Understanding the 16 Steps of the Anapanasati Sutta

One of the core teachings of Theravada Buddhism is the *Anapanasati Sutta* (ah-nah-pah-nah-sah-tee soo-tah), typically translated as the *Mindfulness of Breathing Discourse*. On March 1, 2023, I reviewed the functions of the practice of mindfulness of breathing meditation, along with how disciplined practice changes the structures of the brain in ways that are psychologically and spiritually beneficial.

During that talk I briefly reviewed the 16 stanzas of the discourse, which is often described as 4 tetrads, each of which contains 4 of the 16 stanzas, with each tetrad reflecting different levels of meditative development that can ultimately lead to direct knowledge of Nirvana, the experience of Awakening. These notes are intended to provide a more thorough review of the characteristics of the stanzas.

There are two acknowledged contemporary monks who combine scholarly wisdom along with dedicated personal meditation practice. The first is Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, a Thai monk/scholar, who is no longer alive. He wrote “Mindfulness with Breathing—A Manual for Serious Beginners”; it can be downloaded as a free .pdf document, using the title of the book as a search term. Bhikkhu Analayo is a German monk who currently lives at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies in Massachusetts, and has written several very well-researched books on the Dharma. The relevant book he authored in this case is “Mindfulness of Breathing—A Practice Guide and Translations”. It can also be downloaded as a free .pdf file. All the quotes for this article are from that book, which I often use as a study resource on my self-retreats.

Each tetrad functions in accordance with the Four Foundations of Mindfulness Discourse. The first tetrad focuses on creating a relaxed, calm and alert physical process. The second focuses on using breath awareness to provide emotional stability and non-reactive tranquility. The third focuses on setting aside internal narratives and increasing mental clarity. The fourth tetrad provides the skillful ways and means to realize Awakening through liberation from craving and clinging.

The instructions regarding where to focus one’s attention vary according to differing commentaries. The traditional suggestion is to focus attention at the rim of the nostrils or the area just outside the rim, or around the upper lip. An alternative is to focus attention on the expansion and contractions that occur in the abdomen during a normal cycle of breathing in and out. A more generalized suggestion involves focusing attention “to the forefront:”, that is, wherever one decides to observe the sensation of breathing, one should establish this area as “home base”, dedicating persistent efforts to track the changes in sensations in that area. An important consideration is that this discipline is intended to stabilize attention, wherever in the body it is noticeable. This stability is then available for investigating the ephemeral and fleeting experiences in the mind that create a “self”. Being mindful is “at the forefront” throughout all the steps, applied to more and more subtle mental phenomena. Here is what Analayo writes in the above-mentioned book, on pp. 34-35:

Although the nostril area is a natural choice for becoming aware of the process of breathing, the same can also be achieved by attending to the back of the throat, to the chest, to the abdomen area, or else even without relying on a particular circumscribed physical location. For those who prefer to work with a single spot, it can still be helpful to broaden awareness beyond that spot to the whole of the breath. The suggestion is not to follow the breath in and out, but to broaden our perspective and arrive at a more complete apperception of the phenomenon under

contemplation. This phenomenon is the breath as a whole and not only the sensation caused by the breath at a particular spot of the body. Encouraging a broader form of awareness in this way is helpful for the progression through the sixteen steps.

**THE FIRST TETRAD**-- This practice establishes a routine for stabilizing one’s posture and provides a stability of awareness that is physically relaxed, yet mentally alert.

**1) While breathing in long, one knows: ‘I am breathing in long’;**

**while breathing out long, one knows: ‘I am breathing out long’.**

**2) While breathing in short, one knows: ‘I am breathing in short’;**

**while breathing out short, one knows: ‘I am breathing out short.’**

**3) One trains oneself:**

**Sensitive to the whole body, I breathe in.**

**Sensitive to the whole body, I breathe out.**

**4) One trains oneself:**

**Calming the whole body, I breathe in.**

**Calming the whole body, I breathe out.**

The first two stanzas suggest “one knows”, while the third and fourth stanzas change the wording to “One trains oneself”. My understanding of this distinction is that we use the ever-present availability of breath awareness as a primary point of reference—we “know” it directly. The shift to using the term *training*, which then continues throughout the discourse, makes use of this available resource to train for mindfulness as a quality of attention.

