

Ānāpānasati - Mindfulness-of-breathing

An Introduction

Today we would like to give you some basic instructions on how to develop concentration with ānāpānasati (mindfulness-of-breathing).

There are two kinds of meditation: Samatha and Vipassanā. Samatha is the development of concentration, and Vipassanā is the development of wisdom. Samatha is a very important foundation for Vipassanā. In the *Khandha Saṃyutta* and *Sacca Saṃyutta*, The Buddha says:

Samādhim, bhikkhave, bhāvētha.

Samāhito, bhikkhave, bhikkhu yathābhutaṃ pajānāti.

(Bhikkhus, cultivate concentration.

With concentration, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu understands things as they really are.)

This is why beginners are greatly encouraged to practise first Samatha, so as to develop deep and powerful concentration. Then they can practise Vipassanā, to see the true nature of things.

There are forty Samatha meditation subjects, but we usually teach beginners ānāpānasati (mindfulness-of-breathing), because most yogis succeed with this method.

In the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, the Buddha praises ānāpānasati:¹

Bhikkhus, this concentration through mindfulness of breathing, when developed and practised much, is both peaceful and sublime. It is an unadulterated blissful abiding, and it banishes and stills evil unwholesome thoughts as soon as they arise.

The *Visuddhimagga* says also:²

¹ S.V.X.i.9 'Vesālī Sutta' ('Vesali Sutta')

² Vs.VIII 'Anussati Kammaṭṭhāna Niddesa' ('Recollection Subjects Explanation')

Mindfulness-of-breathing as a meditation subject is foremost among the various meditation subjects of all Buddhas, [some] Pacceka Buddhas, and [some] Buddhas' disciples as a basis for attaining distinction and abiding in bliss here and now.

So you should have strong faith in this meditation subject, and practise it with great respect.

Now we would like to give you some basic steps on how to practise ānāpānasati.

Step One

Sit upright. You may choose any sitting posture you like. If you find it difficult, you do not need to sit cross-legged. You may also sit with both legs side by side on the floor (neither pressing the other). Sitting on a cushion of a suitable thickness helps you feel comfortable, and allow you easily to straighten your upper body.

Then relax your body part by part, from head to foot. Make sure there is no tension in any part of your body. If there is tension, try to release it, and remain relaxed and natural. Otherwise, the tension will eventually cause discomfort and pain. So be sure to relax your whole body every time you start your sitting meditation.

Step Two

Put aside all thoughts, including all worries and plans. You should reflect on the fact that all conditioned things are impermanent. They will not follow your wishes but will follow only their own courses. It is useless to try to grasp them. It is useful to put them aside while you are meditating.

Whenever you get entangled in thoughts, you should remind yourself that now is not the time for you to worry; now is the time for you to keep your mind on only the object of meditation: the breath.

If you happen to remember something very important, and think you must remember it or think it over, do not do so when you are meditating. If necessary, you can write the important thing down in a notebook that you keep beside you, and then not think about it as long as you are meditating.

If you really want to succeed in ānāpānasati, you have to put aside all other objects. Some yogis want to develop concentration, yet cannot give up their attachment for many worldly things. As a result, their mind becomes restless, always wandering between the breath and worldly objects. Even though they try hard to calm their mind, they fail: only because they are unable to give up their attachment for other objects. Such attachment is a great obstacle to one's progress in meditation. So it is very important that you make a strong resolution to stop all other thoughts while you are meditating.

Step Three

Become familiar with the breath through practice. After you have relaxed your body, and have resolved to stop all other thoughts, you should place your mind on the area where your in & out breaths touch your skin: the touching point. It is the area around your nostrils and the top of the upper lip. Try to feel the breath in one of those two places. Then keep your mind with the breath, and be aware of it all the time. You should try to know the natural breath objectively, as if you are an onlooker. Do not control or interfere with the natural breathing: just know it as it is. If you control your breathing, you may feel discomfort in your chest.

One important thing is that you be aware of the breath only at the touching point you have chosen, that you do not follow the breath into or out of your body. If you follow the breath in and out, you will not be able to perfect your concentration.

To explain this, the *Visuddhimagga* gives a simile: the simile of the gate-keeper. A gate-keeper does not pay attention to people who have already gone inside or outside the town: he pays attention only to people who arrive at the gate. In the same way, the breaths that have gone inside and outside are not the yogi's concern. His concern is only the breaths that arrive at the touching point (the gate).

Another important thing is that you should not concentrate on the characteristics of the four elements in your breath. You should not concentrate on the characteristics of the earth-element in your breath (hardness, roughness, heaviness, softness, smoothness or lightness), nor on the characteristics of the water-element (flowing and cohesion), nor on the characteristics of the fire-element (heat and cold), nor on the characteristics of the

wind-element (pushing and supporting) in your breath.

