Reviewing Mindfulness of the Body

In the Satipatthana Sutta (sah-tee-pah-tah-nah soo-tah), the first of the four foundations is *kayanupassana* (kah-yah-noo-pah-sah-nah), translated as *mindfulness of the body*. The word *kaya*, traditionally understood to mean *body*, translates literally as *accumulation*, and in this way would be understood as, for example, *an organization that included several components*. The root word that accompanies kaya is anupassana (ah-noo-pah-sah-nah), which involves seven contemplations:

(1) Contemplating (formations) as impermanent, one abandons the perception of permanence. (2) Contemplating (them) as painful, one abandons the perception of happiness (to be found in them). (3) Contemplating (them) as not self, one abandons the perception of self. (4) Becoming dispassionate, one abandons delighting. (5) Causing fading away, one abandons greed. (6) Causing cessation, one abandons originating. (7) Relinquishing, one abandons grasping" (Pts.M. I, p. 58).

The function of anupassana also is applied regarding the other three of the foundations, vedanupassana (veh-dah-noo-pah-sah-nah), cittanupassana (chee-tah-noo-pah-sah-nah), and dhammanupassana (dah-mah-noo-pah-sah-nah), each of which will be reviewed in future talks. The anupassana contemplations consider (1) Anicca (ah-nee-chah)The transitory nature of experience, (2) The distress and confusion that is essential to dukkha (doo-kah), (3) Anatta (ah-nah-tah), the absence of an enduring/autonomous self, (4) The absence of attraction regarding any accumulation, (5) The fading away of interest/identification regarding any accumulation, (6) The disenchantment that occurs regarding all accumulations, and (7) Liberation from craving/clinging regarding all accumulations. This formulation is repeated throughout the four foundations in terms of what is described as “the refrain”, found in the quote below, italicized.

Here are key quotes regarding kayanupassana, as translated by Thanissaro:

"And how does a monk remain focused on the body in & of itself?

"There is the case where a monk — having gone to the wilderness, to the shade of a tree, or to an empty building — sits down folding his legs crosswise, holding his body erect and setting mindfulness to the fore [lit: the front of the chest]. Always mindful, he breathes in; mindful he breathes out.

"Breathing in long, he discerns, 'I am breathing in long'; or breathing out long, he discerns, 'I am breathing out long.' Or breathing in short, he discerns, 'I am breathing in short'; or breathing out short, he discerns, 'I am breathing out short.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe in sensitive to the entire body.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe out sensitive to the entire body.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe in calming bodily fabrication.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe out calming bodily fabrication.' Just as a skilled turner or his apprentice, when making a long turn, discerns, 'I am making a long turn,' or when making a short turn discerns, 'I am making a short turn'; in the same way the monk, when breathing in long, discerns, 'I am breathing in long'; or breathing out long, he discerns, 'I am breathing out long' ... He trains himself, 'I will breathe in calming bodily fabrication.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe out calming bodily fabrication.'

*"In this way he remains focused internally on the body in & of itself, or externally on the body in & of itself, or both internally & externally on the body in & of itself. Or he remains focused on the phenomenon of origination with regard to the body, on the phenomenon of passing away with regard to the body, or on the phenomenon of origination & passing away with regard to the body. Or his mindfulness that 'There is a body' is maintained to the extent of knowledge & remembrance. And he remains independent, unsustained by (not clinging to) anything in the world. This is how a monk remains focused on the body in & of itself.*

“Furthermore, when walking, the monk discerns, ‘I am walking.’ When standing, he discerns, ‘I am standing.’ When sitting, he discerns, ‘I am sitting.’ When lying down, he discerns, ‘I am lying down.’ Or however his body is disposed, that is how he discerns it.

*“In this way he remains focused internally on the body in & of itself, or focused externally… unsustained by anything in the world. This is how a monk remains focused on the body in & of itself.*

“Furthermore, when going forward & returning, he makes himself fully alert; when looking toward & looking away… when bending & extending his limbs… when carrying his outer cloak, his upper robe & his bowl… when eating, drinking, chewing, & savoring… when urinating & defecating… when walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, talking, & remaining silent, he makes himself fully alert.

*“In this way he remains focused internally on the body in & of itself, or focused externally… unsustained by anything in the world. This is how a monk remains focused on the body in & of itself.*

“Furthermore…just as if a sack with openings at both ends were full of various kinds of grain — wheat, rice, mung beans, kidney beans, sesame seeds, husked rice — and a man with good eyesight, pouring it out, were to reflect, ‘This is wheat. This is rice. These are mung beans. These are kidney beans. These are sesame seeds. This is husked rice,’ in the same way, monks, a monk reflects on this very body from the soles of the feet on up, from the crown of the head on down, surrounded by skin and full of various kinds of unclean things: ‘In this body there are head hairs, body hairs, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, tendons, bones, bone marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, pleura, spleen, lungs, large intestines, small intestines, gorge, feces, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, skin-oil, saliva, mucus, fluid in the joints, urine.’