Contemporary psychological research on mindfulness makes a distinction between “state” and “trait” mindfulness. *State* refers to a particular moment of experience; when these moments can be maintained sequentially over long periods of experience, the *state* becomes a *trait*. For example, a person can be momentarily concentrated on an object, either wholesome or unwholesome—when this concentration persists over time, over a variety of focal objects, you can say that person’s character is reliably concentrated, and this then considered *trait concentration*. The theme of several research projects is to investigate and clarify how one begins with *state mindfulness* and then develops *trait mindfulness*.

Regarding the phrase “sensitive to the whole body”, the commentaries provide alternative suggestions: One can refer just to the process of breathing to the exclusion of any other sensory phenomena—a more inclusive alternative focus could be on the whole-body experience, including breath sensations, which provides a stabilizing point of reference.

Of course, being sensitive to the breath is essential to the practice, and there are times when breath sensations become so soft and subtle that it seems that the process of breathing has disappeared. This can be alarming, but I have experienced this many times while meditating, and I just persist in aiming my attention at that target area with curiosity, confident that I am not oxygen-starved. The goal is, of course, not really about how often or deeply one breathes, but rather to stabilize and sharpen mindfulness and investigation of mental phenomena. The stillness of the breath is just part of the practice. Of course, the quieting of the breath is not required—just let the breath be what it is and continue to investigate the mental characteristics that are occurring in an ongoing way.

the 4th stanza suggests using breath awareness to calm the body, and this can be understood as a comfortably erect but not rigidly stiff posture. After all my years of meditating, there is a “zone” of peaceful, erect alertness in my body while meditating, whether I am sitting cross-legged on a cushion or in a chair. My knees might ache, or I might feel too hot or too cold, but the body is relaxed and alert “in the zone”. Using the sensation of breathing as a stabilizing resource, I might move my attention systematically through the body, alert for subtle tingling sensations. This allows me to recognize any body tension and relax away from that tightness as I am mindful of the out-breath. Once the body is in the “zone”, I support increasing investigative interest in breath awareness, particularly interested in how the mind maintains persistently mindfulness while “resting” in body awareness. This leads to the second tetrad, which is equivalent to the Second Foundation of Mindfulness, Mindfulness of Feelings:

**5) One trains oneself:**

**‘Sensitive to rapture, I breathe in’;**

**‘Sensitive to rapture, I breathe out’.**

**6) ‘One trains oneself:**

**‘Sensitive to bliss, I breathe in’;**

**‘Sensitive to bliss, I breathe out’.**

**7) One trains oneself:**

**‘Sensitive to mental processes, I breathe in’;**

**‘Sensitive to mental processes, I breathe out’.**

**8) One trains oneself:**

**‘Calming mental processes, I breathe in’;**

**‘Calming mental processes, I breathe out’.**

Our culture assumes that feelings represent emotions, and, to some extent, this is valid, as each moment of emotional experience has a characteristic of urgent reactivity. From a Buddhist perspective, as well as in the context of contemporary psychological research, feelings are understood as *affect*, that is, *the degree of reactivity experienced as a result of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral sensory or mental stimulation*. As the body becomes more relaxed, the ability to investigate affective responses other than the sensation of breathing becomes more developed. There is a close interaction between tension in the body and affective impulsivity; as the body becomes more relaxed as a result of practicing the 4th stanza, the ability to rest attention on the flow of experience free from impulsive reactivity develops, and serenity becomes more evident. This frees up the energy moving through the mind/body continuum and cultivates the experience energy as a manifestation of a mind unencumbered by the hindrances, described in stanzas 5 and 6.

The terms “rapture” and “bliss” have different meanings, depending on the commentary. If the commentary is oriented towards the cultivation of *jhana* (jah-nah), an *extraordinarily concentrated state of mind*, then *piti* (pee-tee), translated as *rapture*, is experienced, a strongly pleasant feeling that is part physical and part emotional. Waves of piti move through the body in the first of the four jhana states; in the second jhana piti is less physically ecstatic and more mentally exhilarating.

