

Satipaṭṭhāna (12) Abiding Observing Change

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

refrain, breathing, exercise, insight, know, feel, relax, *viharati*, abide, dwell, awareness, observe, experience, river, thinking, rumination, absorbed, dynamic, concept, leaf, leaves, sensations, changing, arising, passing, body

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In our exploration of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, we are discussing the refrain. There are thirteen exercises in the text. We are studying the first exercise – breathing. As the practice of breathing becomes more focused and more awareness grows, that awareness is available for insight. This is what the refrain is about.

I will repeat what I have said many times now. The exercises are an engagement, a way of practicing, that is meant to heighten our sense of awareness – to bring more clear, stable awareness into the present moment.

In the first exercise, breathing helps us establish present moment awareness. The practices of knowing, feeling, and relaxing support our ability for awareness to become stable in the present moment – soft, open, and clear awareness.

As our awareness starts becoming stable, we are ready for the insights of the refrain when we can abide, observing our experience. The Pali is *viharati*, which means “to abide” or “to dwell.”

The word *viharati* is used, in the teachings of the Buddha, to describe when awareness is strong. Once our capacity to stay present is really stable, we can abide in different things. We can abide in equanimity, calm, and deep concentration states. We can abide in mindfulness – in awareness.

“Abide” is a very rich, important word in the *suttas*. It indicates where we are going with mindfulness practice. It is not only about being mindful of our experience, seeing it clearly for what it is. That is very important. But it is also about developing the capacity to have present moment awareness so we can abide in it. We can abide in our experience.

To abide goes along with observing the experience. As I said earlier, observing is very spacious, clear seeing. It is not interfering with, judging, reacting to, or fixing our experience. We settle back and start clearly seeing our experience for what it is.

By abiding, we are not attacking. By abiding, we are not reaching forward to grab, pulling away, or doing something with our experience. We are just abiding in it. This allows us to come to a place of perceiving things in a very spacious, relaxed way. It is not easy, but the mindfulness exercises in this text support us to get there.

Breath meditation – repeatedly coming back to the breath – can sometimes take a long time, but it is so beneficial. Eventually, the benefits come, and we can feel an abiding way of just being present. This supports the path of liberation because it frees up the mind from being fixated on concepts, ideas, stories, opinions, and other imaginings we have.

There is the example I like to use of just sitting on the bank of a river and watching the river go by. But then, the mind starts thinking about the river: “Well, this river is not flowing in the right location. It would probably be better a hundred yards further south. It would be nicer to sit there and look at it. There would be more sun during the day.” As we are thinking and ruminating about the river, we are thinking about the *concept* of the river. We are no longer deeply absorbed, just watching the river in and of itself. If we get absorbed in the concept of the river, the concept of the river is just a concept, and that has a certain kind of permanence to it. The concept may not change much – it’s just “the river.”

But if we wake up from the rumination and sit back on the riverbank – going back to the river itself, seeing the river directly – we see that the river is a dynamic process of change. It is moving and flowing all the time. As we

sit back and rest, it is the moving and flowing that allows us to settle back, rest, be soft and relaxed, sometimes letting go of our thoughts – just absorbed, watching it go by.

We cannot rest and be absorbed in a nice, abiding way if we are caught up in thoughts about moving the river. “How do I do this? How much is it going to cost? Whom do I write to make it happen?” The mind is kind of active or straining. It is like work to have those thoughts.

As the mind softens and relaxes and the thinking mind stops becoming a priority, we do not have to figure everything out with our thoughts. We start relaxing enough to not be with concepts but with direct experience. Then we start watching the changing nature of things.

So, it is like seeing a single leaf fall from a tree and immediately thinking: “Oh no! Now I’ll have to sweep my yard. It’s going to be a lot of work. Maybe I need to buy a new rake.” I have gotten caught up in a world that does not allow me to appreciate the falling, floating leaf. Then, as the wind picks up, many leaves begin falling. I cannot fixate on one leaf falling. I have to sit back and watch – in a broad, spacious, receptive way – all the leaves falling, like snow coming down.

As we develop this practice, it turns out that much of our direct experience of the body is more akin to a river flowing or leaves falling than a fixed concept. We often live in a world of fixed concepts and ideas, and we relate to what is happening in our experience through the lens of these concepts and ideas.

Even breathing – an inhale – can be a concept. If we are not fixating or focusing on that concept – but rather, *experience* the inhale, experience the exhale – we see that the inhale is made up of many different sensations coming and going. It is like a river of sensations flowing through us as we breathe in and out.

I sometimes have had trouble with my breathing in meditation. I have gotten worked up about my breathing being wrong: “Why can’t I breathe better?” I learned not to worry about these kinds of thoughts. I would dip down into the contracted, tight breathing – or whatever difficulty I had – and start directly feeling the experience itself.

Sooner or later, you see that the experience is actually made up of many different small sensations, which are coming into and going out of existence. The sensations are there for a moment; they pass away; they come back a moment later. Your sensations of the inhale are different from the sensations of the exhale. When the inhale stops, the inhale sensations have passed away, and the exhale sensations begin.

It might sound boring to be involved in these sensations. But it is like watching a river – to be relaxed and absorbed in the beautiful flow of the process, of the dynamic nature of experience.

As practice deepens, the refrain (in shorthand form) explains:

One abides observing the changing experiences of the body. One observes the arising and passing of experiences in the body.

It is not that we are searching or trying to look for change. We are not looking for how the river is changing. It is more like we settle back and relax, and we can watch change.

As awareness gets well-established and we can abide in the present moment in a way that observes in a spacious, relaxed way, we get tuned into – attuned to – the changing nature of sensations in the body. When we open up to seeing this changing nature, the practice opens up in a different way.

The insight into the changing nature, the inconstant flow of sensations is probably the central insight of insight meditation. Why is it so important, central, and appreciated? It is probably not obvious to people who are uninitiated in this world. It seems like there are more important things to do in the world than to look at and see how things are changing in the body.

I will talk more about that tomorrow and go a little further in this section of the refrain that says:

Abiding, one observes the arising of experiences in the body. One observes the passing away of experiences in the body. And one observes the arising and passing – arising and ceasing – of experiences in the body.