Impermanence of Breathing (Practice)

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 59:42

So this morning we're going to continue with anapanasati, mindfulness with breathing, but we're going to put a slightly different spin on it.

In the first few days of the retreat, the emphasis is on settling down. We once summarised the practice as settle awareness in the body and then see what happens. The settling awareness in the body is serenity, and seeing what happens is insight. So we've been looking at mindfulness with breathing primarily as a serenity approach, with the emphasis on settling into the body, settling into the experience of the breathing.

Now we're going to do the same practice, but we're going to edge towards the insight end of the spectrum, which in practice means investigation, or curiosity, becomes more important than before. This is something that characterises insight meditation, or meditation for insight. What drives it really is the quality of curiosity. This is the second of the awakening factors. It lives right next door to mindfulness.

We were talking last night about how, from the Buddhist perspective, we think we know what's going on, but we're wrong. That gives us a problem and a project. We want to find out, well, what is going on? That's investigation. That's curiosity. And if we've got that curiosity, if we've got that urge to understand, this is what drives the whole insight project. Whereas the serenity project is basically how do I become ever more still, calm, peaceful, but not necessarily much in the way of curiosity. People who get attracted to, get drawn to insight practices tend to be people who have this characteristic curiosity about what the hell is going on here.

So let's begin.

Settle awareness in your body. Be aware of the sensations at the base of your body, the hardness and the firmness that you feel there. Lift up through your spine. Relax your shoulders. Balance your head and become aware of what is happening throughout your body.

At the bottom is the hardness and stability of your contact at your base. Rising up from there is the lift and firmness of your spine. Around that frame, there is a field of sensations coming and going.

Breathe and relax. Feel your body, your whole posture, from the base to the top of your head. You can feel a field of sensations and movements. These sensations and movements are already happening. Notice that you are not doing anything to make them happen. They are already happening.

Now begin to be aware of the movements of your breathing, the movements of in-breath and out-breath.

Are you trying to be aware of your breathing? Don't try. You already know you are breathing. Are you trying to make these movements happen? Don't try. The movements are already happening.

You may feel you need some special meditation-style breathing that will take you to where you want to go. But you don't. You just need to notice what you already know. Breathing in and breathing out.

As you feel your breathing, breathing in and out, can you notice any difference between in-breath and out-breath? Sometimes there is in-breath. Sometimes there is out-breath. Are in-breath and out-breath the same? Or are they different from each other?

Is this in-breath new? Or a continuation of the last one? Is this out-breath new? Or a continuation of the last one?

By now you have been aware of a number of in-breaths and out-breaths. Are the various in-breaths the same as each other, or different? Are the various out-breaths the same as each other, or different?

Notice how you are now aiming your awareness toward the fact of change itself. Instead of being interested only in your breathing, you are opening up to the fact of change as illustrated by breathing. Breathing changes. Can you direct awareness more towards the changing than toward breathing?

At the centre of your awareness is the breath, which is one single thing. This one single thing is changing, yet it remains the breath. This is what the Buddha calls change while enduring—something is changing, yet it remains that distinct something. Focus on change while enduring. It's the same thing, breathing, yet you can see it changing. So is it really the same thing? Or does it turn into something else?

And now step back with your awareness and open up to your mind which is tracking breathing—your mind which is aware. Is this mind which is aware of breathing also changing? For example, sometimes mind is focused, sometimes it is distracted. Sometimes mind is vague, sometimes it is clear. Sometimes mind is interested, sometimes it is bored.

Let the movements of breathing move from the centre of your field of awareness to the periphery, and let your aware mind move to the centre. As you continue to practice, how is your mind now? Is it stable? Does it stay the same over time? Or is mind itself changing? Is your experience of mind shifting from one flavour to another?

As you continue to practice, how is your breathing now? Is it stable? Does it stay the same over time? Or is breathing changing? Is your experience of breathing shifting from one flavour to another?

So you can see that in this exercise we start to get interested in the fact of change. Did anybody notice that? A little bit? This is the perception of impermanence.

