Awareness with Breathing (Practice)

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 44:42

This morning we're going to continue with ānāpānasati, mindfulness with breathing. We're using this as our grounding object, as a means of developing a foundation of serenity, so that when the mind becomes sufficiently still and calm, we can turn towards insight.

The way we've been approaching this practice places emphasis on the mindfulness rather than the breathing. That's why we translate it as "mindfulness with breathing" rather than "mindfulness of breathing." We're letting the breathing take care of itself. What we're focusing on is the mindfulness. And as we've been saying, mindfulness presents as the felt continuity of awareness.

If you're looking at the difference between mindfulness and awareness, we've said that we are already aware. Awareness is something which is already happening. We don't have to do anything extra to be aware. It's the mind's function to be aware, and it does so regardless of anything we have to say about the matter. That's one reason why we emphasize the importance of not making too much effort in the practice—because we might find ourselves trying to do something that we're already doing. We just tie ourselves up in knots without really getting very far with the whole thing.

Yet, as we've been talking about and discovering, maintaining awareness is difficult because of the habit we have of forgetting our awareness. The classic example is being distracted by thinking. I'm tracking my meditation object, and then seconds later or minutes later or hours later, I realise that no, I'm not—I'm caught up in thinking. I've been caught up in thinking for some time, but I haven't noticed it. And now I suddenly realise, oh, that's right, I'm thinking. We slide into thinking without knowing we are thinking, which is a very strange experience. I still can't quite wrap my head around it. It happens, but I'm left scratching my head wondering how it happened. It's very puzzling. This is a very normal everyday experience, but isn't it strange when you think about it?

We are lost in thought. We are aware of thinking—we know this because afterwards we can say what we were thinking about. Yet we are not aware of our awareness. Then suddenly we know we are distracted. We are aware of our distraction. We are aware of awareness. Now, we tend to brush over this experience because we're so agitated: "Oh my God, I was distracted, now I've got to get back to the meditation." We don't notice the experience itself and how strange it is. But it is very interesting—that moment when vividly and clearly I am aware of awareness itself.

We can understand this experience in terms of the dyad of awareness and the aware, which we've been exploring. Our habit is always to project all importance into the aware, into the object of awareness. We miss the aware-ing. We just take it for granted. Yet the aware-ing is already available, and sometimes it's

quite clear. For example, I realise I am thinking. At that moment, I am both aware of thinking and aware of my aware-ing. Now I know I am thinking. I am aware of the process of thinking. As we go deeper into the practice, one thing we're aiming to do is to become more familiar with this world of aware-ing. This is one way that opens up the mind to the meditation practice.

We've been talking about aware-ing largely in terms of its elemental quality—the presence itself of an object. But aware-ing as a process is more complex than that. I suddenly know I am thinking. Thinking is now vividly present to me, and that presence is the essence of awareness. But there are other things happening in the process of aware-ing as well.

For example, there is perception. I understand, "Well, that's a thought. It's not a physical experience." If I'm seeing something in my mind's eye, I know, "Oh, that's a thought," as opposed to, "Oh, that's what's happening out in the world." There's perception. There's feeling. "Oh, this is pleasant. Oh, I like this. Oh, I don't like this. This is unpleasant." And so on.

So there's a whole cluster of activity which is part of the broader process of awareing. We've started our understanding of awareing by just looking at the elemental quality of it—pure presence. But when we become familiar with it, we realize there's a lot more happening in this whole process, this whole area of awareing, this area that we call mind. And as we go through the practice, we become more interested in this broader process.

So we're going to do a little meditation experiment where we're going to explore the dyad of awareness and the awared—or awareing and the awared. We're using breathing as the meditation object, and we're going to use an image to get a sense of what it's all about. The image will be of our awareness holding our breathing. It's like you imagine you've got breathing, and the awareness reaches out and holds it and stays with it over a period of time. This is the central image, and as the game progresses we're going to become interested in how tightly we are holding on. In other words, we're going to become interested in the state of the mind which is doing the awareing.

A student asks, "So if we notice at first that the awareness is pretty contracted, we would just loosen the contraction?"

Yes. Once we get a sense of the quality of the awareing, then we can play with it. Am I holding too tight? Am I too loose? Am I too caught up in it? And so on and so forth.

Another student offers, "You have the awareness as a container."

Yes, the image of the container is interesting. Later on we're going to be talking about the concept of citta. There are three key terms that the Buddha uses to talk about mind: mano, citta, viññāṇa.

Mano is literally "mind." It's cognate with our English word "mind." Mano refers to mind as a sense sensitivity. We talk about the six senses, and each sense is a particular kind of sensitivity. Take seeing, for

example: there are two little parts of the body that are sensitive to light. Light strikes the body, and it's registered in these two little parts that we call the eyes. So we have the sense of the eye, but the sense is a sensitivity—a sensitivity to a particular form of data, in this case light. The ears are sensitive to sound. They're not sensitive to light; they're only sensitive to sound. And so on through the five sensitivities.