If you concentrate on any of those characteristics, the others will also become more and more obvious in your body, and that will disturb your concentration. What you should do is only to know the breath. You should know the breath as a general concept.

Sometimes a yogi may find it difficult to perceive the breath. This is not because he is no longer breathing: it is because the breath is subtle, and he is not yet familiar with it. Hence, he should just keep his mind on the touching point with a cool and alert mind. When it becomes difficult for him to perceive the breath, he needs do no more than know that he is still breathing. Then, with patience and mindfulness, he will gradually be able to know the subtle breath. If he tries again and again, he will get used to concentrating on it. That will be very helpful for him to develop deep concentration.

While trying to become familiar with the breath, you should follow the middle way: you should put forth just the right amount of effort. Do not put forth too much effort, because you may then have trouble such as tension, headaches get lost in daydreams or fall asleep. So it is good to make sure that your effort is just sufficient for you always to know the breath.

Whenever thoughts occur in your mind, just ignore them and bring your mind back to the breath. It is useless to get angry at the thoughts or at yourself. You should accept that the occurrence of thoughts in the mind is a natural thing, and should not get entangled in them. By ignoring the thoughts, you remove yourself from them. And by always knowing the breath, you make yourself familiar with the breath. That is the right way to deal with wandering thoughts.

If your mind wanders frequently, you may help it stay with the breath by noting: when knowing the in & out breath, note it as:
'in – out; in – out; in – out...'

You may also count the breaths, that is to say, when breathing in, you note: 'in'; when breathing out, you note 'out'; and at the end of the out-breath you count 'one'. You can count in this way up to at least five, but not to more than ten. For example, if you choose

to count up to eight, you should count from one to eight again and again. But, as you count the breaths, your object should still be the breath, not the numbers that you count. The numbers are just a tool to help you stay with the breath. You should continue counting until your mind becomes calm and stable. Then you can stop counting, and just know the in & out breath.

Step Four

Focus on the breath. When you are able to be aware of the breath continuously for 15 to 20 minutes, you may be said to have become quite familiar with the breath. You may then begin to focus more, and concentrate more on the breath. At the previous stage, when you were aware of the breath, you knew also the touching point. But at this stage, you try to ignore the touching point, and focus on the breath alone. By doing so, your mind will become more concentrated. If, however, you do it too soon (before you are familiar with the breath), you will find that tension gathers in your face.

Step Five

When you can concentrate continuously on the breath for more than 30 minutes, your concentration may be said to be quite good. Now you should try to concentrate on the whole breath from beginning to end. At one point, you concentrate on the in-breath from its very beginning to its very end. Then, from the same one point, you concentrate on the out-breath, from its very beginning to its very end. This way, there is no gap, the mind cannot escape and go wandering, and your concentration will become deeper and deeper.

You will find that your breath is sometimes long and sometimes short. Long and short here means the duration, not the distance. When your breathing is slow, your breath is long; when your breathing is quick, your breath is short. You should let it be as it is: you should not make it long or short on purpose. You should just know the whole breath, regardless of whether it is long or short.

If you persevere in practising this way, your concentration will gradually become stable. When you can concentrate on the breath continuously for more than one hour in every sitting, for more than three days in a row, you may find that your breath soon becomes a nimitta, the sign of concentration.

Summary

These are some basic steps on how to practise ānāpānasati. You should remember them and practise accordingly. You have to practise in every posture. Do not stop your practice when the sitting meditation session ends. While opening your eyes, relaxing your legs, getting up, etc., try to continue knowing the breath. While standing, walking, lying down, etc., try always to know your breath.

Do not let your mind take any other objects. Let the gaps in your practice become fewer and fewer. If you practise all the time, there will be almost no gaps. You must practise with diligence and perseverance in this way, from the time you wake up in the early morning, till you fall asleep at night. If you do so, you are likely to succeed in attaining jhāna at this very retreat. That is why the Buddha said ānāpānasati should be developed and practised much.

You should stop talking, especially in your room: you should talk only when you report your meditation experience to your meditation teacher, and when it is necessary. Holding a meditation retreat is not easy. The organizers and helpers take great pains to make everything suitable for meditation. The donors offer requisites with the good wish that every yogi may succeed in meditation, and thereby they gain great merit. So there is every reason for you to meditate diligently.

But, do not expect everything to be perfect. You should appreciate every convenience you receive, and tolerate any inconvenience that you meet. Instead of complaining, let your mind stay always with your breath. Start right now.

May you all succeed in meditation.

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