**Breath Awareness for Quieting the Mind**

The primary mode for training the mind in Buddhism is *anapanasati* (ah-nah-pah-nah-sah-tee), which literally translates as *inhaling/exhaling mindfully*. This practice characterizes the fundamental practices of two of the most important suttas, the Satipatthana Sutta and the Anapanasati Sutta. These notes will refer to the beginning of the Satipatthana Sutta, the Discourse on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. The following quote is from “Satipatthana—The Direct Path To Realization” by Analayo, p. 4, and describes how to cultivate anapanasati:

“And how, monks, does he in regard to the body abide contemplating the body? Here, gone to the forest, or to the root of a tree, or to an empty hut, he sits down; having folded his legs crosswise, set his body erect, and established mindfulness in front of him, mindful he breathes in, mindful he breathes out.

“Breathing in long, he knows ‘I breathe in long,’ breathing out long, he knows ‘I breathe out long.’ Breathing in short, he knows ‘I breathe in short, he knows ‘I breathe in short,’ breathing out short, he knows ‘I breathe out short.’ He trains thus: ‘I shall breathe in experiencing the whole body,’ he trains thus: ‘I shall breathe in calming the bodily formation,’ he trains thus” ‘I shall breathe out calming the bodily formation.’

“Just as a skilled turner or his apprentice, when making a long turn, knows ‘I make a long turn,’ or when making a short turn know ‘I make a short turn’ so too, breathing in long, he knows ‘I breath in long’, … (continue as above).

[REFRAIN]

“In this way, in regard to the body he abides contemplating the body internally, or he abides contemplating the body externally, or he abides contemplating the body both internally and externally. Or, he abides contemplating the nature of arising in the body, or he abides contemplating the nature of passing away in the body, or he abides contemplating the nature of both arising and passing away in the body. Or, mindfulness that ‘there is a body’ is established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and continuous mindfulness. And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world.

“That is how in regard to the body he abides contemplating the body.

There are other contemplations regarding the body in this part of the sutta, the First Foundation, Kayanupassana (kah-yah-new-pah-suh-nah), Mindfulness of the Body. Future talks will focus more specifically on the other contemplations in this section of the sutta.

Why is breath awareness recommended? Additionally, why is it so prevalent in the Eastern spiritual traditions? There are some common-sense justifications:

* Breathing is essential to life, so we always have the opportunity to use breath awareness as a resource for stabilizing attention.
* The sensations associated with breathing in and out are neutral in feeling tone. Much of what grabs attention and then fixates awareness on an internal narrative or mood has a feeling tone that is either pleasant or unpleasant. The stronger the feeling tone is, the stronger the demand for attention is that accompanies the feeling and the associated narrative. Reactive attention to feelings manifests as craving, with an impulsive urgency to either have more pleasant feelings or to be rid of unpleasant feelings—a topic that is fully addressed in the Second Foundation of Mindfulness, Vedanupassana (vwey-dah-new-pah-suh-nah), Mindfulness of Feelings. Being able to mindfully acknowledge and desensitize the mind to the feelings is facilitated by the neutral feeling of breath sensations.
* As persistent attention to the breath develops and the mind/body system becomes tranquil, the sensations become more subtle and softer; this requires more diligence in paying attention to the sensations, and this increased diligence enables attention to more subtle manifestations of the other Foundations as well.

There are additional neuroscientific insights regarding how mindfulness of breathing is beneficial. A prominent neuroscientist, James Austin, has been a Zen practitioner since the mid-1970’s, and has written several very scholarly books on how Zen Buddhism interacts with the neurological functions of the brain. Here are excerpts from his book, “Zen and the Brain—Toward an Understanding of Meditation and Consciousness”, pp. 94-95:

[While studying brainwaves in a cat] “…Every time the cat breathed in, its nerve cells fired much more. Every time the cat breathed out, these discharges slacked off. *Breathing out quieted the brain*. Lesser degrees of this same phenomenon have since been observed in the human amygdala and hippocampus…

