
Notes on Meditation

by

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1. Mindfulness of breathing, bhikkhus, developed and repeatedly practised, is of great fruit, of great benefit; mindfulness of breathing, bhikkhus, developed and repeatedly practised, perfects the four foundations of mindfulness; the four foundations of mindfulness, developed and repeatedly practised, perfect the seven enlightenment factors; the seven enlightenment factors, developed and repeatedly practised, perfect knowledge and freedom...

2. Here, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu, gone to the forest, or to the root of a tree, or to an empty place, sits down; having folded his legs crosswise, set his body erect, established mindfulness in front of him, ever mindful he breathes in, mindful he breathes out.

3. Breathing in long, he knows, 'I breathe in long'; or breathing out long, he knows, 'I breathe out long.'

4. Breathing in short, he knows, 'I breathe in short'; or breathing out short, he knows, 'I breathe out short.'

5. 'Experiencing the whole body, I shall breathe in,' he trains himself thus; 'experiencing the whole body, I shall breathe out,' he trains himself thus.

6. 'Calming the bodily determination, I shall breathe in,' he trains himself thus; 'calming the bodily determination, I shall breathe out,' he trains himself thus...

Ānāpānasati Sutta, MN 118.

1. The practice of *ānāpānasati* or mindfulness of breathing represents a phenomenological exercise in developing the principle of simultaneity (*akālikā dhamma*). This is accomplished by the sufficient establishing of *mindfulness* and *knowledge* of what one is supposed to do and discern.¹ It is an exercise because it requires one actively engaging in and being aware of the *act of breathing*, and it develops the principle of simultaneity because *while* one is actively breathing, one is *aware* of one's actions (body, feelings, and thoughts). These are two *different*, simultaneously present things: the physical or *bodily act* of breathing, and the mental *reflexive thoughts* of one doing that very act. One is not supposed to be favoured on account of the other; a person should not be *overdoing* the breathing (i.e. turning it into a forceful breathing exercise) nor should he be *underdoing it* (i.e. forgetting about the

¹ Which is why in order to *correctly* do any of the practices found in the Suttas, one needs the right view *first*.

act of breathing that is being performed, and letting it happen unawares). In the same sense one should not *overthink* one's thinking (i.e. get lost in thought). The point is to mindfully breathe *while* remain fully aware of oneself-mindfully-breathing, or – to put it simply – to remain aware of the present phenomenon of “I am breathing.”

2. Breathing is an *intentional action*, not a habit, and there is volition involved in every single breath a person takes. The reason why most people think breathing is an automated process is because they are almost never aware of it. Thus the intentional side of the breath remains obscured.² By being an act (*kamma*), it has potential, if understood as such, to reveal the nature of *all* acts (present, future and past), of everything one has ever intentionally done and planning to do. By being an intentional act, breathing shares the same universal nature as all good and evil actions in this world. The reason why breathing is such a suitable act for the practice of mindfulness³ is because it is an *immediately neutral action*, there is no actual good or bad involved in it. Thus, although it shares the same nature as all these other more “kammically” (and consequentially) *engaging* acts, there are no future results involved that would pertain to oneself and others. The merit of an in-breath ceases with an out-breath.

3. As we see from the opening excerpt, by “training oneself thus...,” a monk develops mindfulness of both *immediate* and *possible* action (*kamma*): “I breathe in/out (thus)...,” and “(thus) I shall breathe in/out...” This kind of mindfulness when developed leaves nothing out, and one is simply, yet steadily, becoming more aware of the nature of action in general *while* that very action is actually present. Ultimately of course, this leads to the full transparency of that “I”, in that experience of breathing as a whole, and its utterly redundant *nature* that is being gratuitously assumed.⁴ This nature, if mindfulness pursued to the extent necessary,⁵ can eventually be completely understood and the gratuitous “I” destroyed. This, however, should not be taken in a sense that the phenomenon of “I” would disappear like it was never there, but in a sense that that “I” will cease *to be* “me” and “mine”. It will remain just standing there, hollow and dry.

