

Tuesday dharma talk: anapanasati

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So back to mindfulness of breathing. This is very famous for some of us, a discourse called the *Discourse on Ānāpānasati*, discourse on breathing in and breathing out. And it's a beautiful discourse, I think, kind of remarkable in its profundity. And some of how it's really an amazing text can be invisible to some readers. And a lot of it is because part of what makes it amazing is what is absent from it.

And, you know, if we take some people who might have been fully acculturated in the modern psychological individualistic culture of the West, and they went looking in this text for things that are really important for them, it's not going to give you any kind of advice on how to get rich, acquire fifteen minutes of fame, or get lots of friends on social media. It's not going to help you, it's not going to address directly, some of the existential issues of identity which many people in the modern world are struggling with. It's not going to tell you how to work through the psychological complexes that mostly post-date Freud, in his wonderful contributions, maybe not so wonderful, the psychological self and all that that entails in terms of so many different identities and needs and what's important.

And I think it's probably fair to say that this modern psychological culture that is so pervasive focuses more on internal mental states, emotions, thoughts, beliefs, than a lot of other people have done down through history. And it's often just seen as natural. It's just kind of people grow up in it, in the language in which they were taught speaking, and it's really deeply embedded. And it comes with all kinds of very strong opinions about oneself, conceits about oneself, very strong opinions about others, what's supposed to happen in society, how people are supposed to relate to each other or not relate to each other.

And I don't want to say that it's bad or wrong. Every society has its way it constructs a sense of self. But what's remarkable about the *Ānāpānasati Sutta*, none of that is addressed. So

much is not addressed. And I would venture to say that even in the time of the Buddha, what was absent in this text probably stood out in highlight for some people of his time. Maybe it's not what they were looking for, not how they organized their life and what they saw there was most important.

In some ways, it's a radically simple text. And the simplest way of understanding it is simply breathing. Immersed in the experience of breathing, inhaling and exhaling. Another way of seeing it is that remarkably this text does not talk about, in some very direct way that we would obviously see it, the normal psychological challenges or emotional challenges that many people are negotiating. They need to negotiate. It comes along with being in this culture.

And the way we organize ourselves and understand ourselves, under so much that's such an active and alive part of our life, is our emotional life and our difficult emotions and our psychological life and the difficult psychological complexes we have. But those aren't mentioned in the text. And is this because the Buddha was psychologically unsophisticated? Well, if you measure him against Freud and Jung and people like that, of course he wasn't around yet. Those books weren't written, those teachings weren't there. So, of course, he didn't know about those kinds of concepts.

But I think the Buddha was a pretty astute student of the mind and the heart and the emotions. And he offers the *Ānāpānasati Sutta* as a kind of paradigm change, a very different approach. And best in my understanding, or my attempt to try to understand this, is that rather than focusing on the problem, he's focusing on the way out of the problem.

I once heard a teacher describing the teacher we had in Burma, Upandita. His approach to teaching students, the metaphor he was using, was if you know these Chinese wooden jointed snakes, have you ever seen those? They're little joints that are kind of, and eight inches there. The analogy was that if you go from the tail and push it, then it coils all up and there's a lot of resistance across the table. But if you take it from the head and push and pull it, then it straightens out, then it slides across the table more easily.

So if we start the path of practice, kind of push from behind with our challenges, our suffering and everything, sometimes things get gummed up and we get wrapped up in it and things get all bunched up and it's just harder to do it. But if you go from the front and pull, then everything follows nicely and it slides across the table. So it's probably fairly naive to kind of take that as a simplistic understanding. But a little bit I see that that's what's going on in the *Ānāpānasati Sutta*, because this is the direct way or full way. And it may be okay to have a whole paradigm shift, a whole different orientation when you do *dharma* practice than you

would do in other parts of our lives.

And so maybe it's okay to have it simpler. Maybe it's okay to not get wrapped up or stopped by certain kinds of issues. But not to ignore it, not to deny it, but to know there's another way to work our way through.

So the analogy I like for practice is if you go for a really long walk, like a hike, maybe many days up in the mountains. I had a friend, I have a friend, a teacher now. In the 1960s he went to India, Nepal, kind of exploring Indic spirituality. But as he describes it, he was completely disassociated. He was not connected to his body.

