

Access to the Breath

Today I would like to introduce to you the basic principles for developing concentration.

There are two types of meditation, namely, samatha and vipassanā. Samatha is the development of concentration. Vipassanā is the development of wisdom. Of these two, samatha is the important foundation of vipassanā. Therefore, in the Khandha Vagga Saṃyutta and Sacca Saṃyutta, the Buddha said: ‘Samādhim bhikkhave bhāvētha, samāhito bhikkhave bhikkhu yathābhūtaṃ pajānāti.’ The meaning is: ‘Bhikkhus, you should cultivate concentration. Bhikkhus, if you have enough concentration, you can understand phenomena as they really are.’ So beginners are encouraged to first practise samatha to develop deep and powerful concentration. Then they can practise vipassanā and see phenomena in their real essence.

There are forty ways to practise samatha. Out of these ways, we usually teach beginners ānāpānasati, the mindfulness of breathing, because most meditators succeed by this method.

In Saṃyutta Nikāya, the Buddha recommended ānāpānasati like this: ‘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.’ In Visuddhimagga, it is mentioned that: ‘The 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 subject of meditation, and practise it with great respect.

Now I would like to introduce to you the basic steps to practise ānāpānasati.

Step one: Sit upright and naturally and relax the whole body. You may choose any sitting posture you like. It is not necessary to sit cross-legged if you find it difficult. You may sit with both legs laid side by side on the floor, without pressing one on the other. Sitting on a cushion with a suitable thickness will make you feel comfortable and allow you to straighten your upper body easily. Relax your body part by part, from head to feet. Make sure there is no tension in every part of your body. If you find tension in any part of your body, try to release the tension by keeping relaxed and natural. Tension in any part of the body will cause discomfort and pain after you have sat for a long time. So be sure to relax your whole body every time you start your sitting.

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 their own courses. It is useless to grasp them. It would be wise to be able to put them aside temporarily when you are practising meditation.

Whenever you get entangled in thoughts you should remind yourself that now is the important time for you to be carefree and have your mind stay only with the object of meditation, the breath. If anything you think very important arises in your mind and you think you must remember it or think it over, do not think of it when you are doing sitting meditation. You may write it down in your notebook, which you keep beside you, and then stop thinking about it as long as you are still meditating. Another way is that you may think of it three times strongly and then let go of it completely.

If you really want to succeed in ānāpānasati, you have to put aside all other objects. Some meditators want to develop concentration, yet cannot give up the attachment to many worldly things. As a result, their mind becomes restless because it is always wandering between the breath and worldly objects. They may try hard to calm their mind but cannot succeed, because they didn't first relinquish their attachment to other objects. That attachment becomes an obstacle to their meditation progress. So it is very important to make a strong resolution to stop all other thinking while you are meditating.

Step three: Get familiar with the breath through repeated practice. After you make sure that your body is free from tension and your mind is carefree, you should lead your mind to the area where the in- and out-breaths touch your skin. That is the area between your nostrils and upper lip, including the portions immediately below the nostrils and the portion between both outer nostrils. Try to find breath in this area. After you find the breath, try to keep your mind with it and be aware of it all the time. You should try to know the natural breath objectively, as if you are an onlooker. Don't control or interfere with the natural breathing, but just know it as it is. If you control your breathing, you may feel uncomfortable in your chest.

At this stage, your goal is to get familiar with the breath. You can attain this goal through repeated practice. Whenever thoughts occur in your mind, just ignore the thoughts and bring your mind back to the breath. It is useless to get angry at the thoughts or with yourself. You should accept that the occurring of thoughts in the mind is a natural phenomenon and should not get entangled in the thoughts. By ignoring the thoughts, you make yourself drift from the thoughts. And by always knowing the breath, you make yourself familiar with the breath.

You have to practise like this again and again many times before you perfect your concentration. You have

to practise in every bodily posture. Don't stop your practice when every sitting ends. While you are opening your eyes, relaxing your legs, getting up and so on, try to continue knowing the breath. When you are standing, walking, lying down, and so on, try to always know your breath.

Don't let your mind take any other objects. Let the gaps in your practice become less and less. At last, there will be almost no gaps and you keep on meditating uninterruptedly. You must practise diligently and perseveringly in this way, from your waking up in the early morning till you fall asleep at night. If you do so, you are very likely to succeed in attaining jhāna concentration in this very retreat. That is why the Buddha said that ānāpānasati should be developed and practised much.