4. The reason why it is recommended that one should *sit* when exercising mindfulness of breathing is because such a posture offers the least distractions to one's mind. When seated, one will not be engaging in any *other* action different from breathing (and passively sitting of course). So, the only thing that one is going to be *doing* is breathing. In this way it can be understood that sitting is the *most optimal* posture to have, so that one wouldn't be wasting any effort. Consequently, with the

² Cf. Ñāṇavīra Thera, *Clearing the Path*, p. 195.

³ As recommended in SN 54:9.

⁴ Whether it is “I am breathing in,” or “I shall breathe in,” through mindful repetition the “I” begins to stand out, so to speak, and when paired with understanding, the more it “stands out”, the less it is mine.

⁵ Cf. MN 10.

further development of the discernment of the simultaneously present phenomena, and with the strengthening of mindfulness, one can more freely assume other postures and not remain confined to sitting alone. Furthermore, even engaging in other acts, for example: “while breathing, I am sweeping the floor,” will not be a distraction for one’s mindfulness in any way. In this particular instance, one’s mindfulness and discernment is *divided*, or shared by, *two* simultaneously present actions (sweeping and breathing), *while* one is also simultaneously *aware of that thing as a whole*. And this division can continue as far as the strength of one’s mindfulness allows, though there is no particular benefit and reason in pushing it.

5. Sometimes people assume that in *ānāpānasati* one is mindful of the “body of breath”, as opposed to just one's (experience of) body.⁶ This rendering comes from the confusion and lack of phenomenological insight into the nature of (appearing) body. If one is to understand that whether it is the ordinary experience of one's body in everyday existence, or an unusual one resulting from the new practice of concentration, or even a strange sense of lightness of one's body on drugs, in phenomenological terms - body is *just there*. Thus, again, regardless of the *particular way* one's body presents itself, it is the phenomenon of body that is present, and that's what one should be concerned with. So, when practising mindfulness of breathing, one *actually* devotes direct attention to the 'act of breathing', *that body* (or that strange-sense-of-body) that emerges as a phenomenon, *peripherally*, is *that which is the body*, in that experience right then and there. In this way one experiences one's body *through* an act of breathing, which is why the Buddha said that body, as one of the foundations of mindfulness, is brought to fulfilment in the practice of *ānāpānasati*.⁷

By being able to see peripherally that which appears as peripheral, but simultaneously present, one does not conceive it. It is the intention in regard to the peripheral⁸, which tends to make things *actual*⁹ that carries appropriation. If one succeeds in leaving it peripheral (i.e. the way it has arisen), one is practicing mindfulness correctly. The tendency towards 'conceivings' will slowly fade when the mindfulness reaches the necessary extent. Again, *knowledge* of what the conceiving is (i.e. not understanding the phenomenon of simultaneously and dependently present and *leaving it* as such), is an absolute requirement, because without it this whole practice won't bear fruits of any fundamental importance. However, even a *puthujjana*, by trying to understand what the correct practice of mindfulness is, might actually understand it, and then cease to be a *puthujjana*, so this whole practice should be encouraged regardless.¹⁰

⁶ This should not be mistaken as “sensations“. See below.

⁷ The same principle applies to the other foundations, namely - feelings, mind and thoughts.

⁸ That which is simultaneously present, but “less“ there, less *actual*.

⁹ Or: “Right in front of us”; to “take them up.”

¹⁰ This doesn't mean that any (i.e. all sorts of contradictory) practice of meditation is being endorsed here. This is because, it is for certain that for a *puthujjana*, no matter how much effort he makes, if the practice he has chosen or been given is inherently wrong, no right results can come from it. One does not accidentally become *sotāpanna*, it doesn't “happen to one“ as a blessing. One builds it up, develops it and attains it through “manly efforts“, as the Suttas often say, and because it was not given to one, it cannot be taken away.

