

Mindfulness of Breathing (70) Four Foundations of Mindfulness

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Buddha, tetrad, lucid, awareness, equanimity, breathing, mind, aware, feeling, experiencing, observing, insight, present moment, arise, harmony, quantum shift, full moon, *vipassanā*, *ānāpānasati*

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As a way of continuing the discussion of the Buddha's teachings on *ānāpānasati*, mindfulness of breathing – the Buddha presents the sixteen steps for mindfulness of breathing, and then clearly shows their connection to two important meditation teachings: the Four Foundations of Mindfulness and the Seven Factors of Awakening.

Many people who don't know about practicing the Four Foundations of Mindfulness will see them as a very different practice than mindfulness of breathing. Certainly, this is often the case in the way they are taught. But the Four Foundations of Mindfulness and mindfulness of breathing also come together. At some point, mindfulness of breathing becomes or enters into the same domain, the same area of life, as the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. The way the Buddha does this is through the structure of the four tetrads in the sixteen steps of *ānāpānasati*, with each tetrad corresponding to one of the foundations of mindfulness.

The foundation of mindfulness that is based on the body corresponds to the first four steps of mindfulness of breathing: being aware of the long breath, being aware of the short breath, being aware of the whole body as you breathe, and then being aware of the body calming and relaxing as you breathe. It is all about the body.

When all four steps of breathing have become well established and awareness has become strong – then awareness is based on the body. The first foundation of mindfulness is about establishing awareness on the basis of the body. Classically, a series of exercises – different ways of practicing mindfulness – are given to establish strong mindfulness, awareness in the body.

The second tetrad – steps five to eight – corresponds to the second foundation of mindfulness, mindfulness of feelings. The second tetrad of *ānāpānasati* is experiencing: as we breathe feeling joy, as we breathe feeling happiness, as we breathe experiencing the mental activity, and then relaxing the mental activity.

The word “experiencing” could also be translated as “feeling.” In the way the Pali grammar and words are used, “feeling” is embodied in the word “experiencing.” Feeling joy, happiness, and the mental activity, and then relaxing the mental activity – this corresponds to the foundation of mindfulness of feeling.

The third tetrad and the third foundation are all about the mind. In the breathing exercises, it is: experiencing the whole mind (not just the activity of the mind); gladdening the mind; settling, stabilizing, concentrating the mind; and then liberating the mind. The third foundation of mindfulness is understanding high-quality states of mind – first the mind itself, and then high qualities of mind that roughly correspond to gladdening, concentrating, and liberating the mind.

The last tetrad is about observing: impermanence, fading away, cessation, and relinquishment. These are deep insights. The fourth foundation of mindfulness is also about insights. It is insight into seeing arising and passing, how hindrances arise and go, and seeing suffering – how suffering comes and goes. This is the first of the observations of the fourth tetrad – observing inconstancy or change. The others follow in the wake of that.

The Buddha creates a correspondence between the Four Foundations of Mindfulness and mindfulness of breathing. The four foundations are equal to the four tetrads, but not automatically. It is when awareness is well established in each of these four areas. When we are grounded, centered, and present in a full way without being distracted or thinking a lot about the past and the future.

Being aware – being able to experience, sense, feel, and know the present moment in all the dimensions of knowing – is precious. Not just knowing it fleetingly, but to feel that now we are centered, rooted, and grounded here. The feeling of being here definitively – grounded, resting here – is like the difference between being in a rowboat tossed around the sea and coming onto dry land. You feel that it is stable and strong: “Here we are.”

There is a quantum, qualitative shift that can happen inside when, boom, we’re here. We don’t have to work at being here, to come back and remember to be here and present. We are not liable to wander off. Awareness becomes strong and well-established.

The translation I like for the Four Foundations of Mindfulness is the four ways or the four bases for establishing awareness. When the Buddha correlates the four foundations and the four tetrads – in the fourth one, he says:

Then mindfulness of the dharmas is well established, so there is a strong level of equanimity.

This is one of the directions the practice goes when there is stability: “Boom. We’re here.”

We are here in such a strong way that we are not easily tossed around by the changing circumstances of our life. We do not easily lose our equanimity, balance, or peacefulness. When difficult thoughts arise, they arise and go. When difficult, painful sensations in the body arise, we can feel and know them, but the mind does not get agitated or disturbed. This lack of agitation or being disturbed is equanimity.

In Buddhist practice, both the Four Foundations of Mindfulness and mindfulness of breathing – whatever way you’ve been taught to do them (and there are many ways they are taught) – are for the ultimate purpose to come to dwelling, resting, abiding, being aware in the present moment without any tendency to leave or wander off.

Some people use the expression “lucid awareness” when awareness – our sense of mindfulness – is not ruffled by what we know. Knowing becomes free and independent of what is known. We cannot completely separate what we know from knowing, but the knowing is not ruffled, agitated, entangled, or clinging to what is known. Knowing something in that freedom or equanimity is the place where all the different practices of mindfulness, all the different ways of *vipassanā* practice, come together and set the stage for awakening.

Tomorrow I’ll talk about how this is connected to the Seven Factors of Awakening. I love this because it creates harmony or unity in the Buddha’s teachings. We start seeing how they all come together as a whole. In a similar way, the discourse on *ānāpānasati* begins with the senior disciples of the Buddha coming together with all their disciples, and living together for months in unity and harmony, receiving the Buddha’s teaching.

To have that sense of unity and harmony with all the different sides of who we are, that we could all come together and live under the full moon of our lucid awareness. Thank you.

We’ll continue along this path of *ānāpānasati*, and tomorrow will be the Seven Factors of Awakening. By Thursday, we will see how the Seven Factors of Awakening are practiced. The practice changes when a person has not just learned how to be stably aware here, but has experienced a degree of real liberation, freedom from clinging. We continue, and we are almost at the end of the *ānāpānasati* series. Thank you.