because it can give the wrong impression. It can suggest that this practice is all about breathing. But it isn't. It's about mindfulness. So here we're calling it "mindfulness with breathing."

As we said, we're talking about awareness. At the very centre of the whole project is awareness. And awareness always presents as awareness of something. If I'm aware, I'm aware of something. If I'm seeing, I'm seeing something, and so on. We summed it up by saying that awareness always presents as a dyad of awareness and the aware-d. It's always a package. And this dyad is already here, already functioning, whether we notice it or not. It's just the way it is.

Now, normally it is our habit to invest all of our attention and all of our interest into the object of awareness, the aware-d. If I am seeing, I assume that what is important is what I am seeing. If I am thinking, I assume that what is important is what I am thinking. Our habit is to give all of our attention to the object of awareness, and we completely take for granted the aware-ing itself.

In this practice, one of the things we're doing is learning to become sensitive to the aware-ing as well as the aware-d. This means we're changing our relationship to the aware-d.

Let's take breathing as a meditation object, for example, and let's say we're using it as the grounding object. As we discussed, the grounding object is very important. This is where we learn to stabilise the mind, where we keep our awareness at home, as it were, unless it has a reason to go somewhere else. The purpose of all this is to develop serenity—in this practice, to develop enough serenity to support insight. So it's pretty important.

If I'm going to work with breathing, first of all I have to find it. That makes sense, doesn't it? Then I have to keep it in mind, which means that my breathing has to be of a pretty high standard, don't you think? It's got to be clear enough and consistent enough for me to develop mindfulness and concentration on it for a

considerable period of time. We are talking about a pretty high standard of breathing, aren't we?

As soon as I begin like that, this attitude compromises my relationship with breathing right from the very beginning. I am already anxious about it. I'm ready to judge it as good enough for my purpose, or not good enough. I am ripe for frustration if it's not good enough—if it's not clear enough, or keeps slipping away, or I can't really find it. I am ripe for delight if it passes the test.

In other words, what I'm doing from the very beginning is imposing a great blob of concept on top of the breathing. The breathing has to carry this burden as well as keeping me alive. And the blob does nothing at all except get in the way.

But the fact is, I am already breathing. That's already happening. In fact, it's extremely difficult to not breathe. We could do an experiment and stop breathing—but we won't, because we're not that extreme.

So if we're practising mindfulness *with* breathing, rather than *of* breathing, I can let the breathing take care of itself. It doesn't really need my intervention. It hasn't up to now, and it doesn't today. What I need to focus on is the mindfulness, not the breathing. What I need to focus on is the continuity of awareness. In other words, I need to learn to notice what is already happening. I need to remember what is already here.

One practical consequence of this is that it's important we do not make too much effort in mindfulness with breathing. Do not try to *do* this practice. And in particular, do not try to breathe. Just remember what's already happening. So relax. Because if I was bold enough to make a guess, I would say you are already breathing.

With that as an introduction, are we ready to get started? Anybody feeling anxious? This is the test.

Sit comfortably and settle awareness in your body. As we were doing this morning, construct your posture from the ground up. Feel the strong, firm sensations at the base of your body, where you are supported by your cushion, your bench, or your chair. Then lift up through your spine, creating space between each vertebra. Let your chest open and your shoulders relax. Bring your head into balance and let your arms hang down, your hands resting in your lap or on your thighs. Feel yourself sitting.

Can you feel your body? Begin with what is clearest and most obvious. This may be the sensations at the base of your body. It may be the sense of lift up your spine. It may be stiffness in your shoulders. It may be the touch of your hands where they rest. It may be the movements of your breathing. Let your awareness go to whatever attracts your attention.

It does not matter what you are aware of. Just see where your awareness goes. Ask yourself: what am I aware of now? You may find it useful to name what is happening. You might start by saying to yourself "sitting," aware of your whole posture. Then aware whatever sensation seems clearest and most obvious.

When you drift into thinking, do not be discouraged. It is natural to think. When you realise you are thinking, say to yourself "thinking." Then bring awareness back to your body.

Are you breathing? Let your awareness settle on your breathing—the movements of in-breath and out-breath. Where are these movements clearest and most obvious to you? Are they in your belly? Are they in your midriff? Are they in your chest? Are they at your nose? Are they somewhere else? Aware these movements wherever they are clearest and most obvious. You might name them "breathing."

Remember that in bringing awareness to your breathing, you are not doing anything extra. You are already breathing. Just relax and let yourself breathe. Breathe and relax.

Why is relaxation important? It is easy to strain in mindfulness practice, to try to make something extra happen. But you are not trying to have some special experience. Just notice what is actually happening. When you are lost in your thinking, just aware that.

Thinking. And come back to your body. Sitting.

Settle awareness in your body, and then see if you can feel the movements of your breathing. In. Out. Very simple. Nothing special.

Have you forgotten your breathing? If so, notice that the problem does not lie in your breathing. Your breathing is taking care of itself. The problem is that you forgot. You forgot you are breathing. So just remember—oh, I'm breathing.

Just breathe and be aware. You are already breathing. You are already aware. It's not a big deal.