Mind is also a sensitivity. It picks up internal data—thoughts, perceptions, feelings, ideas, concepts. But it also takes in the data from the five physical senses, brings it all together, and creates a world out of it. When the Buddha is talking about mind as a sense, he uses the term mano.

Sometimes he uses the term citta. Here he's talking about the inner space, the inner container—using your expression—in which all of this is happening. And when he's talking about liberation, for example, he'll say it's the citta which is liberated.

And sometimes he uses the term *viññāna,* which is awareness itself. And in one text he says these three—*viññāna*, *citta*, *mano*—are essentially the same. They're synonymous terms. They cover the same territory, just depending on what angle you're looking at it from.

So in our case, we're looking at *viññāna*, awareness itself. And we start with the purely elemental, in its most basic simplicity: what is it? It's presence—the presence of something. But when we start to look at this quality of being present to the world, we can see that actually there's a lot involved here. It's quite complex. There's a lot of activity going on. So it becomes broader. The terms that we use can be a bit loose in that sense, but basically we're moving from the most elemental aspect of awareness—the pure presence itself—and we're opening up to the broader field of how we recognize a world and how we build a world, how we respond to it, what we are doing with this world.

Question from student: So is that like integrating the specific focus into a much broader awareness and seeing how it fits in relation to that, and modifying, fine-tuning your focused awareness according to how that fits?

Yep. That's pretty much it. And this is part of the journey into insight, into understanding, which is what the mindfulness practice is all about. If we were doing a straight serenity practice, we wouldn't be interested in all this stuff. It would simply be: here's the breathing, just hang onto it like a dog hangs onto a bone. And just use it to get more and more still—deeper, deeper, deeper, deeper. Period. That's it.

But if we're practicing for insight, we want a bigger picture. We want to see: how does all this work? What's going on here? So this is the insight project. But to do that, we do need a foundation of serenity. The mind needs to be clear and still.

Okay, let's stop theorizing. I'm sure you're fed up with all this blah, blah, blah. You just want to meditate. You're just sitting there ready to go like racehorses at the starting block.

Settle awareness in your body. Be aware of the sensations at the base of your body. And from there, lift up through your spine. Relax your shoulders and let your head come into balance.

Let yourself become aware of what is happening throughout your body. At the bottom is the hardness and stability of your contact on your cushion, your chair, your bench. Rising up from there is the lift and firmness of your spine. Around that frame there is a field of sensations coming and going.

Now track the movements of your breathing. Aware of your breathing. Be interested in what is happening to your breathing. It is as if you are holding the movements of your breathing in your hand, keeping your hand steady and watching what is being held within it.

Now relax your grip on your breathing so your hold is more gentle, less intense. Allow yourself to become sensitive to the broader field of awareness around your breathing. Become interested in the space within which being aware of breathing happens.

Don't get too close to your breathing. Step back and give it room. Step back into your awareness with breathing.

Your breathing is moving and changing. Is your awareness also moving and changing? Become interested in your awareness—not so much what you are aware of, but how you are aware. In other words, begin to be interested in the mind that is aware of breathing.

For example, is it easy to be aware of breathing? Or difficult? Do you find breathing clear or subtle? Is your mind bright or dull? Are you working hard or feeling ease? You are aware of breathing. What characterizes this mind which is aware?

Sometimes breathing is clear. Sometimes breathing is not clear. Sometimes breathing is interesting. Sometimes breathing is boring. Clarity, obscurity, interest, boredom—all these are aspects of mind, not of the physicality of breathing.

As you are aware of the movements of breathing, can you sense the movements of the mind which is aware of breathing?

Don't do anything with your breathing. Just hold your mind steady. Breathing comes and goes. Be interested in this without clinging to it. Your mind changes all the time. Be interested in this without clinging to it. Awareness moves from one object to another. Be interested in these movements without trying to stop them.

Don't force anything. If breathing slips out of view, let it go. Just notice that it slipped away and what replaced it. Things come and go. Let them. Just stay aware that things are coming and going.

Open your awareness to the space within which things come and go. This is the space of your mind. What do you find in this space of your mind? Isn't it awareness itself? What is the nature of this awareness? Can

you be aware of awareness?

We could see this practice as first establishing a physical posture, and from there establishing a posture of awareness. Then we become interested in that posture of awareness—even more interested in that than in breathing. And then we let breathing do what it wants.

If you get lost in thought, come back to your physical posture. Then come back to breathing. When you feel settled and stabilized, relax your hold on your breathing and open up to the mind itself, letting objects of awareness come and go as you maintain your posture of awareness.

Now, how did it go?

"With the visualization of the hands holding the breath, I didn't ever get a sense that I was holding the breath too tightly. It felt like my hands were covering the breath. And when I was losing my focus on the breath, it felt like my hands were sort of dissolving—not in the way that you've used the word dissolve, as in primary and secondary object dissolve and there's just awareness. It was more like my hands were dissolving and I was losing that hold of the breath. So I felt I needed to bring my hands back in again to cup, to hold the breath.