6. The contemporary Buddhist outlook usually equates the practice of *ānāpānasati* with the practice of *jhānas*, and if not regarded as same, it is too often thought that by practicing *ānāpānasati* one will by default “enter” a *jhāna*. I suspect this assumption stems from the commentarial times, whereby various meditation techniques, that revolve around the idea of the mindfulness of breathing, were concocted and advertised as something that would directly lead to the experience of *jhānas*.¹¹

Jhānas are the *establishments of mind*, and as such they are to be developed upon the sufficient degree of mindfulness, which in return can be established upon various different things, *ānāpānasati* being one of them.¹² Thus, it should be clear, that the practice of *jhāna* is a fundamentally *different practice* from *ānāpānasati*. While *ānāpānasati* shares a nature of the phenomenological exercise of one’s actions in regard to body, feelings, mind and thoughts, *jhāna* is less of that, but more of an *establishment* of one’s mind upon a *certain way of attending to things* (in this case upon a *phenomenological surmounting of the sensual domain*), and the discernment involved therein. In other words, by *understanding* what *jhāna* is, one *enters it*,¹³ not by performing a set of prescribed motions that somehow make it “happen” to one.

Obviously, one can develop and establish an unwavering mindfulness through the practice of *ānāpānasati*, and once established one could *change one’s outlook* and with such mindfulness recognize the *extent of sensuality*, as a phenomenon, and what exactly it *entails*, and by doing so step outside of it, so to speak. In this way one would enter the first *jhāna*, where that mindfulness would remain fully established and can be developed even further¹⁴. It is clear here that it is not that *ānāpānasati* in itself took one automatically into a *jhāna*, but that the change of *attending to things* did¹⁵, once the mindfulness was strong enough. Furthermore, *jhāna* is not taught as a goal in itself, as *Kāyagatāsati Sutta* (MN 119) tells us, but as one of the forms that can bring one’s mindfulness to the necessary fulfillment.

So, in order for any of these paragraphs to be intelligible, one will have to abandon the notions of “meditation techniques” and all the contemporary ideas of the practice of concentration, which is usually taught at the expense of mindfulness and with underlying wrong views (such as mystical absorptions and novelty experiences that then become a measure of one’s “success”). When a person hears the term *ānāpānasati*, he will be better off thinking “development of mindfulness” – the same mindfulness that he has to varying extents in his day-to-day experiences.

7. “Meditation techniques” are usually sets of fairly random motions and performances, idiosyncratic to the particular meditation teacher, that require one to follow certain prescribed steps which if performed correctly, and with some luck, will make one experience “something”. Often, in

¹¹ Which inevitably acquired countless mystical connotations that they maintain to this day.

¹² Cf. SN 54:8.

¹³ Cf. SN 40:1.

¹⁴ Cf. MN 119.

¹⁵ Cf. SN 54:8.

return, that same teacher would have to “interpret” back these experiences for one.

To put it bluntly: if one needs to be *told* by *another*, what the *significance* of one's experience was, this means one has not *understood* it by *oneself*. It means one is still concerned with the particular aspects (i.e. the random contents) of one's meditation experience, and one fails to see the general *nature* of it all. As a result, any external interpretation is regarded as an *explanation*, which means that phenomenology remains buried deep down under layers of pre-concieved ideas and assumptions. This holds true even more when it comes to the idea of “attainments”, which are also regarded as experiences that “happen” to one, almost against one's will and as a result of “a very good technique” one has employed. There is a concealed irony there that escapes such people, because if one needs to be “confirmed“ a *sotāpanna*, for example, by one's teacher, this means one doesn't know that one actually is a *sotāpanna*, which means that one can still *doubt it*, which in return means that one is not freed from the fetter of doubt, i.e. actually *not* a *sotāpanna*. The irony is further amplified if the teacher goes ahead and “confirms” one. If one is to actually understand what “being free from doubt” (and the other two fetters, characteristic of the *sotāpanna*) is, one would realize how *non-applicable* any external affirmation or denial is.¹⁶

