

Mindfulness of Breathing (59) Observation and Insight

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

observing, experiencing, mindfulness, breathing, settling, mind, concentration, naturalist, hindrances, insight, knowing, *ānāpānasati*, *vipassanā*, *anupassati*, *passati*, *vi*, *anupassanā*, *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*

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We continue with this series of talks on the sixteen steps of mindfulness of breathing. We're now coming into the last tetrad, the tetrad on observing.

The last tetrad consists of steps thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, and sixteen. All four steps have in common the introduction of a new verb – “to observe.” The steps go something like this:

One trains to observe X.

Or:

One trains: observing X, one breathes in.

One trains: observing X, one breathes out.

In these last four steps, we are observing something and continuing to be with the breath.

There is something about the continuity of mindfulness of breathing that allows us to observe things but helps us not latch onto them. It helps us to not cling or hold on. Through staying with the breathing, there is a continual letting go. Breathing is where the mind is resting. We notice all kinds of things happen. But we are letting go of our involvement, any prioritization, doing anything with it, changing it, or thinking about it. We are just going along with the breathing and going back to the breath – being with the breath.

Letting go is a way to keep ourselves soft, fluid, relaxed. We allow the psychophysical system to have a break from our active involvement, our active and deliberate engagement, doing, and wanting. We let something deeper happen that can only happen if we get out of the way.

In these last four steps, this is strongly represented by the verb “observe” – the idea of observing. This is the first time in the “*Ānāpānasati Sutta*” – the discourse on the sixteen steps of mindfulness of breathing – that observing comes into play. In reading through the teachings of the Buddha in the suttas, we see, most commonly, that observing is a very well-developed practice in which the mind is able to be really centered in the present and concentrated. The strongly concentrated, present mind is the one that begins doing the practice of observing.

There is a lot of preparation in the sixteen steps. The first twelve steps are preparing ourselves for the capacity to lean back, just watch, and observe what is happening without being involved. Some translators translate the verb *anupassati* as “contemplating.” Contemplating, in the way that I relate to the word, is closer to reflecting about something, thinking about something. It suggests an active thinking process.

Etymologically, *anupassati* means “observing.” The prefix *anu* means “toward something,” and *passati* means “to see.” Put them together, and we are gazing upon something, seeing, looking toward something in a sense. Because of this, I think “observing” works very well as a translation. We're observing.

There is deliberateness in observing, but it is not quite the same as actively looking. It's just settling back into being an observer. I liken it to being a naturalist who goes into a natural setting to observe the behavior of animals or birds. It is very important that the naturalist does not interfere with the life there – staying unrecognized by what is happening – so they can watch nature unfold without the interference of humans. Just observing.

An earlier part of the sixteen steps begins with:

Breathing in, one knows one is breathing in.

Breathing out, one knows one is breathing out.

The idea of knowing is one of the attentional faculties we have. As we begin knowing the breath, we know that we never stop knowing the breath. We recognize the breath. We are there with the breathing.

But we are also experiencing things. We're experiencing the body. We're experiencing joy and happiness. We're experiencing the mind. We're experiencing gladness. We're experiencing settledness, steady concentration. And we're experiencing liberation. Experiencing is a little bit passive. It isn't that receptive [?]. It isn't like we are doing something. We are just allowing ourselves to experience.

This applies to knowing also. We are just knowing something. We are not judging or criticizing it. We're just knowing it clearly. These two activities of knowing and experiencing are here to ground us in the present moment.

Then, at some point, it shifts to just observing. The art of deeper mindfulness is to observe. In the other mindfulness discourse of the Buddha, the "*Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*," there is a lot of language of observing. If you read that text carefully, observing also comes in the higher stages of mindfulness.

[In the] earlier [tetrads of the "*Ānāpānasati Sutta*"], knowing and experiencing ground us in the present moment – helping us to stay present, to learn to develop concentration and rest in the present. When the ability to be focused and present in the moment becomes easy and light, and we feel really grounded and centered here, observation becomes stronger.

We are going toward being less and less intentional, deliberate – less activated or active in the mind. The more activated we are in the mind, the more waves, agitation, or clouds there are over our capacity to see clearly. As we get quieter and quieter, what we are left with is the ability to just observe.

Then we learn to trust that, to settle back: "Okay. Now I am just observing. I don't need to interfere or judge. I don't have to fix or adjust anything, or make anything different. Just watch. Just watch."

If in this centered place, we start reaching out to do, fix, judge, or think about something, it feels like we are losing something. We're losing the open field. We're losing freedom. We're losing the peacefulness of just observing. It is very clear that observing is a better place to be in these deeper states of meditation.

Observing becomes very important in these final steps because we really want to get out of the way – and not overlay concepts, ideas, judgment, shoulds, or shouldn'ts on top of our experience. We want to be able to take things in more closely to how they are perceived, held, and experienced before making a lot of judgments, concepts, and generalizations. Just to observe. Just to observe.

In this last tetrad, there is a shift from practices that are meant to be more concentrating, settling, and focusing. Now we are switching to *vipassanā*. Observing is where *vipassanā* – insight practice – begins. Classically, insight practice is built on the foundation of a mind that has gotten very stable, concentrated, still, joyful, happy, soft, at ease, content, safe, and liberated from the hindrances. Now the mind is ready for insight practice.

Insight practice is built on the capacity to just observe – to just observe the experience. In fact, *vipassanā* – the word we translate as "insight" – has the same verb root as *anupassanā* – *vipassanā*. It means "seeing." The *vi* is usually understood to be a prefix – here meaning "seeing clearly." It is a prefix of emphasis: "*really* seeing," "*clearly* seeing." Or "observing" – "clearly observing" or "being clearly aware." So *anupassanā* – from *anupassati*, to "observe." That is the medium through which we are going to explore the next four sets of practices of mindfulness of breathing.

You may ask: "Why is *vipassanā* often taught as an intro to mindfulness?" It also works that way. *Vipassanā* does not have to be done only with a strong base of concentration. It can be done directly as a practice. A lot of what people are doing when it is practiced directly and immediately is sorting through all the ways that they are not concentrated. They are beginning to become wise about the hindrances and distractions. Rather than directly getting concentrated, there is concentration through having understanding and wisdom about all the things that keep them distracted. Then they can settle. They can settle with wisdom rather than – sometimes they say – settle with faith. They are dedicated to just being simple and focused.

If you start with mindfulness, concentration is brought in sooner or later, and mindfulness and concentration become partners. If you start with concentration, mindfulness is brought in later, and these become partners.

Both are true. And both are valuable. *Ānāpānasati* can be seen as a hybrid of the two, with a lot of emphasis on settling, relaxing, and concentrating, which sets the stage for strong mindfulness.

Thank you all very much.