We've been talking about the dyad of awareness and the object of awareness. And once we become familiar with it, we can see that no part of this dyad is still. Both aspects of this dyad are changing all the

time. And this is, as we said, the perception of impermanence, *anicca saññā*. And it's this perception that constitutes for the Buddha the entry into insight. This is the gateway for him.

So if we talk about insight for the Buddha, he's not talking about psychological insight. He's not talking about finally figuring out why I've never liked my father or mother or whatever. He's talking about seeing into the three characteristics of experience: that all experience is changing, all experience fails to ultimately satisfy, and all experience is neither me nor mine.

These are the three characteristics—*anicca*, *dukkha*, *anattā*—always listed in that order. So if we're using mindfulness of breathing as our vehicle into insight, we use breathing to open up to the fact of change, which is what we were playing around with this morning.

These three characteristics are linked with three perceptions: the perception of impermanence, of change; the perception of pain or unsatisfactoriness; and the perception of not-self. Here we're talking about, in particular, the perception of change.

And notice that it is a perception. Perception is something that we learn over a period of time. It's something that we practice. It doesn't simply fall from heaven. As far as the Buddha is concerned, we have been training ourselves in the perception of permanence

since birth, or from his perspective, from before birth. This is *nitya-sanyā*, the perception of permanence, of the absence of change. And we've learned this in very basic ways.

For example, when we look into a mirror, we've learned to recognize the face looking back at us to be the same face that looked back at us yesterday, or last week, or last year. We've learned to recognize the emotion that arises for us today to be the same emotion that arose for us yesterday, or last week, or last year. And we've trained ourselves to recognize that it's arising for the same person. All of this is perception. All of it is something we've developed, something we've been cultivating over time.

This perception is very, very useful, because what it does is build for us a stable world. The world is stable, predictable. I know who I am in it. I know who these other people are. I know how things work. I can navigate my way through my life. So, using the Buddha's language, we cling to permanence. And we find impermanence threatening. We resist it. Instinctively, we pull away from it.

One reason why it's threatening—and we'll talk more about this later—is because when the Buddha talks about impermanence, *anicca*, not permanent, he's talking about more than just change. This morning we've been playing around with it in terms of change. Is this changing? Is that changing? But when the Buddha talks about impermanence, he doesn't just mean that people and things change. He's talking about something much more radical.

Impermanence is more like one thing ceasing and another thing beginning. It's like reciting the alphabet. If we recite the alphabet, we go A, B, C, D, E, F, G, and so on. It is not that A turns into B. It's that when B

appears, A has already disappeared. A does not become B, and B does not become C. In other words, the past has already completely disappeared. Right now, we are already new.

But we don't see this, or if we do see it, we resist it and push it away. We think we can go back to A. And we want to do this because we want to make it better somehow. But we cannot, because it's already disappeared.

So what we find is that sometimes we unexpectedly find ourselves at B. For example, we're tracking our meditation object—let's say the breath—and we are thrown into distractions. At first, we don't know that we are distracted. And then we realize, oh, I'm distracted. I've lost my meditation object. In other words, thinking we are at A, we realize we have arrived unexpectedly at B. And what do we do then? Usually, we try to get back to our meditation object as quickly as possible. We find ourselves at B and we try to get back to A.

This comes out in the way we talk about meditation practice. Someone wants to be optimistic about how things are going, and they might say, "I'm still distracted, but I'm getting back to the meditation object much more quickly now." Have you ever said that to anybody, or thought it to yourself?

Now, what are we missing here? It is impossible to get back to the meditation object. If I try to return to the meditation object, what is it that I'm trying to get back to? It's a remembered image of how things were in the past, before I was distracted. We try to return to our meditation object as it was before we were distracted. Or we try to return to the meditation that we had before we were distracted. Or we try to return to ourselves before we were distracted. In other words, we find ourselves at B and we try to get back to A. But this is impossible, because the past does not exist.

We cannot return to what happened before, even a moment before, because all we have is now. We have already returned. We are already here, and only here.

I think it's very useful when dealing with the fact of distraction to remember: do not attempt to return to your meditation object. Do not attempt to return to what was present. Instead, recognise what is already present. Recognise an awareness that is already here.

