STAGES OF BREATH AWARENESS

It is important to understand why breath awareness is a core meditation practice on the path of awakening. The breath is with us all day and night, whether we are consciously monitoring it or not. This function represents the interaction of two aspects of experience, the functions that are operating in the parts of the mind that are unconscious and automatic, and the functions that are consciously and intentionally guided.

There is a key element involved in mindfulness of breathing that is worth elaborating, that is, *ardency* in investigating the changing nature of breath sensations. The word *ardent* is defined in the Mirriam-Webster dictionary as: *Characterized by warmth of feeling typically expressed in eager* [*zealous*](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/zealous) *support or activity.* The Pali term is for ardency is *atappa*. In the book “Right Mindfulness”, Thanissaro places ardency into the context of the Satipatthana Sutta, on page 103: “One remains focused on the body in & of itself—ardent, alert, & mindful—subduing greed & distress with reference to the world.” The reference to the breath as a “body among bodies” in the first explanation corresponds to the phrase “body in & of itself””

I have benefitted from using Culadasa’s “The Mind Illuminated” for guidance on recent retreats, and he places great emphasis on ardency in attending to the particular sensations noticeable while practicing mindfulness strategies, formally, while meditating, and informally, during daily life routines. I will talk more specifically about this application in the future. It is intended to overcome what Culadasa terms *subtle dullness*. The overcoming of subtle dullness sets the conditions for the maturing of the seven awakening factors: *Mindfulness, Investigation of Mental Phenomena, Energy/Effort, Joy, Tranquility, Concentration* and *Equanimity*. Ardency matures into Investigation of Mental Phenomena combined with Energy/Effort and Joy

The Anapanasati Sutta provides key support for the cultivation of breath awareness. It suggests several stages for developing more and more intimate and persistent breath awareness. Over the course of several talks I will be referring the “The Mind Illuminated”, which doesn’t explicitly list these progressive stages of breath awareness, so I want to describe some of the stages to make what the book doesn’t explicit describe. Progression through these stages requires ardency.

The classical descriptions are: 1: *Counting*, 2: *Following*, 3: *Contact*, 4: *Fixing*, 5: *Observing*, 6: *Turning Away*,

7: *Purification*, and 8: *Reviewing*. Here is a brief summation of each of the stages:

1: *Counting*: The first stage is for absolute beginners or more practiced individuals who have predominant chatter in the mind. The practice includes silently counting “one” on the in-breath and “two” on the outbreath, up to “ten”, or until the mind wanders, then counting “one”, “two”, etc. This gives the parts of the brain that are normally engaged in chatter a minimal task, that is, counting. Some commentaries use two syllable words, such as “budd-ho” (a way to say “awakened”). One can use other words such as “in-out” or “just-this”. The more spiritually meaningful the words are, the more they will associate with other spiritual or benevolent neural associations. When a person can repeatedly count from one to ten, or can say the two syllable words for, perhaps, 20 cycles of breathing without interruption, it is time to practice with the following stages.

2, 3, 4: *Following* involves noticing the fullness of the in-breath and out-breath cycles persistently with primary attention. *Contact* involves what I call “zooming in”, that is, a heightened curiosity about more specific details of breath sensation such as touch, vibration, whistling sounds, coolness/warmth, etc. *Fixing* involves the ability to focus steadily on one particular breath sensation in detail with heightened interest. The results of successful cultivation of these stages manifests as samadhi/passadhi, that is, stability of focal attention/tranquility. This establishes the conditions for the practice of vipassana, that is, insight into the conditional nature of subjective experience.

5: *Observing* is the practice of vipassana. These insights can be about the conditional nature of breath awareness and other body sensations, as well as how subjective experience (“selfing”, in my terminology) emerges into conscious awareness.

6: *Turning Away* is a more advanced stage of practice, providing insight into dukkha, the fundamentally distressing and confusing nature of the selfing process. This stage requires a quality of heightened alertness and emotional detachment, as the functioning of craving and clinging, which produces selfing, is a very subtle process, experienced throughout our personal history. The realization of this decreases the potency regarding taking life experience “personally”, but rather noticing with great clarity how craving and clinging produce the conditioned nature of selfing.

7: *Observing* is the direct experiencing of the conditioned nature of selfing at the most fundamental levels and the benefits of letting go of the craving and clinging processes which manifest as selfing. The ultimate validation of this letting go is direct awareness of the unconditioned nature of reality, nirvana.

8: Reviewing occurs immediately after experiencing the unconditioned, as a reflective process through which the conditioned nature of lived experience is compared to the experience of nirvana. It is said this has a fundamentally transformative effect on how life is experienced from then on.

The process of awakening traditionally has focused on the last three stages. Modern commentary suggests that awakening begins with the practice of vipassana, which cultivates increasing levels of liberation from craving and clinging.