

Mindfulness of Breathing (51) *Samādhi*

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

mind, *citta*, mental activities, self, aggregate, settles, gathers, massage, *ānāpānasati*, *samādhi*, concentration, unification, *samādahaṃ*, *samādahati*

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There are sixteen stages of *ānāpānasati* – each stage is a step along the way. It's nice to think of each step as being complete within itself. Don't be so concerned about making your way through the steps. Be fully present for practicing with what is. Be content with whatever the practice is and the focus is at the time.

As practice develops, sooner or later, the body will start to feel settled and unified. We are breathing with the whole body and relaxing. As we develop the ability to be more content and happy to be here, we have a feeling of well-being. This makes it easier to notice what is going on in our mind – the mental activity – and to relax and tranquilize it.

It is nice to have a sense of well-being so that we can look at some of the craziness that goes on in our minds, and not be disturbed, troubled by, or reactive to the unusual things we can think, do, or feel. We see this as mental activity – as opposed to making it personal, or into material with which to judge ourselves. We experience the mental activity, and then relax and calm it down. In summary, these are the first eight steps of *ānāpānasati*.

The whole practice of the sixteen stages makes a dramatic shift with step nine, “experiencing the mind.” This is a pivot, a deeper dive into our spiritual life. The word *citta* is usually translated as “mind,” “mind-heart,” or even “heart” sometimes. To border a bit on being a Buddhist heretic, the word *citta* is so important and generally respected in the teachings of the Buddha that it is the closest thing we get from the Buddha to something that maybe in English, we would call the “self.”

The idea of self, in Buddhist orientation, is seen as representing some activity of the mind – an idea, interpretation, or something we are holding on to. There is a desire not to get involved in the whole idea of self: “What is the self and who am I?” This investigation is considered more complicated and stressful than is useful for deepening meditation – so we put the idea of self aside. *Citta* – the mind – is what takes its place.

But the mind is not a thing. The mind is the aggregate – the gestalt – of all the mental activities in the way we experience them. It is fluid. It's not a thing to get attached to or to reify into something solid. It is dynamic and fluid. As we go deeper in meditation, it gets very clear how fluid and changeable the mind is, and how the experience of the mind changes with different levels of concentration and clarity. It is fascinating to watch how we sense and feel the mind – how it oscillates between being contracted and small and being expansive. The mind can be all kinds of ways.

When the body gets relaxed, the mental activities relax. Generally, *citta* – the mind state – tends to become very welcoming, wholesome, and nourishing. We feel as if we have discovered a treasure inside – a treasure of well-being, goodness, wholeness, and intimacy. This is a dynamic state, rather than a thing.

The mind is not something that is easy to hold on to or cling to. We can have desires for it, but if we get close to it, we realize there is nothing there to cling to. It doesn't make sense to cling. If we cling to the mind, we are actually getting involved in a mental activity, which is a subset of the mind. Any kind of involvement with these activities, thoughts, or interpretations of the mind narrows and collapses the freedom, openness, and fullness that is the sense of the mind.

That is why, in step ten, we are allowed to satisfy, nourish, and gladden the mind with a sense of wholeness – the sense of being complete and centered. There is a certain well-being. This is the foundation for when the practice of *ānāpānasati* switches to something we call, in English, “concentration practice.”

Concentration practice is not a separate practice, but we can develop concentration doing mindfulness of breathing in and mindfulness of breathing out. We center ourselves. We have a mind state that we feel and are intimate with. We take the whole mind state with us as we center ourselves on the breathing. The breathing becomes the very wind that moves through the mind state – a massage that moves through it.

The breathing becomes more and more the place where we gather ourselves. This is the place where the concentric circles of your life hold council. You gather together and are present for and supportive of that. It is as if you are sitting in the center of a room and there are concentric circles around you. All of your best friends, family, and supporters come there just to be with you, hold you, love you, and show that you are good. You can rest in yourself and be at ease.

And so we gather together all of ourselves. The word that is usually translated as “concentration” – for step eleven of ānāpānasati – is not actually *samādhi*. It is *samādaham*, which is the present participle of *samādahati*. It means, more literally, gathering together, settling, settling in – here:

Breathing in, one settles in. Breathing out, one settles in.

Breathing in, one gathers oneself here. Breathing out, one gathers oneself here.

This gathering, centering, and settling is difficult to do if we’re preoccupied with thoughts, ideas, feelings, and emotions. It works best when we are relaxed enough about that. We are not tight, contracted, or nervous about those things. They can still happen, but we don’t have to be involved in them. They can be in the background, on the side, or in the outer chairs of the circle of our supporters.

As we get more gathered in, the thoughts, feelings, and emotions start getting oriented as supporters for this process of the mind being centered on the breathing. If we are thinking, our thoughts are very simple and innocent, about staying with the breath and feeling the breath. If there are emotions or feelings happening, they feel connected to the process of being settled. This is part of settling. The goodness, wholeness, wholesomeness, and nourishment seem to flow with – or out of – being settled on the breathing and being with the breath.

This process of settling, gathering together, gathering in all of who we are continues the process of becoming whole. In the first tetrad, it is: “experiencing the whole body.” And then, “relaxing the bodily activity.” In the second tetrad, it is: “experiencing the mental activity.” Experiencing the activity and relaxing it contributes to the sense of the mind as a whole, the gestalt of the mind.

With further settling, *everything* begins to come in. It gets really sweet – this sense of being settled, deeply connected, and not distracted. If there is a sound or a sensation in the body, it just seems to be softly, tenderly held, and included. It’s not a problem. It is just part of this wonderful landscape of settledness, softness, intimacy, and care of attention. *Samādhi* is sometimes called “unification” – the unification of the mind, making it whole.

I am very aware that this is not easy to experience. Describing it this way can set up expectations, striving, or comparative thinking – “I’m never going to be in that kind of state.” This is why the earlier steps of *ānāpānasati* are so important. We are always staying attentive to the stresses and strains which happen in the body around our reactions and relaxing them. We are always attentive and sensitive to how we get trapped and caught in our mental activity, thoughts, judgments, interpretations, expectations, and comparative thinking. We are always ready to relax them.

These early steps of *ānāpānasati* are so important. Always keep them close by and be content to do them. That is the “massage” we do. We go back, catch ourselves, and do the earlier steps again – massaging ourselves. We come back into a nice mind state or way of being, and then we get caught again. There is a massage back and forth. Rather than think this is a mistake or a problem or that we’re always supposed to be at the growing edge of practice, it is actually this massaging, going back and forth, and discovering ourselves. We are slowly working out the kinks and wrinkles that need to be ironed out. This allows us to become more whole, holistic, and settled in our practice.

Don’t be too concerned if these deeper teachings we are doing now do not quite work for you. You can trust that they will work in some way. You might not be aware of it consciously. Always be content to do whatever step you are on.

Thank you for today. We will probably continue for a few days with *samādhi* and concentration. Thank you.