In the moment you realise you are distracted, recognise you have already returned. To what? To this distraction. The fact of it, the flavor of it, the feel of it, the texture of it, the compulsion of it, the yearning of it, the pain of it, the pleasure of it. From this point, which is here, that's where we begin the journey to the grounding object, which may be breathing or maybe something else.

This is the return to awareness, and it involves a willingness to accept whatever is happening now regardless of whether or not it is part of our agenda. What happens in the meditation practice has got nothing to do with our agenda. We are not in charge. What's important is this now. And when we start to pay attention, we may begin to recognise that this now is already different, already new. The only question is: are we present to it?

This is opening up to the perception of change, of impermanence.

Someone raised the point that people sometimes try to deal with this by talking about processes rather than things, but exactly the same issue arises. If you regard your breath as an ongoing process, you're still not going back to the same process. No, it's a new process.

This is why the perception of change is quite radical, much more radical than people normally think. "Yeah, things change. Yeah, I think I've changed over the years. What am I missing here?" In the meditation practice, when we're really paying attention, we get a chance to actually recognise this, to see it.

It's quite a common meditation experience. At some point in a retreat, people will say, "You know, the sky seems bluer, the air seems fresher, nature seems more natural." What they're expressing is the perception of impermanence, the recognition that this is new. It's never been like this before and it will never be like this again. This is new. And of course, once we recognise that, it's easier to stay with it, to be aware of it, because it's not the same old, same old.

Someone asked about the instruction of observing the observing mind, being aware of the aware mind. They felt they were tripping themselves up. It was as though the part observing the observing mind was almost retrospectively giving a weather report on what the previous observing mind was doing—whether it was cloudy or clear. They had a sense that the mind they were observing and getting curious about was the mind in the past, the one that had just happened, not the one in the present.

This opens up a really interesting issue about how the Buddhist tradition talks about change. Some people say you can never actually be aware of the present—you can only register the immediate past. There's a whole theory built on this. In orthodox Theravāda, they're committed to this idea. It's the doctrine of moments. When you look carefully at experience, experience lasts only for a moment, so even to register it means you've just passed it. In other words, people do experience this. It's quite a common experience.

Other people don't experience it that way. Personally, I don't. That's never made much sense to me. I have a sense of, no, this is happening now — which puts me outside the orthodoxy in the Theravada world. And also in the Mahayana world, where they are also committed to this doctrine of moments. But quite apart from the philosophy of it, what you experience is perfectly valid. It's what people do experience. They do have this sense of it being the immediate past. That's not a problem. That's what you experience.

But it is true that awareness being aware of awareness itself can trip us up. We can end up tripping over our own feet. It's like the proverbial centipede, trying to work out which leg goes first and can't walk at all. So that too happens. Sometimes it takes a while to get a sense of it. And usually when we first really get a

clear sense of it, well, often it comes about as an accident. We just kind of notice it. Oh, that's interesting. And then it might become more available over a period of time.

That's one of the reasons why I talk about becoming interested in the experience of suddenly realizing, "Oh, I'm distracted." Because that's when we get a momentary sense of mind being aware of mind. And it's quite common, quite ordinary. It's not mystical or profoundly yogic. It's just, yes, this is what it is. But it can take a while to get a sense of this without it being artificial and without having a sense of tying ourselves up in knots trying to perceive this mystical, bizarre thing that doesn't make any sense.

So when you do these little guided meditations, whatever you come up with is good. The fact that you came up with, "Oh, I'm tripping over my own feet here" — that's a good result. Something's happening. Something's shifting in the perception. Questions are arising. What is this? And that helps to open things up a bit. But there's never a correct experience you're supposed to have. It's really important in this practice that whatever is happening is exactly what is supposed to happen, because otherwise it would not be happening. So always stay with that. Always stay with the primacy of your own experience. That's what's important. Not what someone on the throne is saying. Not what the guided meditation seems to want you to experience. That's not important. What's important is what you are experiencing. And if that's clear, the whole process will unfold by itself.