"And then when you were saying to become aware of the space around breath, I felt I needed to—I realized I was holding it out there. It was a little bit distant. I needed to bring it inside of me so I could allow it to be inside with all of the rest that was going on around.

"And then as it was going on, I saw the image of being at the optometrist getting your eyes tested. They have the letters and they put these lenses in and they flick a lens and they say, 'Which is clearer? Lens one or lens two?' Have you had that experience where they flick this thing? It felt like when you were saying to understand the characteristic of the mind, I was trying to understand the characteristic of the lens that was clicking across, because the lens didn't change."

Using this as a metaphor. My breathing, yes, it changes, but the breathing is still there. Experience is still there. But it was the quality of the thing that was coloring my mind. Sometimes it was a bit fuzzy, sometimes it was clear, sometimes it was fuzzy, sometimes it was clear—like that lens that goes back and forth. And yeah, just trying to see that all within one great big container of awareness, and then trying to get the sense that there's another awareness that's aware of all of that that's going on."

"It sounds like it got a bit complicated."

"It might have, but it feels like life. Life is a bit complicated. Experience gets a bit complicated."

"But it held you. It held your attention."

"It held me. To varying degrees. There was the fuzz at times, and then there was the question: what do I

need to do to move it back to the clarity?"

"It sounds like, because you weren't holding tightly to begin with, when I said relax your hold, it got too fuzzy. So you had to actually restore some bit of hold onto it."

"Yeah, bring it back in."

"But it sounds very good. The purpose of all these suggestions is just throwing out concepts in the hope that the mind will kind of bite on something and find it useful. And so I think that happened for you. It got you on a journey of seeing things about the nature of the mind which is doing the aware-ing. So that's very good. That's learning to bring the focus point of interest away from the object itself to the mind aware-ing the object. And that shift is the central thing. Because then you get a sense of there really is this interplay between the two all the time. Sometimes it's the object which holds the attention. Sometimes it's the mind which is the aware-ing that holds the attention. Sometimes there's a flow between them. Sometimes there's a narrow focus on one aspect. Sometimes it's a big picture on the whole thing. All of these are just part of the natural movements. But yeah, I'd say you did quite well with that. Wombat stamp?"

"Yeah, definitely a wombat."

"Well, I was thinking of that, but I was thinking I should get a wombat stamp, because it was my skillful guidance that got you there."

"Well, we will give you a wombat stamp."

"I think some people in this room will be thinking, 'Wombat stamp? No chance. I had no idea what he was talking about.' Because that always happens. If you're talking about a meditation process, there's always going to be a certain proportion of the people who are thinking, 'What the hell is he talking about? I've got no idea whatsoever.'

This is why I like to say that it is impossible to teach meditation. It's just too individual. It is possible to learn it. It is impossible to teach it. So all I'm doing is tossing out possibilities. What you make of them is up to you."

Another student raised their hand. "So the hands was a beautiful image. I thought it was really powerful. But earlier today you were talking about walking meditation, and how if you slow down your meditation after walking, you get too rigid in the body. So even though I felt the hands was a good way to displace my intense focus on the breath—to help get a bit of distance—I still latch onto it. And I'm even noticing that now as I'm talking, there's still this desire to control and strangle the breath. I can't just allow it. So stepping back into the container of bigger awareness, I felt the continuity is found. It's easy, but it's like I have to trick my mind into pretending I'm not noticing the breath in order to be able to notice it without manipulating it. So I'm really struggling with that."

And all of that is mind, not breath. It's your relationship to the breathing. It's the concepts that are put on

top of the breathing. And the habitual reactions that emerge once you start to notice the breathing—how the mind responds, including the habitual responses that come up.

Then there's also the aspects of physicality. Any tension that you habitually hold in the body, that will emerge once you start to pay attention. So we've got this complex interplay between body and mind that's going on all the time.

And sometimes, particularly with breathing, you've got to play tricks with it so that it doesn't get tight. Sometimes it's like you settle down to do mindfulness with breathing in which you're not going to be interested in the breathing at all. You're just going to be—I'm not looking at you. No, I'm not looking in your direction. I'm just aware of the whole body. Oh, you happen to be there. Well, that's okay. I'll just look the other way. Sometimes you've got to play tricks like that. And somehow it stimulates the mind into not going where it normally wants to go.

And all of that is working with mind. You're using breathing as the opportunity to work with the mind. So this is part of the rhythm between awaring and the aware. It moves back and forth very differently for each person.

Anyone for whom this made no sense whatsoever? I can feel the vibe. But we won't pursue it.

So again, I don't know if I've emphasised this, but when we do these exercises in the morning, they are games. Play with them. Don't take them seriously. Just play and see what happens. And if you find something useful, you can pursue it. If it's not useful, you can forget about it.

Good luck.

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