

Satipaṭṭhāna (5) Sensing the Whole Breath

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

breathing, *sati*, mindfulness, awareness, attention, object, freedom, simple, body, *paṭisaṃvedeti*, experience, feel, sensory, rhythm, unification, commitment, continuity, checklist, massage, duration, inbreath, outbreath, exhale, inhale, bronco, exercise, safety, identity, separation, boredom, whole body, sensations, sensory awareness

Gil Fronsdal

The practice of mindfulness or *sati* – establishing and developing awareness – begins with breathing. Breathing, as a meditation object, does not work for everyone. There are other ways of practicing mindfulness. Some people establish awareness not so much with breathing but with the body more generally. They may ignore the places in the body where breathing occurs because those places are compromised or difficult.

But breathing is a classic and primary focus in Buddhist meditation. A teacher in Japan told me that everything you need to learn about Buddhism can be discovered through mindfulness of breathing. I would reword this and say that everything you need to know about Buddhism will be *revealed* through practicing mindfulness of breathing. Whatever the object of engaged mindfulness practice is, mindfulness can reveal everything you need to know for the purpose of freedom.

We are focusing on the first exercise, mindfulness of breathing. The emphasis now is to experience it in the body. The word in Pali is *paṭisaṃvedeti*. It means “to experience,” “to feel,” in a reflexive way – your deep subjective feeling of what is going on. But “feeling” does not mean “what I want,” “what I’m thinking,” or “my attitude,” as it sometimes does in English.

We are talking about something simpler. What we feel is our sensory experience, independent of our preferences. We are learning to be close to and simple with that. We use our sensory experience as a way of cultivating concentration and stability. It also protects us from easily wandering off into distracting thoughts.

To have a place where our attention gets established and rooted: *this* is where we are going to be. Of course, the mind wanders away. Rather than being upset, take it for granted your mind will wander away. What we are developing and practicing is a rhythm. There is a rhythm of breathing in and breathing out. There is also a rhythm of coming into the present moment with breathing and then wandering away – coming back, wandering away – and coming back.

You are not in charge of wandering away. Your role is to come back. If you consider it a rhythm or a flow, then maybe you will practice more harmoniously, rather than jerking the mind back or being upset that you were distracted. Just, “There it is” – and you get into the sense of the rhythm. If you have a choice, you choose not to participate in the mind being distracted. You bring it back to the breathing. Then you stay close to the sensations of breathing, which are the meeting place of the mind and the body.

We want the mind and the body to work together in harmony. That gathering together is part of the unification practice of meditation. So all of who we are begins to operate in harmony rather than at cross-purposes. If the mind keeps wanting to think about something else instead of being in the present moment in our direct experience, we are at cross-purposes with ourselves. In this exercise around breathing, the task is to come back to breathing.

Offering a little commitment to staying with the simplicity of breathing has been a very common practice through the centuries. There is some strength in that. With time, it overrides the tendency to wander off in thought. The rhythm begins to slow down, and you wander off less often. You stay more with the breathing and come back more quickly to it. Slowly the practice changes, and you are more and more here. Offering some strength or commitment that “this is what I am doing” is a way of not offering a lot of energy or fuel to our thinking mind.

It is a slow process. Slowly, we begin to switch the orientation. We switch the commitment of the mind from the issues in our life to just being here, in meditation practice, with the simplicity of breathing. When we have

important things to think about, it can be hard for the mind to appreciate how valuable this is – that we are safe, and we will make our lives better by simply staying with the breath.

This is, in fact, one of the great ways of making ourselves safe. We are learning how to drop into a quieter, deeper place within that is a source of wisdom and understanding. A shift of identity – a shift in how we understand ourselves – which is sometimes wiser than the identity that supports distracted thinking. The training is to come in for a landing with our breathing: just being with the body as it breathes.

At this point in the text, the instructions are:

Breathing in, one experiences the whole body.

Breathing out, one experiences the whole body.

There are two possible meanings of “experiencing the whole body.” One is experiencing the whole breath-body – the whole duration of the breathing. The other is actually experiencing the whole body, beyond just the experience of breathing. For now, I would like to emphasize the first – that as we cultivate continuity with breathing, it is possible to have continuity within the inhale and the exhale.

There was a time when I had a checklist approach to mindfulness. I knew I had to be mindful of the breath, so I would note it. As soon as the mind recognized the inbreath, I just checked it off as “in.” And because I had done my job, it was then vacation time, and my mind would wander off. I did the same with the outbreath. I just checked it off as “out.” I learned that rather than checking it off and being done with it, the practice is to stay present for the whole duration of the breath.

Many years ago, I took a massage class in college. The instruction was that as you massage someone, you keep a hand on their body so there is always continuity of contact. That way, they are not surprised if you take your hand away to get more oil and then put it back. There can be a little surprise when you have lost contact.

It is the same with breathing. Stay in touch with the full duration of the inbreath – the beginning, middle, and end. As you get more intimate with the experience, you will feel a kaleidoscope of sensations. As you breathe in, there may be the beginning of the chest lifting, the belly expanding, or tingling in your nostrils. What happens to those sensations? How do they morph and change in the course of the inhale? Then stay in touch with the exhale in the same way.

Sometimes you sit down to meditate, and the breathing is short and quick. So ride it, like riding a bronco in a rodeo. Ride the shortness of it, coming and going. Relax as best you can on the exhale. As meditation gets calmer, the breathing tends to get slower and longer. Then you start feeling, sensing, and savoring – having intimacy with – all the physical sensations that come into play as you breathe.

It helps if you do not measure everything from the perspective of your preferences – whether it is comfortable or not, whether you like it or not, or whether you think it is good or bad. That belongs to the control tower. It is a way of separating ourselves from our experience.

Getting bored with the breathing is also a separation from the experience. You probably will not be bored unless you have pulled away from the experience of breathing. The idea is to be close and intimate with the experience. Feel the whole inhale and the whole exhale. Then with the same kind of delicacy, experience the transition from breathing out to breathing in, and from breathing in to breathing out.

I am not suggesting that what I have described today is easy. But it is a possible direction to go – to settle in, let the mind become quiet, and develop your sensory awareness. Sensory awareness is one of the forms of awareness or attention that the Buddha offers us in *satipaṭṭhāna*. To cultivate, develop, and hone the tool of sensory awareness is fantastic for the purpose of mindfulness.

I encourage you to spend the next couple of days studying and being curious about the sensations involved in your breathing. Take little time-outs, maybe a minute or two, throughout the day, like while waiting in traffic or standing in line in a store. Use that time to be curious. What is happening with your breath? How is your body experiencing the process of breathing? Get intimate, curious, and wise with that. Start becoming familiar with the range of different ways that breathing is experienced.

We will continue with this process next week. At some point, we will expand it to mindfulness of the whole body as we are breathing. We will go through all four steps of the first exercise in mindfulness of breathing. Thank you very much.