Question: Thanks for putting the emphasis on validating our individual experience. I think that's a really great empowering thing to do. I'm not really sure what I'm saying here, but this idea of the register — you're observing, so you have this sense of being, almost like a duality. How about just being? You're present, but you're just being. And it's almost like osmosis. You're present, but there's not really a sense of observing. You're just with the experience.

That's another flavour of the experience. So sometimes you do have a sense of... sometimes it's like you have a watcher, you have a witness.

And in some traditions, they emphasise this idea of the witness. So you have this sense of there's something happening and there's the witness here. And then you say, okay, pull back to see the witness again. And then you have a sense of the witness here, seeing this witness, seeing this. Some people like to play with this. I think among the people I've spoken to about it, the record is about five steps back. And then the whole thing becomes so complicated it just crumbles completely. So it can be an interesting game to play. But that's just one of the flavours of the experience.

Sometimes, as you say, you simply get the sense of being with it. It's just happening. And that's characterised by intimacy. It's probably more a feeling-based approach, whereas the very idea of watching is more cognitive. When the Buddha talks about experience, he talks about it in broad terms, in terms of the cognitive and the affective. And he draws the distinction between them. They're both happening all of the time.

So, for example, when he's talking about what is the fundamental problem that we have as human beings, sometimes he'll say it's ignorance or delusion, which is a cognitive problem. What's the solution to the problem? Enlightenment. Awakening. I now know what's going on. Cognitive. But sometimes he'll say, what is the fundamental problem we all have? Drivenness, taṇhā, craving, which is of the heart. What's the solution to the problem? Nibbāna, which is affective. It's of the heart. So he sees that there are both sides of human experience. And sometimes he'll talk on this side, on the cognitive side, using the words that he chooses. Seeing, I would say, is cognitive, whereas feeling is affective. So sometimes you talk about seeing something. Sometimes you talk about feeling or touching something. And the second one has a quality of being more intimate. The first one suggests a degree of detachment. Sometimes what he says suggests creating space, detachment. Sometimes what he's saying suggests complete intimacy. And sometimes both.

One quality that emerges with mature practice is what in English is called equanimity, which is the perfect balance of both. It comes from the Sanskrit root *īkṣ*, to see, and the prefix *upa*, which denotes intimacy. So equanimity is an intimate witnessing. There's a witnessing, so it's not entangled in it, but it's witnessing from very, very close by, intimately. It blends both the cognitive and the affective.

When observing the mind, essentially you get different flavours again. You might be observing particular mental formations, a particular emotion, or you might get a purer sense of seeing awareness itself. If you give people that exercise, they come up with different answers, different experiences. I remember one time I did it, and my response was, there's no such thing as awareness. There's just something happening. Why would I add awareness on top of it? It just makes it more complicated. This was definitely not the correct answer, apparently. I thought, I better try again. But the next time I did it, what came to me was, oh, transparency. And I remember that's an image that the Buddha uses.

He uses the image of, let's say, coming to a clear mountain pool of water. You look into the pool and you can see right through it. You can see the pebbles on the ground, the water plants, the fish swimming around. Well, the pool is citta, the mind. The pebbles, the fish, and so on—these are the things that are happening within the mind. And awareness is the water. When it's pure, it has the quality of transparency. It just goes straight through.

For me it's very helpful because what we're developing is a sensitivity to what's happening in the mind. This is very crucial. But of course, what happens in the mind happens in the body as well. Body and mind are intimately interconnected. But we're doing it for a purpose which is fundamentally ethical. It's about the way that we live.

I'm sure everybody's had an experience of having an argument with someone and you say, "Why are you so angry?" And the person says, "I'm not angry!" At that point, you begin to think, hmm, maybe the self-awareness here is not quite up to scratch.

So if we can see things in the body, that's really useful in terms of how we live. Sometimes it's a movement

that occurs within what we would normally think of as the mind, but we might first notice it in the body. And then we know, oh, something's going on. Simply by relaxing, it can dissipate.

One place where this is very useful is the problem of meditators who say, "I've been meditating for a long time, but I still think a lot." One way of working with thinking is to ask: if there's thinking—the kind of thinking that pops up in meditation—where does it come from? Basically, there's always a degree of restlessness in the mind. And restlessness is associated with some degree of tension, and there'll be some tension in the body. So there are those who would say that if the body is completely relaxed, it is impossible to think. It's just one thing.