You must be patient and persevere. Every time after your mind comes back to the breath, continue to simply know the breath. You should take it easy. Don't hurry to concentrate on the breath before you are familiar with it. If you do so you will get tension, because you cannot concentrate on it rightly. If the tension grows, it will disturb your meditation. It is like you cannot behave intimately with a nodding acquaintance, but you can do so with an old friend. In the same way, when you have not yet got familiar with the breath, you cannot concentrate on it rightly. Only after you have got

familiar with it, you can concentrate on it well. So at this stage, just knowing the breath is enough.

Meditators may meet with either of two problems at this stage. One is that they experience gross breaths. The other is that they find it difficult to perceive the breath.

When the breath is gross, the meditator should be aware of only the breath that is passing the area mentioned above, the touching point, without following the breath into the body or outside. If the meditator follows the breath in and out, he will not be able to perfect his concentration.

One of the similes the Visuddhimagga gives is that of a gate-keeper: A gate-keeper does not pay attention to people (who have gone) inside and outside the town, but only examines each person as he arrives at the gate. In the same way, the breaths that have gone inside and that have gone outside are not the meditator's concern. His object is only the breath that arrives at the touching point, the gate.

The other thing to notice is that you should not emphasize the characteristics of the four elements in the breath. This means that you should not emphasize the hardness, roughness, heaviness, softness, smoothness and lightness of the breath, which are the characteristics of the earth element. You should not emphasize the flowing movement and cohesion of the breath, which

are the characteristics of the water element. You should not emphasize the heat and cold of the breath, which are the characteristics of the fire element. You should not emphasize the pushing action and supporting function of the breath, which are the characteristics of the wind element. If you emphasize any of these characteristics, other characteristics will also become more and more obvious in your body and they will disturb your concentration. What you should do is just to know the breath itself. You should know the breath as a whole, as a general concept, instead of emphasizing on any particular characteristic.

In the other case, the meditator finds it difficult to perceive the breath. He should understand that he is still breathing. The reason he cannot perceive the breath is that the breath is subtle and he is not familiar with the subtle breath. He should keep his mind in the touching area mentioned above with a cool but alert mind. And he should be aware of the fact that he is still breathing. Just knowing that he is still breathing is enough. If he is patient and alert, gradually he will be able to know the subtle breath. If he tries again and again, he will be used to concentrating on the subtle breath. That will be very helpful for him to develop deep concentration.

When trying to get familiar with the breath, you should follow the middle way, which means to put forth adequate effort. Don't expend too much effort, because

that can produce many troubles, such as tension, headache and eyes strain. Don't put in too little effort, because you may get lost in daydreams or fall asleep. So you had better adjust your effort to just the extent that you are alert enough to always know the breath.

Step four: Focus on the breath. When you are able to be aware of the breath continuously for 15 to 20 minutes, you have got quite familiar with the breath. At that time, you may begin to focus or concentrate on the breath. At the previous stage, when you were aware of the breath you also knew the touching area. But at this stage, you try to contract the scope of your attention to focus on only the breath. By doing so, your mind will become more concentrated. However, if you do so too early, that is, before you get sufficient familiarity with the breath, you will feel that tension gathers over your face.

Step five: Concentrate on the breath throughout its whole course (the whole breath). When you can concentrate uninterruptedly on the breath for more than 30 minutes, your concentration is quite good. You may try to concentrate on the breath throughout its course. This means that you concentrate on the in-breath from its very beginning to its end, at the same point. Then you concentrate on the out-breath from its very beginning to its end, at the same point. In this way, your concentration will become sharper and sharper, deeper and deeper, because there is not any gap for the mind to

wander.

If you are perseverant in practising so, your concentration will gradually become stable. When you can concentrate on the breath continuously for more than one hour in every sitting, at least four sittings per day, for more than three days, you may soon find that your breath becomes nimitta, the sign of concentration.

These are the basic steps to practise anapanasati. You should remember every step and practise accordingly.

You should stop talking, especially in the sleeping room, except at the interview time and under absolute necessity. To hold such a meditation retreat is no easy matter. The organizers and helpers take great pains to make everything ready and suitable for meditation. The donors offer requisites with good wishes that every meditator may succeed in meditation so that they can share the merits. So there is every reason for you to meditate industriously.

However, don't expect everything to be perfect. You should cherish every convenience you have received, and tolerate any inconvenience that you may encounter. Instead of complaining, let your mind always stay with your breath. Start to do it right now.

May all of you succeed in meditation.