This feeling transitions during the development of jhana from exhilaration to an emotional state of happiness and satisfaction, *sukha* (soo-kah), rendered as bliss in the above translation, and this represents the sensitivity of the 6th stanza. Because the emotional state of sukkha is predominant as piti subsides, the mind becomes increasingly tranquil, and this supports the transition represented by the next stanza.

The 6th stanza can have an alternative rendering, depending on whether the experience represents the cultivation of even more refined jhana states or, alternatively, the practice of *vipassana* (vih-pah-sah-nah), *insight into the way the “selfing” process operates*. In this case, piti is more likely to be experienced as an enthusiastic, buoyant, and engaged interest in investigating what is happening, rather than developing the kind of sukkha represented by the 6th jhana. Instead of sukkha, the experience of quiet satisfaction emerges into awareness.

The 7th stanza provides opportunities to investigate more subtle mental states—in jhana practice, the mind settles into a very quiet flow of experience, exclusive of any peripheral stimulation, which culminates in the experience of heightened tranquility characteristic of the third jhana. Regarding the practice of vipassana, awareness of the characteristics of thought formation become clearer in awareness—there is less interest in identifying with the stream of thoughts that are normally apparent—they are more frequently and clearly understood as mental phenomena rather than “myself” or “the world”.

This awareness leads to the 8th stanza, “calming mental processes”, which begins to investigate even more subtle manifestations of selfing that do not involve internal narratives. The mind becomes more even more clear and peaceful, and the experience of “flow” is evident, that is, the conditions that are investigated in the Third Foundation of Mindfulness, Mindfulness of the Mind. Here’s another quote from Analayo’s book, pp. 68-69:

The mental activity that has been discerned clearly with the previous step can now be allowed to settle down naturally. Here “calming mental activity” does not mean that all types of mental activities have to be entirely tranquillized. Without the presence of any feeling tones and perceptions it would not be

possible to continue the practice any further. The distinction between inhalations and exhalations relies on being aware of feeling tones and perceptions, a distinction relevant throughout the remaining steps. The target of practice at the present juncture is only to calm down mental activity to such a degree that we are able to experience the mind itself, which is the first step in the ensuing tetrad on contemplation of the mind.

The reference to “feeling tones and perceptions” points out that *vedana* (vey-dah-nah), *feelings*, not necessarily emotions, and *sanna* (sahn-yah), *perceptions*, are always present in every moment of experience in the unawakened mind, and constantly changing; cultivating these insights becomes an increasingly more important element of practice going forward. The end goal is to understand the affective quality of each moment, either pleasant, unpleasant or neutral, as impersonal phenomena, and that perceptions are also impersonal, providing the initial stimulus that the feelings interact with, building the experience of selfing through the process of craving (affective drives) and clinging (perceptions that are identified with as a self). Here is the next tetrad, which is equivalent to the Third Foundation of Mindfulness, Mindfulness of the Mind:

**9) One trains oneself:**

**‘Sensitive to the mind, I breathe in’;**

**‘Sensitive to the mind, I breathe out’.**

**10) One trains oneself:**

**‘Gladdening the mind, I breathe in’;**

**‘Gladdening the mind, I breathe out’.**

**11) One trains oneself:**

**‘Steadying the mind, I breathe in’;**

**‘Steadying the mind, I breathe out’.**

**12) One trains oneself:**

**‘Liberating the mind, I breathe in’;**

**‘Liberating the mind, I breathe out’.**

Being “sensitive to the mind”, the training practice reflected in the 9th stanza, describes the characteristics of investigative consciousness that is not distorted by feeling tones or perceptions that are associated with the hindrances. This frees up energy in the mind, which is more serene and less reactive than one normally experiences, reflected in the 10th stanza, “gladdening the mind”. There is a quality of mental fluidity that is comparable to the way water flows, first actively streaming, then becoming quieter, then becoming still and clear. Here is another quote from Analayo’s book, found on p. 86, that makes use of this simile:

