

Dharmette: Prescriptive and Descriptive

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In the discourse where the Buddha gives the instructions for mindfulness of breathing on an *ānāpānasati*, he offers 16 steps that are associated with this practice, and they unfold through various different aspects of the body and the mind, encouraging both calm and insight.

The point of a day like today is not to try to remember all 16 or something, but I did want to point out that that is what's in the background of what we're doing. And then to say a little bit about how do we relate to a set of instructions like that when they're in a teaching. It's interesting that that text, by the way, is fairly long. And the 16 are just kind of put in the middle. And there's a fair amount of context and other description around them.

So it's not that the Buddha sat down and said, here are the 16 steps, 1 through 16... now go do them. There was a whole context around it. But it's natural, I think, to, you know, how do we interpret a set of 16 things related to the breath? We could see it as prescriptive, you know, meaning we should do each of these things, maybe in sequence. And so we sit down, and the first instruction is to know a long breath, an in-breath that's long as an in-breath that's long, and an out-breath that's long as an out-breath that's long.

So we could do that, and so forth. The second instruction is to know a short in-breath and out-breath. And then it switches to train, and we have this sensing. I've actually gone through the first eight in what we've done so far. And so we could put some intuitive time frame on that and try to see each of these things.

And I think that's okay. He does give the instructions kind of like that, and it is called a training. We're training ourselves to see these things. I think it's nice to see them maybe if we do it that way as something that we're inclining the mind toward or opening to the possibility. Could there be, you know, if the next step is the joy step, hmm, is there any joy, looking a little bit?

And that works because, you know, we are training the mind. We are creating a channel through which it can flow. And these 16 things that are pointed out are helpful ways to create that channel. We could incline our mind to them over a series of meditation sessions today or over the next 10 years, you know. And yet, it's also more subtle than that.

Are instructions only prescriptive, things that we're supposed to do? Sometimes, speaking from experience, it feels to me like what the Buddha is doing is actually pointing out a description of what will happen if the mind focuses on the breath. There's a natural pathway there that he uncovered. We're not creating a channel, we're noticing something. Or if we direct our attention toward the breath and just allow ourselves to stay with that, not demanding it be anything, being open to it, might it be that we'll naturally notice the length of the breath and then we'll naturally notice, oh, the breath is in the body.

Yeah. And then it's natural that we start to feel some calm and some ease and maybe even some pleasure from that. Is that just what happens when a human mind inclines in this way with wise mindfulness? You do have to have right mindfulness. I hadn't read this *sutta* at all for the first several years that I did breath meditation practice.

I just listened to my teacher and did it on my own at home. I was amazed that when I read it, those were the things that had happened. Maybe not all sixteen, but I said, oh, I recognize this. This is what happens when you meditate on the breath. It was a huge revelation.

It's really interesting to start relating to the *Dhamma* teachings in this way. What if all the Buddha's doing is pointing out what will happen if your mind starts waking up, not all the stuff you have to do in order to wake up. Make it a big project. It's interesting. So this knowing and sensing that we're pointing toward today, they can be directed.

I'm not going to say that's not a good way to practice. If we don't do anything with our mind, it'll probably just think for the whole session. So it's good to direct it in some way. I get that. And they can also be receptive.

Both modes are possible. So at some point today, you might find greater simplicity and greater richness through taking a more receptive stance with your mindfulness. See what happens. Give yourself that experiment or gift today.