

Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta #7 - Internal & External

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on 02/09/2014.

Over the last few months I've been exploring the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the Buddha's teaching on the ways of establishing mindfulness. Last month I spoke about mindfulness of breathing. And so today we reach a section that Anālayo Bhikkhu has called the "refrain," because it appears at the end of each set of instructions in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. This refrain is quite important because it tells us, and then reminds us again and again, what are the crucial aspects of mindfulness practice no matter what the object of mindfulness is. Today I want to talk about the first aspect.

First, what the Buddha is recorded as saying:

"In this way one dwells contemplating the body in the body internally, or one dwells contemplating the body in the body externally, or one dwells contemplating the body in the body both internally and externally."¹

What does it mean to practice mindfulness of breathing internally, externally or both internally and externally? Anālayo Bhikkhu examined what the suttas, Abhidhamma and commentaries tell us about these terms, as well as alternative interpretations. His conclusion is that the thing that makes the most sense is that internally refers to one's own experience, externally refers to the experience of other people, and internally and externally refers to both oneself and others.

So, contemplating mindfulness of breathing internally is what we have been doing all along. Bringing mindful attention to the experience of breathing, noticing the characteristics of the in-breath and the out-breath in terms of length, of smoothness, in terms of the effect that these characteristics have on the body, on our moods and thoughts, and on breathing itself.

But how does one practice mindfulness of someone else's breathing? Most of us don't have the ability to read minds, so we have to rely on observation and inference. When we're mindful of the breathing of another person, we're noticing the speed with which they're breathing, the length and depth of their breathing. We're noticing whether they are agitated or calm. And then from these observations and knowledge of our own experience with breathing, we may infer what their internal experience is like.

That brings us to mindfulness of breathing internally and externally. Perhaps the simplest way of understanding this instruction is that it is a practice of first watching one's own experience and then in the next moment watching another's. But Anālayo Bhikkhu suggests that there is an added aspect to this, Anālayo noted that as one pays mindful attention to breathing internally and externally one begins to see the phenomenon—in this case breathing—as just a phenomenon. One begins to see it as more of an impersonal process arising from causes and conditions and separate from any sense of it belonging to oneself or to another.

When I reflect on my own experience with giving attention internally and externally, I think that there is at least one more very important result. By seeing this phenomenon occurring in other people and reflecting on the ways their experiences may be similar to our own, we strengthen the quality of empathy which is also at the core of being compassionate. We grow to see, more and more, that other people's experiences are like our own.

This both-internal-and-external practice also give us a skillful means that we can use during difficult times. If we are agitated but we are with another person who is calmer than we are, then we can focus attention on their breathing and before long our breathing pattern will become synchronized with theirs. It will help us to calm ourselves. And, vice versa, if we are with someone who is agitated when we are calm, we can suggest that they focus on our breath as a way to help them get more calm and collected.

So the practice of mindfulness of breathing can help us to be more attuned to the truth of our own inner experience, while also helping us to be more attuned and connected to those around us. Helping to reduce the sense of separateness and isolation while also helping to create a more compassionate world.

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. (Used gender neutral "one" in place of "he.")