

Mindfulness of Breathing (40) Unlimited Mind

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

mind, experiencing, mental state, biking, skiing, fixated, teasing apart, suffering, contracted, expansive, breathing, agitation, malleable, UC Davis, big mind, *ānāpānasati*, gloves, cold

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The topic for much of this week is step nine of mindfulness of breathing. In this step, we're experiencing the mind. I hope that how I'm presenting the mind doesn't define it in a way that causes you to fit yourself into the definition. But rather, it is pointing to how you experience the mind, the mental state, mind state, heart state. There is a lot of room here for you to find your own way through this.

One way to appreciate this is that we are moving into the sum total of how we experience the mind. *Vipassanā* practice often has a big emphasis on particularity – seeing the particularity of the sensations of the inbreath and the outbreath as they occur. Really seeing the particular activities of the mind as they come and go.

The harmonious working of all this together – the awareness or the knowing that knows it all – is also part of the particular. It is very hard to pin down exactly whether mind, awareness, or knowing are the same or not – to know exactly what the mind or consciousness is. All these kinds of things belong to rather amorphous, difficult-to-define qualities or experiences of our inner life.

You will see in a moment why it is difficult to put it into words or to define the mind exactly. The concepts we live with – the ideas we have about our experience – actually shape our experience. We are not innocent bystanders for our experience. Whatever happens to us, whatever experience we're having – it is not only happening to us, but we are also contributing, to some degree, to that experience.

Certainly, there are clear things that happen to us. I will give you an example that I've taught many times. I was thinking about it while I was biking here this cold morning. It was kind of a revelation for me. Many years ago, I was living in Central California and going to college at UC Davis. There was an early morning tule fog. In the wintertime, the fog was really cold. I didn't wear gloves when I biked to school. In the first five or ten minutes of class, I couldn't use a pen because my hand was still frozen – it was so cold.

For a while I was biking to school this way, feeling miserable and sorry for myself. The cold that I felt was so terrible. Then, at some point, I had a memory. The feeling of cold that I was having while biking to school was exactly the same cold I had in my fingers as a kid when I skied. But skiing was exhilarating. It was fun and fantastic. The cold was part of the richness of the whole experience.

I realized that how I was experiencing the sensation of cold varied depending on the interpretation I had of it, the context I put on it, the ideas I had about it. After that, biking wasn't so difficult anymore. I realized that I was adding something to the experience of cold. I was adding self-pity: "This is going to be tough and hard."

Then it became matter-of-fact and simple to be cold. It was still cold and a little bit painful, but I didn't complicate it with ideas that were almost subconscious. I hadn't realized how much I was doing that. I thought it was just cold. The cold was cold, and it was painful and bad.

But we contribute to the experience. We have interpretations, meaning-making, and predictions. We have self-referential feelings about it. I may have self-pity about things that are difficult or self-congratulatory about things that are good. These inner movements of the mind may be very subtle. We don't necessarily see them, but they help shape our experience. They give the totality, the gestalt of it.

As we practice mindfulness, we start teasing apart the different component elements that are all glommed together. We see that self-pity is self-pity. It is different from the cold. We see that the ways I'm worried about the future – that pull into my experience of the cold, for example – are just my thoughts about the future. We begin teasing apart all these component elements.

As we do that, we begin freeing the mind. Rather than glomming on or focusing on it, we begin to free it. Not only is our experience – for example, experience of the cold – partly shaped by our relationship to it, but it also shapes how we experience the mind. The mind gets contracted. It gets tight and small. The mind gets hot and agitated. Our inner mood – the state of mind we have – shifts and changes depending on what we are focusing on, and how we are focusing on it in relation to things.

So we are also, in a sense, shaping how we experience the mind, or how the mind can be felt. Whether that is the mind itself – who knows what the mind is? But how we experience the mind is what we are really working with in this practice here. The mind is being shaped.

In the language of the early tradition, the concepts we are focusing on and fixating on create limits. They create a boundary – an edge to the mind. But, as we stop focusing on these things and our preoccupations – all the activities of the mind – the mind gets quieter and quieter. The way in which we shape the feeling of the mind – the sense of the mind – begins to lose its edges, its coagulation, its contraction, and its gathering together. It becomes more open, more spacious.

After a while, you can feel as if there are no boundaries to the mind, to awareness, or to the state we're in. To use a bit of a dangerous word, there are no boundaries to consciousness. What all these words point to isn't so important. The wonderful thing is the experience of no more edges or boundaries. The mind starts feeling large, great, expansive, and wide.

This is one of the things that can be experienced as we deepen meditation practice. The mind becomes expansive and wide. In Zen, they call it "big mind" – as opposed to a small mind – the expansive mind rather than the contracted mind.

The more expansive the mind gets, the calmer it becomes, the less agitated it is. In a similar way, space – empty space – has no agitation. They say that the mind becomes similar to space – with less and less agitation and more calm.

It also helps make the mind more malleable and shapeable. Because when we're really fixated on something, the mind becomes hard and brittle. If you have the same habits of mind over and over again for decades, the mind gets locked into being a particular way. It is hard to soften it. But with meditating long enough, it begins to soften and relax. It becomes malleable and shapeable.

When the mind becomes more shapeable, malleable, and soft, it is easier to train. It is easier to get the mind focused, centered, and settled. And that allows for some of the more beautiful qualities of the mind to shine. A mind that is fixated, bounded, and limited by its agitation and preoccupations does not allow for the luminosity of the mind to show itself – the clarity of the mind that feels clean and bright.

This gestalt, this sense of the attitude, state, and mood of the mind – this quality of awareness – is so wide that it includes all things. And it includes our suffering – not to deny it, but to give it a different context than if our relationship is locked onto our suffering. It is possible to have different kinds of suffering and *not* lock on. To feel the suffering being held or existing in a much wider, broader context has a certain ease or calm. That ease also allows us to have compassion for suffering. There is space for friendliness and care for suffering, whereas this is more difficult when we are locked into it.

There are a lot of benefits to discovering mindfulness of the mind. For *ānāpānasati* – mindfulness of breathing practice – we train ourselves to breathe with the mind:

Breathing in, one experiences the mind. Breathing out, one experiences the mind.

As always with *ānāpānasati*, this rhythm of breathing in and breathing out is meant to keep us from getting fixated on anything. This includes getting fixated on the mind. We stay fluid and relaxed with the breathing – breathing in with the mind, breathing out with the mind.

So, how about taking care of your body by placing mittens or wool socks over your hands? These days, I bike down with mittens or gloves. When I was a college student, I wasn't smart enough for that to occur to me. I didn't have gloves, so that never crossed my mind. For some of us, it takes a while to become wise about how to take care of ourselves. In the meantime, I got a very good lesson from the story about my cold hands.

Thank you very much.