NOTES FOR ACQUIRING THE BREATH

In a previous essay, I suggested some reasons why mindfulness of the sensation of breathing is beneficial for furthering the process of awakening. Here are the relevant stanzas from the Anapanasati Sutta (The numbers refer to the sequencing of the 16 stages of development in the sutta):

"**[1]** Breathing in long, he discerns, 'I am breathing in long'; or breathing out long, he discerns, 'I am breathing out long.' **[2]** Or breathing in short, he discerns, 'I am breathing in short'; or breathing out short, he discerns, 'I am breathing out short.' **[3]** He trains himself, 'I will breathe in sensitive to the entire body.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe out sensitive to the entire body.' **[4]** He trains himself, 'I will breathe in calming bodily fabrication.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe out calming bodily fabrication.' (Translated by Thanissaro, downloaded from Access To Insight)

This essay focuses on the practical application of mindfulness of breathing that promotes mental stability and begins to promote serenity and mental clarity. “Breathing in long…breathing out short.” establishes a continuity of focus, and, as I practice, becomes the primary practice for what is called “acquiring the breath”, which is the ability to maintain easy access to breath awareness in all settings other than formal meditation practice.

The terminology of the sutta suggests that the primary purpose of mindfulness of breathing is to experience an uninterrupted breath awareness. This is unrealistic; it’s the nature of the mind to be alert to novelty and determine “friend or foe, food or poison”. Typically, this determination is immediately accompanied by some internal narrative and/or behavioral response, driven by pleasant or unpleasant feeling (I like to use the term *affect* rather than feeling, because an affect describes an emotion and the urge to act that accompanies the emotion).

Mindfulness of breathing, because of the neutral feeling tone associated with the sensations around the nostrils, isn’t prone to the fairly automatic emergence of internal commentary or reactive behavior. This neutrality creates a “buffer” that interrupts the transformation of feeling into internal narrative and/or impulsive reactivity. This interruption doesn’t necessarily make the feeling, narrative or impulse to act disappear—it denies a certain sort of “momentum” to the emerging automatic reaction, providing time for different responses to be considered.

What this means operationally is that, even though breath awareness might be predominant, there will be more or less noticeable “threads” of feeling, narrative or impulsivity coinciding with breath awareness. The key function is that more energy is being guided towards breath awareness than the intrusive thoughts and feelings. Here’s a way to understand this: when neurons are working, they need fuel—glucose—and blood supplies it. The more fuel a particular cluster of neurons receive, the more connections there are between those neurons and the stronger the signal strength is between them. That is, when the mind is clinging to a particular narrative, feeling or behavior, it gets more fuel, and then becomes more dominant. When the mind is intentionally focused on breath awareness, more fuel goes there instead! This doesn’t mean that that coinciding narrative is “turned off”, like with a switch; it means that the narrative is being “starved” of fuel, thereby losing strength.

A key skill to cultivate in this practice is *vitakka/vicara*, usually translated as *aiming/*s*ustainin*g, which eventually matures into *dhamma vicaya*, usually translated as *investigation of mental phenomena.* Intending to notice the first awareness of the in-breath and persisting in that noticing for the duration of the in-breath is an example of “fueling” the cluster of neurons associated with increasing body awareness. This makes the neural network “stronger” but doesn’t have the felt sense of urgency normally experienced when attention is drawn to a novel stimulus, because the sensation of breathing is neutral. This ability to intentionally focus on what is emerging into awareness quite rapidly becomes a core skill in the practice of vipassana, insight meditation.

One of the first capabilities to be mastered with this practice is the ability to notice if what is emerging into awareness is wholesome or unwholesome; if it’s wholesome, fuel it with attention—if it’s unwholesome, send the fuel back to breath awareness instead of feeding the emerging unwholesome mental fabrication. This is the practice of what are called the four noble efforts: the ability to notice emerging wholesome conditions, the ability to foster them, the ability to notice emerging unwholesome conditions and the ability to deny fuel to the conditioning process.

As mentioned above, it’s unreasonable to expect the mind to easily stay with the breath, so the ability to aim attention (vitakka) with mindfulness to any emerging conditioning process and sustain awareness (vicara) sufficiently long to determine whether the process produces calmness and clarity is quite valuable. This is combined with the training rule to let go of the undesirable mental conditioning process and go back to the breath is fundamental to spiritual progress.

In several suttas, the Buddha admonishes meditators to be “Ardent, clearly comprehending, mindful, having given up covetousness and affliction towards the world.” *Ardency*, in Pali as *atapi*, is understood to represent being *diligent, serious in effort and zealous.* It is very easy for attention to become lax and rote, and this presents a significant and enduring obstacle to progress along the 16 steps or stages of the Anapanasati Sutta.

There are several ways to practice acquiring the breath:

* The key skill to cultivate and sustain is the discipline of maintaining a persistent focus on the sensation of breathing. There is a tendency to engage the breath sensation in a “lazy” way, which allows the mind to be hijacked easily into some sort of ongoing narrative. One of the last things the Buddha said before dying is “Seek out your own salvation with diligence”. The term diligence warrants careful attention to the breath and alertness regarding any emerging thoughts and a determination to interrupt any emerging preoccupation with thoughts, instead returning to the breath.
* Find ways to embed cues for remembering to access breath awareness in your daily environment, such as little cue cards that say “be mindful”, or daily routines that can instigate breath awareness such as waiting for traffic to move. Watch the breath and try to notice whether the intention to resume driving occurs on the in- or out-breath.
* Take mini-meditation breaks while at work or at home. For example, I sit in the chair in my office and practice mindfulness of breathing while waiting for my next client to arrive. This increases the likelihood that I’ll remember to watch my breathing while listening to my client. Watching the breath during this activity doesn’t interfere with my ability to pay attention. Breath awareness serves as a way to interrupt the wandering of the mind, so I can actually be more effective at attending to what’s going on. There’s a psychological term, “state-dependent learning” that suggests that information and behaviors acquired in a particular situation are more easily accessed and used when the conditions of that situation are repeated. In other words, sitting in that particular chair in that particular spot reinforces my ability to notice and interrupt daydreaming or other distractions.

The next essay will focus on the part of the sutta that says “He trains himself, 'I will breathe in sensitive to the entire body.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe out sensitive to the entire body.”