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“Furthermore…just as a skilled butcher or his apprentice, having killed a cow, would sit at a crossroads cutting it up into pieces, the monk contemplates this very body — however it stands, however it is disposed — in terms of properties: ‘In this body there is the earth property, the liquid property, the fire property, & the wind property.’

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“Furthermore, as if he were to see a corpse cast away in a charnel ground — one day, two days, three days dead — bloated, livid, & festering, he applies it to this very body, ‘This body, too: Such is its nature, such is its future, such its unavoidable fate’…

“Or again, as if he were to see a corpse cast away in a charnel ground, picked at by crows, vultures, & hawks, by dogs, hyenas, & various other creatures… a skeleton smeared with flesh & blood, connected with tendons… a fleshless skeleton smeared with blood, connected with tendons… a skeleton without flesh or blood, connected with tendons… bones detached from their tendons, scattered in all directions — here a hand bone, there a foot bone, here a shin bone, there a thigh bone, here a hip bone, there a back bone, here a rib, there a breast bone, here a shoulder bone, there a neck bone, here a jaw bone, there a tooth, here a skull… the bones whitened, somewhat like the color of shells… piled up, more than a year old… decomposed into a powder: He applies it to this very body, ‘This body, too: Such is its nature, such is its future, such its unavoidable fate.’

*“In this way he remains focused internally on the body in & of itself, or externally on the body in & of itself, or both internally & externally on the body in & of itself. Or he remains focused on the phenomenon of origination with regard to the body, on the phenomenon of passing away with regard to the body, or on the phenomenon of origination & passing away with regard to the body. Or his mindfulness that ‘There is a body’ is maintained to the extent of knowledge & remembrance. And he remains independent, unsustained by (not clinging to) anything in the world. This is how a monk remains focused on the body in & of itself.*

The italicized refrains focus on various ways to investigate the sections they are associated with. Focusing *internally…externally…both internally and externally* has a variety of interpretations, classical and contemporary. One interpretation would focus on the distinction between what is being stimulated solely by *internal* processes, while *externally* relates solely to external sources; it would seem that, based on that understanding, *both internally and externally* would involve the interaction between the two. Another view involves what is happening within one’s own experience relative to what is empathetically known regarding another being. We can never know definitively the understanding of the Buddha or other early Buddhists was in this regard. The refrain is repeated throughout the sutta, substituting feeling, mind, and mental phenomena, depending on which foundation is being described. I personally practice with an understanding that integrates what is stimulated externally, through five of the six sense bases (found in the fourth foundation), *seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, somatosensory experience, interacting with the sixth base, mental phenomena*—interpretations and responses related to the first five sense bases.

Being focused on phenomena of *origination…passing away…both origination and passing away* relates directly to mindful awareness of anicca (ah-nee-chah), the transitory nature of subjective experience. Reference to mindfulness of anicca is also related to the other three foundations.

The phrase *mindfulness that ‘There is a body’ is maintained to the extent of knowledge & remembrance* can be understood as a reference to anatta (ah-nah-tah), the absence of an autonomous self. When each of the four foundations is in awareness without attachment to the view there is an inherent identity, just the composite elements cooperating in an ongoing way, subject to anicca. *Knowledge and remembrance* points to *sampajanna*, (sahm-pah-jahn-yah), *clear comprehension of the conditioned and impermanent nature of subjective experience*. Be mindful and don’t forget to notice the impermanent and conditional nature of each moment!

These practices, as they become more mature, lead to the next part of the refrain: …*remains independent, unsustained by (not clinging to) anything in the world.* This refers to the moments of liberation we can experience when the mind is free from craving and clinging. Each time we can identify the conditioned nature of the selfing process, the insights that accumulate ultimately can lead to the experience of nirvana.

This review doesn’t cover all the topics in the quote. As was mentioned in the previous talk “What Is Satipatthana?” on July 13, the Satipatthana Sutta is likely the compilation of several themed talks developed during the life of the Buddha and over the several centuries that followed before it was written down. Scholars such as Analayo, who has done a lot of research comparing the versions of the sutta in various schools around Asia, reported that the only sections found in three existing versions include the contemplations of the parts of the body (a sack open at both ends), the elements (earth, air, fire, water), and the corpse contemplations. It is curious to note that mindfulness of breathing as part of kayanupassana is found in only two of the three. The Ekottarika-Agama version makes no mention of mindfulness of breathing meditation!