So if you find yourself thinking, just ignore the thinking but look for the tension in the body, especially in the upper part of the body. Because up here, this is where we tend to get caught up. Can I find any tension in the upper body—shoulders, neck, head, face? Find the tension, relax. And sometimes what you'll find is you can feel relaxation and the thinking just disappears. So this body-mind connection plays a really important role. Becoming sensitive to movements within the body and how they connect with movements within the mind is extremely useful.

Question: Does the doctrine of mind moments talk about how they resolve—in stillness or longevity? Or is it just mentioned as something that happens: there's the moment, and then there's the recognition of the moment?

The doctrine is basically describing how fast change actually occurs when we start to pay attention. We can have the sense that change is happening, but it's happening slowly. But they would argue that when you really look closely, you see no, it's happening very quickly.

The Buddha talks about this. There's one discourse where he says that if you're going to identify with experience to construct a self, you're much better off identifying with the body because it lasts fifty years, sixty years, seventy years, eighty years. But the mind changes so rapidly—and he gives the image of a monkey leaping from branch to branch. How can you identify with it? Because by the time you've made the move, it's already gone. It's something else. So he talks about how rapidly mind changes compared to body.

But this gets taken up by the academics after the Buddha. They develop all this to the nth degree—one mind moment lasts X number of body moments, and so on. How much of it reflects actual experience and how much of it is philosophical speculation, I do not know.

But if you've got a question about it, this is useful because there's curiosity. What is it? Is it true? Is it not true?

Does it help? Does it not help? Well, that investigation can help the practice.

A follow-up question arose. Nirvana, you said, is "heartwood," while enlightenment is cognitive. Is that

because nirvana comes from the idea of fire extinguishing?

Yes. That's the sort of imagery that the Buddha gives. For nibbana, essentially coolness is the central image. One image is that you're slogging through a potentially hot landscape, completely exhausted and thirsty, and you stumble into an oasis—soft grass, shady trees—and as soon as you enter, it's just... *ah*. And at the centre of the oasis is a pool of clean, cool water, and you just go in. This is nibbana. These are the kinds of images he uses when talking about nibbana. Whereas when he's talking about bodhi, which is awakening or enlightenment, he's talking about understanding and seeing. So he uses a different kind of language.

Another question came up about getting distracted. You try to bring yourself back to your original focal point, but the distraction becomes the new reality. The concern was that this could get out of control—moving from one distraction to another.

There definitely is a control in practical terms. We addressed this very early on when we were talking about the secondary object. I realise I'm distracted; that becomes my meditation object. This is what's happening now. And then the question becomes, well, how long do I stay with it? Certainly in the beginning, the answer is not long at all—just enough to acknowledge it. Oh, this is what's happening. And then move to the grounding object, but not assuming I'm going to find it the way it was when I left it. Being ready to see it as it presents now, which is different.

So I might have a style of practice that really emphasises the directed awareness, the grounding object, where I acknowledge the distraction briefly—I'm with it for that period of time, it might be just a second—but I'm with it. And then I shift awareness to the grounding object, but it's clear to me that I'm not going back to the way it was before. I'm interested in the way it is now.

Or you could start to move from distraction to distraction and begin to open up, having a wide field of awareness. Both approaches are valid. But for some people, they find they're much better off if they stay with the grounding object as much as possible. Other people find that if they do that, it gets really tight and claustrophobic, and the mind just rejects it. They find that when they open up, that's much better for them.

And the same person will find at some points in their meditation career that the mind naturally wants to stay with the grounding object. At other times, the mind will want to open up. So you learn to roll with it.

But when you start, and as you go through, it's always best to favour the grounding object. Give preference to that. Because that's the stability point. That's what gives you the stillness, the clarity, and the power to be able to penetrate into experience, to see what's really going on.

So if there's any doubt, grounding object. Should I do this? Grounding object. What should I do now? Grounding object. That's its job. But if something else—boom—there's something else there, fine. That's what it is. This is here.

And now it becomes a grappling object.

Okay. Thank you very much.

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