By way of illustration, we might imagine a swiftly flowing rivulet as an exemplification of the joy experienced with the first step of the previous tetrad on contemplation of feeling tones. Suppose at some point this rivulet enters a large lake. The flowing into the lake illustrates the happiness of the

second step of the tetrad on contemplation of feeling tones. There is still some motion, but it is no longer as swift and lively as earlier. Once the water has settled in the midst of the lake and become quiet, this then represents the gladdening of the mind with the second step of the third tetrad on contemplation of the mind. The image is not meant to convey the idea that these are static conditions that invariably manifest in the same manner. Progressing through the sixteen steps repeatedly will result in different experiences of joy, for example, or of happiness or gladness.

The water simile only aims to illustrate how these three states relate to each other. Joy, happiness, and gladness are just different modalities of a basically positive mental condition conjoined with pleasant feeling tones, all of which can be illustrated with the example of water. The joy is more active, the happiness is in comparison quieter, and the gladdening of the mind more profoundly still, in line with the general shift from mental activities in the previous tetrad to the mind as such in the present tetrad. Over the course of sustained meditative training, each of these three will mature and incline the mind ever more to a deep inner sense of mental composure.

Stanza 11, “steadying the mind”, describes how the various factors of a wholesome mindset come together. *Samadhi* (sah-mah-dee) can have two renderings—one manifestation is *focused attention*, *exclusive of other stimuli*, and is related to jhana practice, while the other is related to the unification of the Seven Awakening Factors, and this unification is described more specifically later in the Anapanasati Sutta. The sixth Awakening factor is *samadhi* and is *the unified and optimally more effective coordination of the other six factors*--Mindfulness, Investigation of Mental Phenomena, Energy/Right Effort/Persistence, Joy/Enthusiastic Engagement, Tranquility, Concentration/Unification, and Equanimity/Balance. Here is another quote from Analayo’s book, on p. 85:

Here the term “concentration” does not refer to a narrow focus that excludes anything that does not fit into the circumscribed passageway of its restricted field of attention... Instead, in the way of practice described here, the cultivation of “concentration” carries more a flavour of a natural converging, a coming together in an effortless unification of the mind that rests within itself, composed and at ease. It is as if the whole of subjective experience is held in a loving and caring embrace such that it becomes completely unified, with no trace of its usual fragmentation left. At this juncture, then, the

whole-body awareness practised throughout becomes a whole-body-and-whole-mind experience.

Experientially, the physically experienced “zone” related to the first four stanzas becomes expansive and inclusive also including consciousness. There is an “open-ended” mindset that is less and less invested in defining a separated self. This kind of insight leads to the realization potential described in stanza 12, that is, liberation from significant influences created by the hindrances.

There are different levels of liberation that can be experienced. Every time we go back to the breath there is a state of liberation, even if it is brief in duration. When the mind is relatively free of the hindrances, that is, *upacara samadhi* (oo-pah-dah-rah sah-mah-dee), *translated as access concentration*, when the influence of any hindrance is set aside, there is a more profound state of liberation, but it is still a state. The product of the 12th stanza is more like a *trait of liberation*, an ongoing quality of serenity and clarity, although this experience is not a manifestation of Nirvana. This quality of dispassionate freedom sets the conditions that support the potential of the fourth tetrad:

**13)** **One trains oneself:**

**‘Focusing on impermanence, I breathe in’;**

**‘Focusing on impermanence, I breathe out’.**

**14) One trains oneself:**

**‘Focusing on fading away, I breathe in’;**

**‘Focusing on fading away, I breathe out’.**

**15) One trains oneself:**

**‘Focusing on cessation, I breathe in’;**

**‘Focusing on cessation, I breathe out’.**

**16) One trains oneself:**

**‘Focusing on relinquishment, I breathe in’;**

**‘Focusing on relinquishment, I breathe out’**.

This level of practice, more significantly free from affective drives and associated misperceptions, manifests a flow of wholesome mental states that are unified and tranquil, providing support for increasingly clear realization of anicca (ah-nee-chah), the transitory nature of subjective experience, typically described as impermanence. Investigation of impermanence is embedded within the practice of anapanasati—the sensations of breathing are constantly changing, as is the quality of awareness that is available for investigation of the cycle of breathing in and out. Subjectively, the characteristics of this experience involve insights into the fundamental elements of consciousness, without any internal narrative. The operation of the second and third tetrads creates the conditions that support a more agile and insightful investigation of the breath and the mind. This is characteristic of the 13th stanza.