How obstructive to phenomenology (i.e. mindfulness) this whole way of practising is, can be seen from the nature of *understanding*. One understands things when one *understands* them, when the knowledge in *regard to the nature* of an arisen thing is there, and not when one successfully goes through a set of methods and observances that relies on almost mechanical set of motions one has to perform attentively. Any bodily act and any act that pertains to the bodily domain (such as the celebrated and misguided notion of “sensations”¹⁷ which involve observing different parts and aspects of one's body) is simply irrelevant for the discerning of the *nature* of an arisen phenomenon.¹⁸ It is misleading and obstructive, because it is impossible to engage in a technique without the implicit belief that a set of motions, that the chosen technique consists of, performed in a particular mechanical order, will *somehow*, by itself, *reveal* the nature of things. By holding this *belief* and *faith* in a technique, one will not be *trying to understand* things, and by not making attempts toward the understanding, one will definitely remain devoid of it.

One sees things correctly - as phenomena - by *understanding* what the phenomenon is, and there is no technique that can make this magically occur. Thus, the closest to what *one should do* in order to obtain understanding is: *trying to understand*. For as long as a person is attempting to understand and see the nature of an arisen thing, that person might actually succeed in it, for it is certain that understanding cannot occur in someone who is not trying to understand. Incidentally (or not), there is never any mention of meditation techniques in the Suttas, but 'understanding' and 'discernment',

¹⁶ Cf. Sn 1:3,21 (verse 55).

¹⁷ Cf. Ñāṇavīra Thera, *Clearing the Path*, p. 75.

¹⁸ In other words, it is impossible to perform an *action* which in and by itself would be able to overcome the *nature of action*, which is the whole point of the Buddhist practice: overcoming *kamma*. Through action, good or bad or neutral, all one accomplishes is the maintenance of the nature of action: by acting, one remains *bound* by action. If this would not be the case, the Buddha and the Dhamma would not be required for the freedom from suffering, and all one would have to do is simply *perform* certain things and by doing so, automatically reach *nibbāna*, or even better: all one would have to do is *choose* to be in *nibbāna* and one would attain it.

as a way to reach the final freedom from suffering, is described and referred to countless times.

When one looks at the experience mindfully, it becomes apparent that regardless of the content of the particular experience, the nature of experience is present. So, whether it is the experience of “impatiently-waiting-for-a-bus”, or the experience of tiredness after a physical exertion, or strange and novel experience of a powerful light that occurred in front of me while meditating on a seven-day technique-based meditation retreat, all I should be concerned about is that *an experience is there* and as such it needs to be *understood*.¹⁹ This means that investing effort into meditation techniques is fundamentally a waste of time if one is concerned with understanding the Dhamma, and the most one can accomplish is relaxation, a sense of peace coming from withdrawal from the habitual world of senses, or – worse – fortification of the wrong views based on a misinterpretation of the *nature* of the novelty experiences. Either way, the results of any technique one might engage in, will remain *worldly*, and will draw its power from a temporary change of one's environment, one's usual way of regarding things. In any case, the “benefits” and “helpfulness” of a chosen technique will simply share the nature of a phenomenon of *novelty* that one is experiencing. As such, it means it will run out, and one will have to either do it harder, or change the technique.

If people attend meditation retreats as a form of a temporary escape from the busy and oppressing world, by all means they should do it, as often as they can. However, rather than engaging in a practice of a technique and “sensation watching”, they would be better off using their quiet time in trying to understand the *nature* of things according to the way the Buddha described it, whether sitting, walking or lying down. For it is that “nature“ which the Dhamma means and refers to, and anything that is not dealing with this, or anything that is obscuring that very nature (i.e. phenomena) of things, consequently is not the Dhamma, no matter how “helpful” and “useful” it might be²⁰. In different words, one's experience is phenomenological (i.e. the five aggregates are all simultaneously present in their respective domains), and this means that nature of things comes *first*²¹, before anything one *does* based on that nature. Doing a technique in order to practice the Dhamma (i.e. see the nature of things) is like exiting the house, so as to be in it. It's a contradiction in terms.

