

## Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta #6 - Mindfulness of Breathing

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on 01/05/2014.

Over the last month or so we've been exploring the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the Buddha's teaching on the ways of establishing mindfulness. So far we've basically been setting the stage for working with the four fields where the Buddha has told us to establish mindfulness. Today we're going to begin exploring the first of these fields, the body.

The first practice the Buddha recommends for bringing mindfulness to the body is establishing mindfulness of the experience of breathing. I want to begin by reading the full text and then we'll explore the different parts of it.

The Buddha said:

"And how, bhikkhus, does a bhikkhu abide contemplating the body as a body? Here a bhikkhu, gone to the forest, to the foot of a tree or to an empty hut, sits down; having folded his legs crosswise, set his body erect, and established mindfulness in front of him, just mindful he breathes in, mindful he breathes out. Breathing in long, he understands: 'I breathe in long'; or breathing out long, he understands: 'I breathe out long.' Breathing in short, he understands: 'I breathe in short'; or breathing out short, he understands: 'I breathe out short.' He trains thus: 'I will breathe in experiencing the whole body'; he trains thus: 'I will breathe out 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 lathe-worker or his apprentice, when making a long turn, understands: 'I make a long turn'; or, when making a short turn, understands: 'I make a short turn'; so too, breathing in long, a bhikkhu understands: 'I breathe in long' ... he trains thus: 'I shall breathe out calming the bodily formation.'<sup>1</sup>

The Buddha begins with this phrase "contemplating the body as a body." To me this has always seemed kind of odd way of expressing that one is giving attention to the body. Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu translates this differently as "And how does a monk remain focused on the body in & of itself?"<sup>2</sup> What I've been taught over the years is that this expression, whichever translation one prefers, means that we're not thinking about the body or feelings about the body or images of the body. We're giving attention to the actual experience of the body.

I want to take a few moments to elaborate on this a bit. We normally think of the world as being comprised of an objective reality — actual objects such as a bell, a striker, a cushion — and then our subjective experience of that objective reality. And then an assumption is made that if only we could perceive that objective reality more accurately then our problems would be solved. I have to say that practically there is some truth to this. But in this practice when "the world", or in this case "the body", is being referred to, what is really being referred to is

our experience. We are focusing attention on the experience of the body. The experienced body is the only body we can truly know. So our practice is to experience the body just as it is in this moment, to know it directly. This is that first facet of mindfulness called bare attention or lucid awareness, among other things. In the instructions that follow, the Buddha is telling us how to begin to cultivate this quality of bare attention in relation to the bodily experiences.

Next the Buddha speaks of having "gone to the forest, to the foot of a tree or to an empty hut". This is about the quality of seclusion. There are two forms of seclusion that are important in doing this practice. One is some kind of physical seclusion, which is what he is talking about here. The other is being secluded from unskillful qualities that undermine one's practice.

One way to get some seclusion is "to go to a forest or an empty hut." Or to come to a meditation center or to go away on retreat. Or, we can get some seclusion by having a particular, quiet spot in our home, a spot where we can feel safe and not be disturbed by others for our period of practice. These are all useful and at times essential. But we also can get some seclusion simply by sitting still and closing our eyes. We can gain some seclusion in this way, for a few moments at least, whether we're at work, at home or traveling somewhere (as long as we're not the driver!) So beginning with the intention to give bare attention to the experiences of the body, we have to establish some degree of seclusion.

Next the Buddha tells us about our posture. One "sits down; having folded his legs crosswise, set his body erect". Different forms of Buddhism place varying amounts of emphasis on posture. Especially in some forms of Zen, sitting on the floor in full lotus position with one's hands held at the lower belly is regarded not only as correct posture but as an expression of being awake. In this view one really isn't doing "Zen" if one isn't sitting this way. In Theravāda Buddhism, there is less emphasis on one way of sitting. Especially in this country where we grow up sitting in chairs, sometimes it is easier to sit in a chair rather than on the floor. And sometimes we have injuries that make it difficult to sit on the floor, or sometimes to sit in a chair. So my general rule of thumb is: find what works best for you and then stick with it as much as possible.

One of the things we are looking for is stability — sitting in a way that allows the body to be stable and still, which then helps the mind to settle as well. Another important part of the posture is sitting with an erect back, upright, yet with some relaxation. Not too rigid and not overly lax. This effort to sit in an erect way helps to bring up energy which can both feel good and help us to give attention to what we are focusing on.

The next step is to establish mindfulness "in front of" oneself. One way of understanding this is that we move establishing mindfulness to the front of the line of possible actions we might take. In other words, relating to the experience of breathing with mindfulness becomes our priority.

This phrase "in front of" is also taken to be a reference to the location where we give attention to the experience of breathing. The most traditional location is at the tip of the nose or upper lip. In this location we're actually noticing the experience of the air making contact with the skin at the edge of the nostrils or on the upper lip as the air moves in and out. Using this location can be helpful because it is a small spot and the sensations experienced become more subtle over time, so it requires increasingly greater continuity of mindfulness which leads to stronger levels of concentration. It has the disadvantage for some people for the same reasons. It is simply more difficult to focus upon.

In the 20th century Mahasi Sayadaw, the Burmese master, responded to this difficulty by recommending that people notice the experience of breathing in the expansion and contraction of the abdomen as air is pulled into the body and then released from it. Other approaches speak of experiencing the breath in the whole body and then gradually focusing to the tip of the nose, or settling attention wherever the experience of the breath is the most clear.

Rather than insisting on one location as the best one, I've come to favor a pragmatic approach. Follow the sensations of breathing wherever they are the clearest for you and use that as the primary location, or anchor, for attention while you're trying to collect the mind .

And now with the next set of instructions we finally begin meditating. That instruction is "just mindful one breathes in, mindful one breathes out." In other words, we're not trying to do anything other than being mindful of the experience of breathing in and out. Unlike yoga practices which emphasize manipulating the breath, in this practice we are just allowing the breath to be as it is and we meet that "as it is" with bare attention and the remembrance of the Buddha's teachings that might be pertinent here.

#### Notes

1. Adapted from Bhikkhu Bodhi. MN 10, "The Four Establishments of Mindfulness," *In the Buddha's Words*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2005, p. 282.

(Changes: Used the Pāli "bhikkhu" rather than the English "monk."

Followed the usage of *Ñāṇamoli* and *Anālayo* "set his body erect" rather than "straightened his body."

Followed the usage of *Anālayo* "calming the bodily formation" rather than "tranquilizing the bodily formation".)

2. "Satipatthana Sutta: Frames of Reference" (MN 10), translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. Access to Insight (Legacy Edition, version ati-legacy-2013.12.21.11), 30 November 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.010.than.html> . Retrieved on 03 January 2014.