The 14th stanza describes further development of *viraga* (vih-rah-gah), translated as *dispassion*. When experiencing viraga, attention is not dull or flat—subjectively, there is an awareness of mental phenomena, but the appeal instigated by craving and clinging regarding those phenomena fades. It is like what happens when the ink in a printer starts to run out—the printed material becomes fainter and harder to read. Another simile is what it is the difference between being in a room with a loud radio that is hard to ignore, then moving to another room that is well-insulated to the extent that you could listen to what is being broadcast over the radio, but there is little interest in allowing the sounds to become meaningful.

The 15th stanza focuses on *cessation*, which moves the practice closer to the potential for Awakening. The Pali term for this phenomenal experience is *nirodha* (nih-row-dah), translated as *the absence of craving and clinging*. It is the quality of freed-up awareness described as the Third Noble Truth. This is a more complete freedom from vedana and sanna, and is the consequence of the maturation of viraga. *This sort of subjective awareness is “tired” of the fruitless consequences regarding any attachment to the view that there is an enduring/autonomous self*. This level of consciousness repeatedly “loses track” of craving and clinging, setting the stage for the final stanza.

The 16th stanza involves relinquishment, a thorough “letting go” of the misperception of the enduring/autonomous self. Earlier in the process of Awakening, one practices renunciation, which is an intentional disregard for a particular conditioned self-experience. With relinquishment, intentionality, in a sense, ceases to exist as a factor that conditions the mind, creating a self. There is a total disinterest in duality, that is, the belief that there is an observer and that which is observed. This is the doorway to the Unconditioned, Nirvana. Here is another quote from Analayo’s book, on pp. 110-111:

The insight progression that underlies the present tetrad on contemplation of dharmas could be illustrated with the example of standing on the bank of a river. Facing the water and looking at its flow corresponds to contemplation of impermanence. Suppose now we step on a bridge that spans over the river and face the direction in which the water flows, whereby our perspective will be with more emphasis on the motion of the water away from us. This change of position illustrates contemplation of dispassion, when emphasis is on the moving away and eventual disappearance of contemplated

phenomena. Next we might turn around on the bridge and face the direction from which the river comes. Instead of looking out to the far distance, we look straight down to see how the water disappears from view right at the edge of the bridge. This illustrates contemplation of cessation, when the disappearance and ending of things stands out prominently. Finally we might let ourselves plunge into the river itself. This illustrates the final step in the present tetrad, letting go.

Beside attempting to convey a practical flavour of each of the four insight themes, the simile of the river is also meant to point to their interrelation. At first sight, it might seem that impermanence is a quality of the object and dispassion a subjective response to it. Again, cessation can appear a quality of the object and letting go a subjective reaction to it. Although this is indeed a way of reading the insight progression described here, such a distinction between subject and object does not do full justice to the insight dynamics that can unfold here. Impermanence and cessation need to be applied as well to the subjective. Conversely, *virāga* in its alternative sense of fading away can be a dimension of the object. Letting go needs to be comprehensive, comprising object and subject. From this viewpoint, each of the four insight contemplations can have a broad range of possible applications.

After the 16 stanzas the Anapanasati Sutta then describes how the practice can be applied to directly realizing the validity of the Four Noble Truths, the potential of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, and then the optimal functioning of the Seven Awakening Factors.

Ultimately, the experience of Nirvana is a mystery, in that any description of the experience is bound and limited by conditioning. It is said that, after his Awakening, the newly realized Buddha contemplated for a few weeks before seeking out his companions, unsure as to whether or not his way of cultivating that profound insight could ever be effectively taught to anyone. As the story goes, the first time he explained it, at least one of this fellow-travelers realized Nirvana, and this began the long path to our time. I hope my talk and these notes provide some useful information for all of us to contemplate towards this goal. +