¹⁹ And one also comes to realize that for as long as one is alive, experience is *always* there, and one doesn't have to do *anything* in order for it to be so. And this is where the real purpose of a meditation technique becomes apparent: one is after a *particular type* of experience (regarded as more desirable and lofty) as a form of *replacement* or *escape* from another type of experience (regarded as undesirable and unpleasant). “I want to experience *this*, I don't want to experience *that* (or *lack-of-this*). Thus, all one is trying to do is experience pleasant by *directly displacing* unpleasant, i.e. one wants to fulfill one immediate desires. For as long as one remains concerned and puts value on the *particulars* of an experience, the nature of it will remain unknown. This is the reason why any meditation of this kind is a meditation that is utterly *within* the sensual domain and cannot go beyond it, which is what MN 108 (iii, 14) refers to.

²⁰ People themselves might often struggle to reconcile the nature of meditation techniques with the nature of the Buddha's Teaching, but they usually end up ignoring this because it feels like the immediate application of a technique is helping them and makes them feel better. The problem with this is that they, as *puthujjanas*, have *no criteria* to determine what “helpful” really is. Thus, they just end up following their own feelings and assumptions again, but this time on the pretext of Buddhism and spiritual practice.

²¹ One can be ignorant of the phenomenological nature only because that nature is there, *present*.

8. In the first establishment of mind, the first *jhāna*, the appropriation of the bodily action (intention) ceases. This is accomplished when that *thought*, which in ordinary experience *stands for* that which is the body (and anything originating from it) is seen in its phenomenological nature, i.e. *as thought*²². When the mind is thus established upon the signs and characteristics of one's *thought*, as an arisen *thing*, that thought is recognized as being *indifferent*²³ to anything other than itself, such as body and matter²⁴. Through that very indifference, the thought, even if it thinks about the body and anything bodily, ceases to *stand for* 'that' which is the body (*rūpa*). This is why the first *jhāna* is primarily characterized by thinking-and-pondering (*vittakavicāra*) and it is also why the sensual domain (i.e. domain that is pertaining to the body) has been surmounted. The result of this cessation is the subsiding of speech - the physical, bodily aspect of it. By dropping the appropriation of the bodily intention, through the surmounting of its whole domain, one clearly sees the whole *body* as an independent thing, just sitting there, already given. Even if one is to make a bodily intention, one would see that intention too, as something that is inevitably and inseparably confined to the bodily domain and as such: as something that can never be “*mine*”. This is why the first establishment of mind is also sufficient for the final knowledge.²⁵

Furthermore, it is because of this very principle of thought ceasing to 'stand for' that which is the body, that the *jhānas* are wholesome in themselves, even if not accompanied by understanding. By “ceasing to stand for” the *wrong order* of the experience is *reversed*, and the structurally independent, simultaneously present and indifferent to each other individual domains of the aggregates are experienced *as they are*, without the distortion introduced by *assumption* in regard to them. This is why the Buddha praised the practice of *jhāna*, because if the person develops them correctly, even as a *puthujjana*, he would require very little instruction in order to understand things and remove all conceivings and *avijjā*.

²² Cf. my essay *Not Perceiving the Feeling (Meanings)*, p. 43) where I said that it is the feeling that feels, perception that perceives and thought that thinks (I am paraphrasing).

²³ This is a type of *structural* indifference and this can be understood in terms of the superimposition of the respective domains of body (matter) and thoughts. Both of these domains are simultaneously present, but they don't interfere – they are “indifferent” to each other. Furthermore, it is not just that they don't interfere, it is that they *cannot* interfere, even if one is to want it. This principle actually applies to the whole experience, namely: the five aggregates. Crossing from one domain into another is structurally *inconceivable*, but as long as one does not *fully understand* that, by not-understanding one *conceives* it. For more on this cf. my essays *The Infinity of the Mind* and *Not Perceiving the Feeling (Meanings)* p. 39 and p.43).

²⁴ And this very indifference was obscured through the *assumption* of 'body' (i.e. matter) in one's thoughts. Cf. *Resistance and Designation (Meanings)*, p. 47).

²⁵ “Bhikkhus, I say that the destruction of the taints occurs in dependence on the first *jhāna*...” - AN 9:36.