

Mindfulness of Breathing (69) Practice as Onward Leading

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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In these almost seventy sessions, we have gone through the sixteen steps of mindfulness of breathing. The most famous discourse where these sixteen steps occur is a discourse that has much more in it. There is a second half that discusses how the practice follows up – how it continues – after being well established in the sixteen steps. It describes part of the wider unfolding that happens while we are doing the sixteen steps.

The second half of the discourse presents more richness and fullness. It does so partly by harmonizing, bringing together, and showing how other aspects of early Buddhist practice come into play in mindfulness of breathing. In particular, there are two: how the Four Foundations of Mindfulness are fulfilled through mindfulness of breathing, and how mindfulness of breathing leads to the Seven Factors of Awakening.

Inherent in this second half of the instructions or the description of practice is something that is called the “onward leading” nature of the Dharma. There is a very famous description that says the Dharma is “immediate, inviting inspection, onward leading, to be known for oneself.”

The Pali word for onward leading could also imply that it “carries us along.” Rather than being the agent of developing and growing in the practice, we enter the Dharma stream. We enter the stream of meditation and somehow the meditation, the Dharma, carries us along.

A simple way of understanding this is that most people spend their days preoccupied, maybe with tension, attachment, or wanting – the mind racing, spinning, afraid, angry, resentful. There are all kinds of ways in which we are caught in phenomena and activities. There is a lot of physical, emotional, and mental tension. If we begin to relax that preoccupation – the entanglement with everything – it isn't that nothing happens. Rather, there starts to be unwinding, dissolving – a fading away of attachment.

The fading away and dissolving of attachment begins a change, which is onward moving. As we change, things open up within us. Qualities and capacities that were submerged or repressed by our fears, attachments, preoccupations, and entanglements have a chance to begin showing themselves. They become stronger. It is not so much that we are trying to make them stronger, but they begin unfolding and moving.

It is wonderful to feel in meditation – slowly, day by day, or whatever way we might feel it – an opening, releasing, growing, and maturing of something quite beautiful inside. It is like a plant that has finally come into the sunlight. The plant has been in the dark for a long, long time, and now it grows and flowers.

This natural description of a flower coming to full blossom is inherent in the teachings of the Buddha, which refer over and over again to organic movement, growth, unfolding, and flowing phenomena as we enter into this Dharma path. One metaphor is the growth of a plant. We can cultivate the plant, but we don't tug on it to make it grow.

A frequent metaphor is a river or stream coming down from a mountain. If it rains enough on the mountain top, the raindrops start to flow down the side of the mountain. They join together and form little streamlets. The streamlets become streams, and the streams become rivers. The rivers become bigger until, finally, they come down to the plains and become wide, big, silent rivers flowing along into the ocean. Water has a natural flow – the flow of gravity. This metaphor is used for getting into the stream – the flow of the Dharma. It will carry us along.

As we go into the Dharma, these qualities inside of us become bigger, stronger, and more silent. The expression of silence is the silence that happens within when there is no conceit. We are no longer caught up and preoccupied with me, myself, and mine. This does not mean that we are physically silent. It means a silencing of the extra agitation that spills over into the world in all kinds of noisy ways.

Entering the stream is one of the metaphors for this flow down the river. With the first experience of real liberation, real freedom, a person is changed forever. Now they know what the stream is. They know where the current is. They know the directions of and how to be in the current that is going to carry them onward to full liberation – the onward leading nature of the Dharma.

In *ānāpānasati*, concentration practice is onward leading in one way, and insight practice is onward leading in another way. The two go together. In concentration practice, onward leading is described as the “arising of gladness” when we are no longer caught up in the hindrances. The mind is no longer distracted all the time. We are glad that we are finally present.

That gladness is the condition from which joy flows. If we feel joy, it is a condition from which flows deeper tranquility, relaxation, and calm. With deeper calm, there is happiness. With happiness, there arises concentration.

These five – gladness, joy, tranquility, happiness, and concentration – are not talked about in the suttas (the Buddha’s discourses) as something the meditator is doing or making happen directly. But rather, we are creating the conditions where this onward leading movement through gladness, joy, tranquility, happiness, and concentration can unfold on its own. This is the concentration path.

I think the insight path is described best by the last four steps of mindfulness of breathing. There is insight with the observation of inconstancy. There is a fading away of attachments that depend on things having more constancy. There is the ending, the cessation, of certain attachments. And then there is letting go – relinquishing our investment and belief in those attachments. This is described as a natural flow. It is not something we do, but something that we observe and watch happen.

In *ānāpānasati*, the flow of practice moves through concentration and then leads to this insight of deep observing. What the meditator does all along is mostly just staying with the breath – being with the breath. There is a little intentionality to stay focused on the breath. This is expressed in the repetitions of the phrase about being mindful of breathing. The sutta says, “One trains,” and then there is a statement about what I’m doing and saying to myself, “I will breathe in.” “One trains: I will breathe out.”

We will engage over and over again no matter what happens as we go through these sixteen stages. We are not getting sidetracked by anything. We are allowing all the other things to happen in this onward leading nature. We are recognizing and allowing the tranquility, relaxation, joy, happiness, gladness, concentration, liberation, and observations that happen.

All along, the dedication is simply staying with the breath: “I will breathe in. I will breathe out. I will stay connected to it.” This is where home is for people doing mindfulness of breathing.

The attention is not exclusive. It is open and aware so that this wider field is allowed to manifest and grow, and the Dharma that is onward leading can appear. To keep us relaxed – not caught in anything, not preoccupied – we are staying with the breath in an open, committed way. Not clinging to it, but staying open – staying there – so we don’t drift off and get caught in other things.

We have a relaxed, open, steady, continuous dedication, love, and devotion for breathing one breath at a time. Of course, we will get distracted, but whenever we can, we come back: “I will stay here with the breathing. This is what I’m doing.” Then we start entering into the Dharma that is onward leading – the flow that begins to unfold.

One of the things that it unfolds into is the core aspect of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. How mindfulness of breathing connects with the Four Foundations will be the topic for tomorrow.

I hope that you will be open to not being the agent of change – not being the one in charge of making things happen or fixing things all the time. Rather, go through the day with some room to allow things to unfold – to

allow yourself to unfold. Make room for yourself and the Dharma, which you cannot do if you are constantly caught up with being in charge, being the agent, or being the subject of your preoccupations.

Thank you.