Can you feel the movements of your breathing? This is mindfulness with breathing. Can you feel your awareness going somewhere else? This is also mindfulness, so no problem. Just be curious about what your mind is getting up to. No big deal. Just breathe and be aware.

Are you doing something special to your breathing? Trying to make it good enough for your meditation practice? It's already good enough. Maybe it is not clear. That's fine. That's the way the breathing is now. Let breathing do what it wants. Don't get in the way. Just aware of whatever is happening. Relax and breathe.

You began by feeling your whole posture. Then you allowed your awareness to settle on your breathing. Now open again to your posture. Feel yourself sitting here. Let the movements of your breathing be in the background of your awareness, but be interested in your whole body as it sits and breathes.

Can you feel any tension in your body? Relax and let it go. Just sit. Just breathe. Just relax.

You are already sitting and breathing. There is nothing extra to do. You don't have to do this properly, like a good meditator, because you are already sitting and breathing. So relax.

Notice any tension in your body and let it go. Don't hold yourself rigidly. Adjust your posture if you are uncomfortable. Don't try to get anywhere. Just notice you have already arrived.

I noticed quite a lot that it was very comfortable to move between just focusing on the breath and then other things came up and moved into the foreground. There was something about having the two of them there at the same time that was very calm, and it felt very good at both ends. I was very comfortably aware of the two without having to prefer one to the other.

Yes, absolutely. One of the things about meditation is that it's very difficult to capture in a technique. In fact, it's impossible. You get in the meditation world sometimes people claiming, "This is the ultimate practice that will speedily take you to enlightenment, and the others—okay, I suppose—but they're not going to work." So you get the myth of the one true technique, and it simply does not exist, because it depends on what works for the particular meditator.

Decades ago I was discussing this with someone who pointed out: if you go to a meditation center and there are twenty people in the hall meditating—let's assume they've never done any practice except in this particular center, with this particular teacher, doing this particular technique; they have no experience of anything else—if you went around the room one by one and asked, "What are you doing now?"

You would get 20 different answers. You cannot pin it down. So basically, if it works, it works. This is the area of experimentation. The basic limitation is continuity of awareness over time, so do whatever it takes to develop that continuity. If that involves sitting on your head and contemplating the universe, well, sit on your head and contemplate the universe. Whatever works.

Did anybody feel they were actually developing a bit of serenity? Anybody feel that no, it definitely didn't work? There must be someone, surely. No protests?

One participant shared: "I had to kind of go with breathing and everything else, because everything else was there—tones and energetic streams. I just thought, I'm not going to pretend they're not happening. I'm just going to call it everything else. And that kind of helped a bit."

So you had breathing plus everything else, interwoven, with breathing as part of everything else? And in your case, when you decide you're going to do mindfulness of breathing and focus on breathing to some extent, does that get in the way?

"Yes, it does a bit, because normally I'm just an everything else person. Not that I'm always interpreting—I mean, in this instance I was, and I was just going, oh, there's a lot of energy streams."

So adding the breathing to the soup doesn't really improve the flavour? You have to keep experimenting and see. If it doesn't help, drop it. But it can be useful to experiment because often we have assumptions about what works and what doesn't, and it turns out when we test them they might not be true. Apart from which, things change over time. What works for us one day doesn't necessarily work for us the next,

and vice versa. So keep an attitude of playful experimentation. Don't take it too seriously—just check it out.

Another practitioner raised a similar challenge: "Often I find that when focusing, I tend to really grasp at it and control it. Then it becomes a point of stress because there's some sort of fusion with the physical breathing at that point. So just experimenting—dropping down, trying to drop into the pure physicality of it, the physical qualities—that's helpful."

Yes, and if you find any tension, just relax. Drop the tension. Drop the focus on breathing. If the focus creates tension, what would happen if you dropped the tension? Now, if you drop the tension, you may lose the focus. Well, fine—it doesn't matter. What you want to do is drop the tension. And then, okay, relax. Now see if you can point awareness towards the breathing without the tension. If the tension pops up again, okay, let go, drop it. When you're relaxed, have another look. Oh, there it is again. Okay, just drop it.

So it could well be that the practice becomes: noticing tension, relax. Tension, relax. Tension, relax. And that's a very good practice.

And then you might find, at some point you might discover that you can actually be aware of the breathing without the tension. It may not be for very long. It may even be that as soon as you notice, "Oh, I'm not tense anymore," the tension returns. But that's fine. "Oh, tension—relax."

"It's not like I've never experienced that beautiful serenity of just being with the breath, but it tends to arise organically when I'm already in a more samādhi state."

So for you it's not good as a preliminary practice?

"Usually it would seem that way."

This is the trouble with meditation teachers. They want to interfere in your meditation practice. I don't like going to retreats where there are teachers. They just get in the way. I don't know how you people tolerate it.

Okay, so that's our experiment in mindfulness with breathing. I'm introducing it as the grounding object. But as you can see, the element of creativity is inescapable. It's not a matter of obeying orders. There are no wombat stamps for obedience. It's about the sensitivity and the awareness.

So if following these kinds of instructions helps, you follow them. If they don't, forget about it. If you find that in the course of however much teaching there is, there is one comment that is useful, you take that and pocket it. And the rest of it, you completely ignore.

Thank you very much.

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