The primary cultivation of kayanupassana involves noticing the impersonal and neutral sensations associated with the process of breathing. The basic practice involves three components: atapi (ah-tah-pee), sati (sah-tee), and sampajanna. *Atapi* is a quality of *persistent alert attentiveness*, *sati* has a characteristic of present-moment, non-reactive awareness, and *sampajanna*, as mentioned above, is a *clear comprehension of anicca, dukkha and anatta*. Any sensation is impersonal, as suggested in the above quote—a sensation is not a self, but simply neural stimulation; with the breath, it can be the sensations that occur when air moves in and out of the nostrils or rubs against the upper lip. There are also sensations as the abdomen expands and contracts. Very careful investigation reveals the way the torso moves with each breath, and when the torso moves, so do the arms—if you find this incredible, then look persistently and carefully at what happens within the torso as you breath! When standing, the movement of the torso creates subtle changes in the center of gravity in the body, so the legs move, and the feet flex ever so slightly.

The practice of mindfulness of breathing is described procedurally, that is, a step-by-step description of how to attend to the changing nature of breath awareness—long breath, short breath, calming the breath, etc. Another very useful teaching, the Anapanasati Sutta (ah-nah-pah-nah-sah-tee soo-tah), provides a comprehensive approach to cultivating the process of Awakening through mindfulness of breathing. Excellent books regarding this sutta include “Three Steps to Awakening” by Larry Rosenberg and the more scholarly but quite useful “Mindfulness of Breathing” by Bhikkhu Analayo”. I often take the second book with me on my self-retreats for reference and inspiration.

All of the normal breath-associated sensations are primarily neutral in feeling tone, neither pleasant nor unpleasant. This neutrality causes a decrease in the flow of hormonal excitation throughout the body and, over time, creates a quality of physical relaxation and mental tranquility which is generally health-inducing physically. However, this internal quietude is vulnerable to a loss of alert attention, which makes the mind dull and lacking in discipline; atapi helps keep attention alert and active, while the neutrality of sensation also maintains internal quietude.

When something comes to attention other than what I call the “breath-body”, it can be noted as either an internal or external stimulus. When craving and clinging are associated with these distractions, we are normally subject to dukkha, that is, emotional distress and mental confusion regarding what is happening. The process of creating an ongoing identity, which I call the “selfing Story”, is inherently unstable and often involves misunderstanding what is actually occurring circumstantially. The function of atapi sati sampajanna provides protection from dukkha, or a quick acknowledgment that the mental phenomenon is arising and passing away—this is anicca. The quieter the mind is and the longer the intervals between distractions, the more liberation occurs, because there is not such an investment in either defending or gratifying the selfing story’s analysis of circumstances.

The following contemplations foster integrating atapi sati sampajanna into one’s daily life routines:

“Furthermore, when walking, the monk discerns, ‘I am walking.’ When standing, he discerns, ‘I am standing.’ When sitting, he discerns, ‘I am sitting.’ When lying down, he discerns, ‘I am lying down.’ Or however his body is disposed, that is how he discerns it.

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It is very important to create routines that keep reminding oneself to actively and mindfully investigate the transient and impersonal aspects of experience beyond formal meditation practice. A residential retreat is ideal for this practice, as the circumstances are set up in ways that encourage simplifying daily routines around being mindful of how one moves through the day—dressing, washing, walking, eating, etc.

The kaya contemplations that compare embodied experience to a “sack open at both ends” is somewhat abstract, compared to the sections that are associated with the “four elements”, which can be directly noted—earth is any feeling of compression, air is any movement of the body, fire is any experience of heat or coolness, and water, which is more abstract, as it is described as an experience of cohesion, the “holding together” inherent in embodied experience.

I personally cultivate a formal seated mindfulness of breathing practice daily, integrating breath awareness while increasingly investigating a whole-body vibratory sensation, somewhat like the “pins and needles” feeling that happens when a limb “falls asleep”. This sensational process is occurring all over the body, on the surface and the interior, all the time. Training the mind to be alert to the in- and out-breath process, combined with investigating the whole-body vibrations, becomes sufficiently predominant in awareness that the “selfing story” process becomes less frequently intrusive and demanding of identification. I often include my internal ringing in the ears experience as well. Integrated into this practice is a persistent recollection of how the subjective flow is constantly and rapidly changing, either in terms of the physical sensations or the swift shift of attention from one focal point to another. The shifting of attention awareness is related to the cultivation of the third foundation, mindfulness of the mind.