“Normally, we spend slightly less time breathing in (43 percent) than breathing out. Normally when the [Zen] monks merely sat quietly, they spent less time than this in their inspiratory phase. But during zazen, their time in inspiration fell even further. Now it consumed a mere one-quarter of the whole breathing cycle…

“The expiratory pause is the final phase at the end of one cycle of breathing in and out. in this pause, no expiratory movements take place. Which of our basic human emotions show and increase during this pause? Only tenderness. In contrast, fear lengthens the phase of inspiration and increases the amplitude of breathing. In general, states of tension increase chest breathing; relaxation favors abdominal breathing…

“When both brain and body quiet down, less oxygen is needed. When monks slow their breathing rates to only four breaths a minute, each of these breaths contains an increased tidal volume of air, for a total volume of 3.2 to 4.4 liters per minute. Even so, this total volume is still substantially less than the volume of air that normal controls breathe at rest: around 6 liters a minute…

“The flow of air along the nasal passages also influences the brain, because air flow stimulates nasal nerve endings… When slow meditative breathing reduces the volume of air flow it also reduces the discharge of nerve cells…In summary, then, *whenever we breathe more quietly and prolong the phase of expiration, we are probably quieting the firing activity of many nerve cells, both in the medulla and above*.

HOW TO USE BREATH AWARENESS TO QUIET THE MIND

It is the nature of the mind to be able to shift focus quickly from one stimulus to another. In evolutionary terms, it is beneficial to be alert to novelty and assess whether something on the periphery of awareness represents potential threat or potential gratification—friend or foe, food or poison? In order for the mind to “abide independent, not clinging to anything in the world” we must train the mind to be alert to the transition from a peripheral awareness to focused attention without becoming attached to what is being attended to as an enduring self.

The terms in the quote above, what Analayo calls The Refrain, which occurs at the beginning of the sutta and which is reviewed during the talk of May 26, 2021 entitled “What Is Satipatthana?”. The relevant phrase there is “contemplating the body, diligent, clearly knowing and mindful, free from desires and discontent in regard to the world”. The result of this freedom is a quality of attention called *samatha* (shah-mah-tah), a quality of *tranquility* in the mind synonymous with *samadhi* (sah-mah-dee), usually translated as *concentration*, but more appropriately termed *unification of mental formations*.

Functionally, this means renouncing craving and clinging by setting aside the Five Hindrances: Sense Desire, Aversion/Ill-Will, Sloth/Torpor, Restlessness/Worry and Skeptical Doubt. This setting aside is temporary and is primarily accomplished through the procedural routines developed through the practice of mindfulness of breathing. Craving is the subjective experience of wanting or not wanting, typically impulsive and reactionary. Clinging is an identification with an internal narrative as constituting a self and/or how the world is. Mindfulness of breathing requires an intention not driven by wanting or not wanting combined with the innate directness of breath awareness—there is typically no story associated with the sensation of breathing.

In that way, anapanasati interrupts the patterned nature of craving and clinging; the breath sensation induces samatha/samadhi, which drains the potency of craving, while the simplicity of direct breath awareness doesn’t require any description to accomplish.

TWO APPROACHES TO QUIETING THE MIND

There are two primary approaches to the practice of *vipassana* (vih-pah-sah-nah), that is, *insight into the conditioned nature of subjective experience*: through jhana practice or through what is called dry vipassana, which is a practice not requiring jhana. Both can be cultivated through mindfulness of breathing meditation, as the mind becomes quieted and stabilized in the flow of experience. This results in samatha, as described above. Here is a rendering of the two approaches in a sutta translated by Thanissaro:

**In Tandem--The Yuganaddha Sutta  (AN 4:170)**

On one occasion Ven. Ānanda was staying in Kosambī at Ghosita’s monastery. There he addressed the monks, “Friends!”

“Yes, friend,” the monks responded to him.

Ven. Ānanda said: “Friends, whoever—monk or nun—declares the attainment of arahantship in my presence, they all do it by means of one or another of four paths. Which four?

