

Mindfulness of Breathing (29) Trusting the Calm Mind

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Summary Keywords

mind, meditation, relax, tension, calm, agitation, thinking, activity, dissolve, settled, agitated, preoccupied, softening, *ānāpānasati*, thinking muscle, over-efforting, mental formations, mental activity, letting go, alienation

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The eighth step of *ānāpānasati* is:

One trains oneself: one calms the mental activity.

One relaxes the mental activity. Most English translations will use some language of 'tranquelize': "One makes tranquil the mental activity." Mental activity is often translated as "mental formations." It is the formations, the activity, the constructs, the doing aspect of the mind. I think that to translate it as 'activity' works relatively well. We are now beginning to calm the mental activity.

This doesn't have to be a big project. If it's easy to relax, then please, by all means do so. But it's also recognizing that this is a natural process of settling. As we get more settled in meditation and focused on the breathing, we start shedding a lot of the concerns of the day. As we're more and more here, there starts to be a heightened sensitivity to different aspects of our experience. One of them is experiencing the way we hold tensions in our body.

Of course, there's a feeling that well enough the body itself wants to relax and let go. There's almost a natural letting go – relaxing from knowing, and recognizing what goes on. We can participate in that if it's easy enough. If we don't get busy, we can help ourselves relax more.

As we begin having more well-being and are more settled in meditation, at some point, we also develop a special sensitivity or awareness of the mind thinking. Of course, we can know that earlier. We're letting go of our thoughts, and coming back to our breathing.

As we go along, there's more sensitivity to the unsatisfactory quality of thinking. We start noticing that when we're involved in thinking, it's almost like an alienation from ourselves. That's unimaginable for people who identify strongly with their thinking – as though their thinking is who they are. But, as we become settled, calm, more embodied, and present in meditation, we realize that thinking is just one aspect of our lives, and there is a fuller range of who we are.

If we get lost in thought, we actually lose touch, in a sense, with the fullness and wholeness of who we are. There's a kind of alienation – even if the thoughts are really great, exciting, or so-called 'important.'

We also become sensitive to the impact that thinking has. One impact is alienation. Another impact is that unskillful, unwholesome thoughts attract more unwholesomeness. If we are thinking in a way that is agitated, angry, or greedy, then those thoughts tend to perpetuate themselves. They attract more of the same agitation and preoccupation.

We also start feeling the subtle impact that thinking sometimes has on our musculature. I can go around all day somewhat calm and engaged in life. But, when I sit down to meditate, I realize my thinking has somehow created a little tension around my eyes and behind my forehead. I'm too busy with life to really notice the subtlety of it. But, as we settle in meditation, the subtlety of where we hold tension and tightness becomes more apparent.

The tension, pressure, and agitation that's associated with thinking is almost physical in nature. I call that the *thinking muscle*. It's more closely connected to thinking than the surface muscles, which we can often actively relax. Part of meditation is to relax the thinking muscle.

As we feel this, there's a natural tendency for the psychophysical system to want to relax. The more we are mindful of tension, and feel the tension itself, there is a momentum to relax. But we can also soften and relax ourselves by softening and relaxing the thinking mind.

Certainly, this is very helpful because the more the mind is calm, the more that attracts calmness. The more the mind is calm, the less we're likely to be caught in our thoughts and wander off in thoughts. Then it's easier to stay focused, and continue with the process of meditation.

We can learn very important lessons about how our mind works as we get calmer. One lesson is there is wonderful intelligence and creativity that can happen when the mind is calm and settled. This is much less likely to happen when the mind is agitated.

It's a bit of a trap for some people, because sometimes they start composing the great world novel. They have some great idea for something. The creativity and intelligence of the mind is really operating. It feels so good, engaging, and right to be involved in these wonderful creative thoughts.

But this is a dead end for the purpose of meditation. It actually becomes another way of being self-alienated, even though it feels so good and exciting. They think, "Finally, I feel fulfilled. I'm doing something very important by creating the greatest poetry that's ever been written."

We should try not to get sidetracked by that. But the process that got us there is showing us that there's a natural intelligence, creativity, or wisdom that can operate when the mind is not so active. Actually, the mind operates the best when there's no extra or unnecessary energy operating. That's a great and difficult lesson to really take in. It can be so compelling to worry and to feel: "I have to accomplish. I have to fix something. I have to think my way into it." We can get agitated and pressured.

Sometimes we feel that if we're a responsible person, we have to engage the mind and show ourselves – and maybe other people – how serious we are in thinking and taking care of things. If we allow the natural, quiet, calm mind to operate, then it may look like we don't care. Or it looks like we're just letting things go whatever way they go.

I would like to suggest that our love, care, and responsibility – even a sense that things are really important to take care of – can be taken care of better if the mind is relaxed and calm. And we don't build up this extra tension in the mind of doing, accomplishing, fixing, and thinking about things.

To learn this shift of perspective. To learn how to trust a calm mind, and have that calm mind be engaged responsibly. To take care of things is a process of trust, a process of familiarity of experiencing, "Oh, this actually works. I don't have to believe in the messages from society that I have to be anxious, preoccupied, angry, or apologetic. I don't have to engage my mind in some way to please other people or myself." It's possible to stay peaceful. Love, intelligence, creativity, and responsibility all can operate when there's no extra or unnecessary energy going on in the mind.

This learning to relax and calm the mind depends very much on our ability to recognize how we're over-efforting in the mind – where the agitation, tension, pressure, or closing down of the mind is. The seventh step of *ānāpānasati* is to feel that – to feel what's going on. Then the eighth step is to relax it.

This has a wonderful effect on some of the problems we feel we have to fix or take care of. Maybe some don't have any solutions. Rather than solving them, we can *dissolve* them. For example, someone who wants to know the meaning of life might have a lot of agitation, even anxiety. They think: "I need to know where I fit in this universe. What's happening with me? I need to have a purpose." There's a lot of agitated thinking around searching for the meaning of life.

But, if they do this meditation process, and all the agitation and anxiety associated with the question abates or dissolves, then lo and behold, they might discover that the meaning of life might still be an interesting question. But there's no personal need, investment, or desperation around it. It just becomes an abstract question. The existential power that held them in its grip has dissolved without solving it. It's no longer a problem. It just becomes an interesting academic question.

This might not have been the best example. But I'm hoping you can apply that to yourself. Think about: What

are you concerned with? What are you preoccupied with that may not need to be solved? Maybe what's more valuable is to dissolve the underlying tension, fear, anxiety, pressure, ambition, or greed that might be the very thing that's keeping those thoughts pumping up and going.

To relax the mental activity, trust softening the mind. It's a wonderful thing. This is especially true in meditation. So, as meditation continues to develop, there comes a stage – periodically it comes and goes – where it's clear that what's good to do is to trust the calm mind and letting go of all the unnecessary energy there.

Thank you very much. We'll continue with this process of steps seven and eight for another couple of days.