

Mindfulness of Breathing (53) Analogies for *Samādhī*

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

analogies, mind, awareness, breathing, sprinkled, similes, deepening meditation, body, kneading, reassurance, joy, equanimity, confidence, expansive, water, dough, spring, lake, *samādhī*, massage, unification, contact, lotus, flowers, peacefulness, aliveness

Gil Fronsdal

*Breathing in, one concentrates the mind. Breathing out, one concentrates the mind.
Breathing in, one steadies the mind. Breathing out, one steadies the mind.
Breathing in, one unifies the mind. Breathing out, one unifies the mind.*

The words “concentrate,” “steady,” and “unify” are all facets of developing and deepening meditation practice. In deepening our practice, it can be helpful to have some landmarks or signposts – some sense of where we are going, what we are looking for, what we are valuing as we develop our meditation practice.

Subconsciously or unconsciously, the mind is valuing all kinds of things. Thoughts go off – thinking about the past, future, fantasy, what we’re worried about, what we want – because we prioritize or put a value on those concerns.

If we place value on the process of meditation and the signpost experiences in meditation – enough to recognize them – then we make space for them to grow and nourish us. They support us and provide more confidence and reassurance, “Oh, this is good. This is the right thing to do.” So it is easier to put down our preoccupations.

As the practice deepens, the mind becomes stiller and quieter. The mind and body become softer, more malleable. Different kinds of well-being arise – joy, happiness, and settledness. There can be equanimity. There can be a sense of being really embodied – feeling the vitality of our life coursing through us, feeling present, whole, or settled: “Ahh, it feels so good to be at home in this body.”

It is the same with the mind. The mind can feel assured and peaceful. The mind can start feeling expansive – as if the mind has room for all the little details, dramas, and concerns of our life. All the little experiences and details can be held now in a mind that is really broad and wide. It’s like a very large room that can hold everyone and everything inside in a peaceful, spacious way.

With this expansive, open mind, there can be a sense of brightness for some people – even the sense of a light that comes on, which feels really good.

I want to provide three similes or analogies that the Buddha uses for this deepening of meditation practice. The advantage of similes or analogies is that each person can interpret them or find themselves in them more easily than with a clear technical description of what might happen in meditation. In addition, analogies are a little like poetry. They are evocative. They touch our imagination and maybe even our emotions. They are also a bit kinesthetic or somatic sometimes so our somatic associations come into play as well. There is a lot of room for personal uniqueness – our own way of finding ourselves – in these analogies.

I offer three similes about deepening stages of meditation that are progressive. They all use water. It has never been explained to me why water keeps being used in these similes and analogies or what it represents. I take water to represent the mind or awareness itself. The mind, awareness, is the medium in which we are operating right now. This awareness takes different shapes, different forms, as practice deepens.

The first simile is water being sprinkled into our modern equivalent of flour. As the water gets sprinkled in, it gets folded in, kneaded in, and stirred into the flour until the flour becomes dough to make bread. What is important is

that all the water, which is being sprinkled in, is kneaded in and spread out evenly throughout the dough. Part of kneading the dough is to spread it out equally, so the dough can hold together into one whole.

In a sense, the flour is the body, and the water is the awareness or the mind. We want to bring these together. The awareness is immersed in or penetrates throughout the body. The body and mind are to be in the same place at the same time.

If the mind is thinking about other times and other places, then the body and mind are separated. If the mind begins focusing, awareness starts entering into the body and is present for the body – as for the breathing – then the mind is in the same place at the same time as the body.

We are looking for the body and mind to end up in harmony with each other – unification and working together harmoniously – where there can be a real experience of feelings of health, healthiness, and wholesomeness. This cannot be felt if there is a dichotomy or separation between these two parts of ourselves.

We take awareness and bring it into our breathing. It's nice – the breathing itself is kind of a massage or kneading. We bring our awareness, and place or sprinkle it into our breathing. Then we want to knead it – to stay there with the breathing. These are the two different movements that I talked about yesterday: contact – placing the attention somewhere like with the breathing – and then keeping it there.

Keeping the attention there is not necessarily holding it steady, but is gently working it and staying there – being there. Then we have to do it again because the mind wanders off. We come back, connect, and stay there. That is sprinkling awareness into our breathing, into our body, and we knead it in. There is a massage – a rhythm of coming back and applying yourself, staying there, reconnecting.

For every beginning of an inhale and beginning of an exhale, there is a gentle reconnecting. Then it is staying there, “Stay there; be there” – the massage. Slowly, we are beginning to penetrate awareness into the whole experience of breathing so that it is continuous and fills the experience of breathing, wherever that might be in the body.

As we get the hang of doing this and feel like this is going well, gladness can arise. Certainly, it can be the gladness and happiness of relief – of not being lost and preoccupied in thoughts, which for many of us is not much fun. It is not great to spend a lot of time caught up in thoughts and ruminations. What a relief to have the thoughts recede enough to not be pulled into their orbit – and to be settled here. There is work involved – kneading, sprinkling in, coming here.

The next analogy is what I used in the meditation – a mountain lake with an underwater spring that flows into it. Awareness has now become very stable and expansive. Awareness penetrates, rests on, or is coterminous with the body. Awareness and the body are not so distinct. We really feel the fullness, vitality, and aliveness of the body, where the sensory apparatus of the body is part of the awareness system. Awareness is not just cognitive – a mental observing or knowing. There is a broader feeling of sensing and aliveness, which is part of awareness.

The body and mind are now together as partners. Within that – the concentration, steadiness, and intimacy with just breathing – there is inner goodness and nourishment, a welling up of joy, well-being, or delight, which is not evaluative. We don't have to think ourselves into being happy. It's almost like, as some people say, their joy hormones – serotonin, endorphins – get released. In this steady massaging, staying with the focus of concentration – a sense of well-being wells up. There is a flow of vitality that feels like it comes from the inside out – joy that comes from the inside, like a spring going forth.

The last analogy is now – in deeper meditation – where the sense of flow, vitality, and joy settles away into very deep, satisfying peacefulness. The analogy is a lake that has become really still, unmoving. There are lotuses growing in it, which means it is not a cold mountain lake. The lake is a nice temperature – comfortable to be in. There are many beautiful lotus flowers of different colors submerged in and floating on the lake. There is a sense that everything is very peaceful. Everything is calm and very still. Everything that is known within that calm – even though conventionally it might be something not so nice – everything that is touched by awareness, touched by the water is like a beautiful lotus flower floating peacefully in space, in the water.

Initially, there is work – with the kneading of the dough – and then there is no more work. It is just a flow that is happening. We are being carried by the flow. Then the flow calms down, and we are in this very peaceful, still place where everything feels beautiful. In these states, there is reassurance, confidence, and equanimity.

It is a beautiful thing to tap into this capacity for deep confidence, deep serenity, deep reassurance. It does the heart a tremendous amount of good. It does not depend on things in the world around us being just right, being fixed. It is a very private inner place, which becomes a resource from which we can enter into the world in a wonderful way.

Maybe these analogies could be interesting for you to play with and work with. Perhaps you can explore how this topic of inner reassurance and confidence lives in you as you go through the next day.

I look forward to seeing you tomorrow. Thank you.