“There is the case where a monk has developed insight preceded by tranquility. As he develops insight preceded by tranquility, the path is born. He follows that path, develops it, pursues it. As he follows the path, developing it & pursuing it—his fetters are abandoned, his obsessions destroyed.

“Then there is the case where a monk has developed tranquility preceded by insight. As he develops tranquility preceded by insight, the path is born. He follows that path, develops it, pursues it. As he follows the path, developing it & pursuing it—his fetters are abandoned, his obsessions destroyed.

“Then there is the case where a monk has developed tranquility in tandem with insight. As he develops tranquility in tandem with insight, the path is born. He follows that path, develops it, pursues it. As he follows the path, developing it & pursuing it—his fetters are abandoned, his obsessions destroyed.

“Then there is the case where a monk’s mind has its restlessness concerning the Dhamma [Comm: the corruptions of insight] well under control. There comes a time when his mind grows steady inwardly, settles down, and becomes unified & concentrated. In him the path is born. He follows that path, develops it, pursues it. As he follows the path, developing it & pursuing it—his fetters are abandoned, his obsessions destroyed.

“Whoever—monk or nun—declares the attainment of arahantship in my presence, they all do it by means of one or another of these four paths.”

The path with *tranquility preceding insight* involves the development of jhana (jah-nah), which is an extraordinary level of samadhi that is quite difficult to attain. In the image below it is represented by the tip of the cone. The approach of *insight preceding tranquility* is called dry vipassana and is much more inclusive in awareness. In both cases, the flow of energy in the cone below the area where the hindrances are subdued is called *upacara samadhi* (ooh-pah-chah-rah sah-mah-dee)*, access concentration*, and makes the practice of vipassana possible. Below is an image to illustrate these approaches:

Cone of Awareness

Stable focus of attention on the breath or nimitta

Realm of the Hindrances

Hindrances are Set Aside.

 (Access Concentration)

Dry Vipassana

Jhana Entry

The process of concentration is occurring everywhere in the cone, just as energy from the sun is being concentrated by the focusing capacity of the lens in a magnifying glass. At the tip of the cone the energy is most strongly associated, hotter and brighter. Higher in the cone the energy is still associated, but not as strongly, but it includes a larger area of concentrated attention, which facilitates vipassana, insight into the fabricated nature of self-experience and the characteristics of impermanence, and this dissolves the misperception of an enduring/autonomous self.

**Anapanasati and Jhana:** This practice involves persistent and exclusive attention to the sensation of breathing, to the extent that the hindrances are totally absent from awareness. As samadhi increases and stabilizes, a mind-created object appears in awareness called a nimitta (nih-mih-tah); this apparently is most frequently noted as a persistent image of a bright point of light and continued focus on the sensation of breathing with awareness of the nimitta stabilizes ones focus until attention “falls into the object” and this produces various characteristic conditions in the mind known as the first jhana, which will not be elaborated upon here. Further levels of jhana can then be developed to a very high degree of refinement. The purpose for cultivating the jhanas is to create optimal circumstances for recognizing and developing the Seven Awakening Factors to fulfillment.

Upon exiting jhana, the mind is very stable, much like the surface of a pond that is very still; when anything “touches” the surface of the pond, the ripples are very noticeable, and this is the primary advantage gained when practicing vipassana after exiting jhana.

**Anapanasati and Dry Vipassana:** This practice was developed in the late 19th century in Burma (Myanmar today) and involves using anapanasati to the extent that the Five Hindrances are not totally eliminated but remain potentially in the periphery of awareness. Because the mind has been so persistent in attending to the breath sensations, noticing and disregarding the emergence of a hindrance, a stability of inclusive attention is developed, allowing minimal and non-interested awareness of peripheral mental phenomena as impersonal and transient. In this way, insight regarding both the nature of the Five Hindrances and the more fundamental process of impermanence leads to a realization that there is no enduring/autonomous self, with the result being liberation from distress and confusion.

The topic scheduled to be reviewed during the next talk on June 9, 2021 will be contemplations on the body, specifically the Four Postures and Clear Knowledge In Regard To Activities.