

Mindfulness of Breathing (35) Unknotting

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knotted, clinging, challenges, breathing, mind, fetter, knot, fist, relax, massage, lubricator, mental formations, caught, suffering, cling, crave, craving, *ānāpānasati*

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In the Buddhist view, it's fairly well-known that one of the core sources of suffering has to do with clinging or craving. Clinging is described in many ways. Sometimes there's simply a stickiness – a glue that keeps us attached to things. Sometimes it's called a knot. We're knotted up in things. It's sometimes called a fetter. In the *Pali* language, 'fetter' literally means a 'knot' – to be knotted up. In colloquial English, we might say, "I was all knotted up in something."

A Japanese teacher I really liked used the expression, a "fist in the heart" or "fist in the mind." We're trying to open the fist of the heart so it's not all closed, or tightened up.

There are many ways of talking about how we cling or crave. Part of the function of practice is to reveal the ways in which we cling or are knotted up. Sometimes it's pretty evident right away. At other times, as we go further and further along in the practice, we start seeing aspects of being knotted up or caught by things in ways we didn't know at all. The knots are more subtle or deep inside.

In some ways, the movement through the path of practice is a continual movement of encountering and then releasing. It is a movement of encountering and untying all the different ways we are sticky with things – holding on to, clinging to, or resisting things.

When we run into these things in ourselves, some people instinctively feel bad about or criticize themselves. But it's also possible to see these knots as, "Oh, good! This is the path forward. Knowing these things is part of the path of how we move forward." That's one interpretation for why the practice of *ānāpānasati* is so simple. We aren't meant to avoid or not recognize our attachments, clinging, or challenges. The practice of *ānāpānasati* offers a very simple way of moving through them without making a big deal out of them – because they are not mentioned.

Let it be really, really simple – rather than get caught up in stories, or the idea of me, myself, and mine in relation to them. Of course, those things are there. But how simple can we be as we go through them – in a way that's genuine, beneficial, honest, healing, and freeing? The simplicity of the beginning of *ānāpānasati* works as a way of addressing all this clinging – our challenges, strong feelings, and emotions. It addresses all the ways in which the mind gets knotted up, fisted up, caught up, and concerned with things – but without getting further entangled with them.

We just simply breathe through it all. Breathe with whatever is going on. I think I said yesterday that there's something about hanging in there with the rhythm of breathing. I sometimes call it the "great lubricator." The rhythm of breathing keeps things lubricated so they don't get too rusted up, squeaky, or frozen.

Or it's a massage. We're massaging stuff. By staying with the gentle rhythm of breathing, it's a little easier for the mind not to get caught by something. If you get caught, you've lost touch with the breathing. But, if you are in touch with the breathing, then there's something you're with, which is like a lubricant or a massage. Your concerns and feelings haven't necessarily gone away, but the knots, stickiness, and preoccupation with them have loosened up.

Something else begins to happen when we free our concerns, emotions, challenges, and even our suffering from our preoccupations, resistance, stories, opinions, and predictions. We free them from pushing them away, or from validating, justifying, or apologizing for them. All these complicated things we do perpetuate them somehow. We learn to leave them alone without denying them.

Just leave it alone. Let it be. If we leave it alone from all this extra stuff, the heart knows how to heal. The mind knows how to unfold. For example, if you cut your finger with a kitchen knife while chopping vegetables, a complex physiological process will heal the cut. We don't have to worry about it. The body heals itself. All we have to do is keep the cut clean.

We can deeply respect our angst, suffering, challenges, and grief. Really respect it, but leave it alone – without the stickiness, clinging, or being knotted up. The implicit idea here is that mindfulness of breathing allows us the freedom to leave things alone.

Then, as the practice goes along, we feel the mental and bodily formations. Feeling the physical activity, the expressions and manifestations of the mind – our responses, thoughts, or feelings – is such a powerful thing. It's a way of being physically present for all the difficulties and joys of life without the stickiness, clinging, or being for or against.

Feeling it in your body is a way to begin loosening up the stickiness. The body is not a story. So much of the stickiness has to do with the story-making mind: opinions, ideas, and predictions.

On top of that, the instructions of *ānāpānasati* say to relax or make tranquil the body. This idea of relaxing and calming the body is not meant to avoid anything. But rather, we are beginning to relax the ways in which we hold things – the ways we hold on or are knotted up. We're letting go of the knots. As we let go of the knots, we let go of the entanglements. Then what we're feeling inside – our challenges – can begin to move, relax, and resolve. This offers a very different perspective.

Sometimes we don't solve our problems, but we *dissolve* them in this way. Some of the external problems we have in life – the real things that we have to take care of – don't go away. But we can put ourselves in a much better position – with more creativity, intelligence, wisdom, and love – to address them when we go through this deep process of letting go of the stickiness and craving we have.

I think this practice is radical. It doesn't actually talk about these challenges directly – because we don't have to address them directly. If we follow the steps of *ānāpānasati*, they get taken care of on the side. Or the challenges get taken care of because we're making space by releasing our stickiness and knots.

This process continues into the second set of four instructions, where we become aware of our mental formations, activities, and thoughts. Then we calm them down. Calming means letting go of stickiness, tightness, constrictions, and pressure. It can't be done all at once. But we are beginning this process of letting go of the stickiness and settling the mind. We are not avoiding the mental problems, but we are letting go of our stickiness and fetters.

To repeat myself, it's a radical thing that the practice of *ānāpānasati* does not directly address our challenges in practice. But it's not because they are being ignored. I would like to propose that it's because the practice of *ānāpānasati* is offering a very realistic and effective process by which the challenges can be resolved or dissolved. We find our way with them without addressing them directly. The mind and heart want to do that.

So, when you find yourself with challenges as you practice, know that the practice has ways of addressing and responding to them. Be content perhaps and willing to address them indirectly. For some of us, it's radical to not feel like we have to fix everything directly. But rather, we can relax, settle back, and trust the process as we move along on this path.

Thank you, and I look forward to being with you again tomorrow.