

Mindfulness of Breathing (58) Liberating the Mind

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

ānāpānasati, mind, *citta*, liberation, clinging, experience, mental state, *samādhi*, letting go, well-being, self-liberating, agent, relax, thinking muscle, *samādhi*, joy, freedom

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Now we come to the twelfth step of the sixteen steps of *ānāpānasati* – the practice of mindfully breathing in and mindfully breathing out. The twelfth step is:

Breathing in, one liberates the mind.

Breathing out, one liberates the mind.

It is the twelfth step, not the sixteenth step, so it is not the full or complete possibility of liberation that Buddhism champions. But it is a significant experience of freedom, liberation, and letting go that makes an impression on the mind. It makes an impression on us. It is educational, opening, and inspiring.

It begins pointing the way: “Oh, *this* is what the path is. This is the direction of practice and the path that we are on.” It is as if a door has opened and now we know something we did not know before.

Remember, this is the twelfth step. This means that the first eleven steps are, in a sense, a preparation for this step. If we simply hear that the only instruction for Buddhism is to “Let go. Let go. Let go,” I don’t know if that would be very useful for people. It also might not give the right idea of what letting go is about. It might feel like, “Oh, I just let go of everything I have, and have nothing as a result. I will be impoverished in some way. If I let go, there will be nothing left. I will be depressed and miserable.”

Letting go happens after the first eleven steps prepare the ground, open up the field, and set up a sense of well-being in which letting go has a wonderful context. We understand the tremendous value of letting go because of the wholesome and beneficial states we are experiencing.

To review how the context for letting go is set up – the practice begins with simply mindfully breathing in and out. This helps the mind calm down and get focused. It also helps us show up and be present for our experience. I think that is where the bulk of the practice is for most people. Even people who have practiced for a long time are at steps one and two when they sit down to meditate.

The idea that there is a progression – that you are always supposed to be at the growing edge of these sixteen steps – is an unnecessary source of stress and a misunderstanding. It is easy to miss or not really connect to ourselves in the process.

The idea of mindfulness practice is to really become or be ourselves – to be honest about what is here, and to learn how to rest in and be present for it. This idea of just breathing in and out through it all is a way of supporting us to not resist, to not try to escape or avoid what is here. But, to really be present, to face what is here and work through it. Just breathe with it and relax. Heal, open up, and release the things that have to be released.

As we do this practice, at some point, we begin feeling – recognizing – that we can relax the body. Sometimes the body relaxes itself in meditation. Often we don’t have to do the relaxing. The body becomes more tranquil and calm. And that feels like a good thing.

The more we practice, the more calm and relaxed the body becomes. As the body becomes calmer and more relaxed, and we let go of some of the tension we have, feelings of well-being can well up. This sense of contentment, ease, and relaxation can in itself bring joy and happiness.

The practice begins inching its way into feeling some joy, happiness, contentment, and well-being. That sets the stage for us to better appreciate the tensions of the mind, mental activity, and stresses we may have. When we start seeing this, we start to relax the mental activities, calm the agitation of the mind, relax the mind – the mental muscle, the thinking muscle. The mental activities – which can be swirling around, fragmented, and going off in different directions – begin to settle down. The mental activity starts coming into harmony with itself, and into harmony and unity with the settling process of meditation.

Then we come to the third tetrad – all of which has to do with the mind, *citta*. *Citta* can be understood as the “heart-mind.” It is our inner life. Although this would not be an appropriate Buddhist term, some modern people may use the word “soul” – the deepest places inside our psyche and inside ourselves. It might be the soul – but the mind, heart, mind-heart is what Buddhists talk about.

We start to recognize that we have an inner life, inner mind, inner quality of life – a mood, a state that is inside. And we start to become the caretaker of that. Because of the earlier steps of *ānāpānasati*, it begins to feel good to be connected to this deep – if I may use a Western word – soul. For some people, it feels like a homecoming, more than if we say “mind” or “heart.”

The heart – this “heart-mind” – really feels, “Oh, this inner state, this state of being, is good.” There can be gladness, deep satisfaction, and contentment in being home – connected to something deep. We are not scattered in our mind or spinning around on the surface of our thoughts and ideas. We are really starting to feel whole and unified.

The process of becoming unified, unscattered, and undispersed continues into the eleventh step with *samādhi*. With unification and steadying, this whole mind state comes and gets gathered together. There is a lot of well-being. Some of the greatest forms of joy and happiness come from *samādhi* – from a mind that is unified, settled, and connected.

By the time we get to step twelve – letting go, liberating the mind – there is a tremendous amount of well-being. There is a feeling of being really at home, connected. Rather than letting go being an impoverishment or diminishment of ourselves, we start to see that what we are letting go of is, in fact, what diminishes and impoverishes us.

There is something about the mind getting caught, preoccupied, obsessing about things, spinning around in thoughts and ideas, and holding onto fear. Oddly enough, we can cling to fear. We cling for dear life to all kinds of things that we resist or hold onto. We cling to self and self-image. We cling to hurt. There are all kinds of things people cling to.

But it is seen on this foundation or reservoir of well-being, goodness, freedom, or clarity. So it is really clear that this clinging is a separation from well-being. Letting go feels like: “Of course, I’ll let go! What I am letting go of is so obviously a diminishment, a source of suffering and stress. Of course, I will let go.”

Sometimes letting go – the liberation that happens here – is so innate that it is not something we have to do. We just keep staying present, breathing with the experience, and letting things be. Something will let go by itself because it takes a certain kind of mental involvement to remain clinging. If we just let things be, even our clinging will self-liberate at some point – the self-liberating capacity of all things.

So, we come to the twelfth step. We come to the time of liberation, of letting go. It is at this point that some people find it is a really wonderful thing when they sit down to meditate to just let go...let go...let go.

Whatever arises, let it go. Let it be. Don’t be involved. Don’t pick it up. Don’t get reactive to it. Don’t pull away. Just let go. Let it be. Let it go. We let go of everything. We even let go of mindfulness – of being aware. We let go of self. We let go of knowing. We even let go of letting go at some point. Just let go.

Let go of being the agent of it. Let go of having an agenda. Let go of trying to be complete or even getting enlightened. Just let go. Let go as if that is all there is. Let go of needing to let go. Wherever it is possible – the next moment – let go of this.

The twelfth step of *ānāpānasati* is:

Breathing in, liberating the mind.

Breathing out, liberating the mind.

This is the entryway to the last four steps of *ānāpānasati*. Letting go and liberation are not the end of the story. In some ways, they are the beginning of the story. Sometimes it is said in the folklore of Buddhism that the Buddhist path really begins when we have a qualitative experience of letting go, of liberation.

That is when we know: “*This* is what it’s about. This is what freedom is possible. This is what really feels good and inspiring. This is such a qualitatively good and rich experience. It is an experience filled with the potential for compassion, love, freedom, goodness, lack of causing harm, or wanting to cause harm in the world. This is a good thing.”

That is where we are in this process. We will continue it on Monday. Over this weekend, talk to some friends about what they have learned about how and when letting go is useful. Have conversations about the benefits of letting go and how letting go can be done in wise ways. Look for opportunities to let go. Be really excited to explore all the different dimensions you can find of when, how, and where letting go operates for you or can operate for you.

If we do that, we will have a better foundation for continuing our adventure next week on Monday. Thank you.