And so he was disconnected, but he met this Tibetan teacher in Kathmandu that he wanted to study with. And the teacher was going to go back to his home monastery someplace else in Nepal. And he was lucky enough back then to take a little airplane, but there wasn't space for my friend. So he was told to walk to the monastery. And the walk was maybe a week.

And he was given the practice to feel the soles of your feet against the ground with every step. And for one week that's what he did, and that was the beginning of him no longer being disassociated. That was a very simplistic, maybe overly simplistic, practice. But it brought him into his body. He started to have a whole new relationship with himself through that one-week walk in the mountains, feeling every step, being in his body.

One of the things about going for a long walk like that is you bring all of yourself along when you walk. You don't leave part of yourself alone. It all comes along, your whole body. The other thing is that, especially if the walk is important, you're going up a mountain and all kinds of things in the mountain, one of the things that a hiker will do is just keep walking.

And you might feel like you don't want to. Well, sometimes you should rest, but maybe it's just because, oh, you know, I've walked enough, I'm tired, I should watch Netflix or something else. Whether you're on water or whether you walk, whether it's hot or cold, you walk. Whether it's steep or easy or something, you just keep walking. You might have to adjust the speed, all kinds of things, but there's just one step after another, one step after another. You keep doing it.

And there's a rhythm, there's a connection, there's a movement. You keep walking, you don't give up. And there's all kinds of things you might think about, and you might know what you're thinking about, but you also know you're walking. These two things are going together.

And I do a lot of walking, and there are times when I have some emotional challenge. And I'm really fond of walking with my emotions because it's a way of, the walking, the rhythm

of it, the movement of it, actually protects me a little bit from getting spun out and being caught in them. I'm constantly being reminded to be in the present moment, to be here now, here now, whatever. And then I give my mind freedom and I give my emotions freedom. And that combination of giving my inner life freedom to feel what's there, to recognize what I'm thinking about while walking, keeps me limber, keeps me loose, keeps it all kind of light, if that's the right word, so there's more room for everything to kind of be processed and work itself out.

That's very different if I just kind of hunker down, you know, on the couch at home and look miserable. There's something different that happens in that movement, that fluidity. So the same thing with mindfulness of breathing. The equivalent to walking, walking and getting kind of grounded or connected to yourself, is the rhythm of breathing. The alternation, breathing in and breathing out.

And it's remarkable how well mindfulness of breathing has worked even when I don't like doing it. Even when I didn't want to do it. Even when it was hard. Even when I was controlling my breath. Even when I had all kinds of complicated relationship with breathing. I just kept doing it, doing it, just at every next step on the mountain, the next step.

And by staying connected to every breath that way, I did the same thing with a walk, with my emotions. I learned to give freedom to my inner life as long as I was there for the next breath. And I learned this for myself many, many years ago. More than fifty years ago, I had the occasion to sail across the Atlantic. I think I was twenty years old.

And now it was a small sailboat. And I had to spend three two-hour shifts at the helm, and there was no automatic pilot like they have now on boats. So you had to be at the helm adjusting the sail, constantly moving the rudder back and forth. And you had to watch the sails and pay attention to the waves and adjust the boat according to the wave conditions, constantly there.

But what happened at the beginning of that summer, I decided it was okay to have a fantasy life, that I could give freedom to my mind to do whatever it wants. And having these six hours a day standing there mostly alone with the Atlantic Ocean all around me, and giving freedom to my mind, if that's all I did, I probably would've gone crazy. But what I did was I gave this freedom. But because of the sailing, every moment, every few seconds, I had to notice the present moment. I had to make an adjustment in the rudder, I had to make an adjustment in the sail, I'd notice the waves, I'd adjust my balance because of the shiftings on the boat.

And so the whole event kept me in the present moment while I gave this freedom to myself.

And the combination of those two, by the end of the summer I was ecstatic. I was so happy because I had given this freedom and experienced the quality and characteristic of just letting my inner life be completely as it is, but in a way that kept me present, ready for the next moment, to give freedom to the next moment, the next moment.

So this thing about the rhythm of breathing, breathing in and out, it's a huge protection. It's a protection from the mind spinning out in thoughts. It's a protection from all kinds of ways we think and believe that undermine us, that drain us, that challenge us, that make things worse for us. But we don't have to fight those things. We don't have to get involved with those things. We don't have to debate them.

We don't have to decide whether they're right or wrong. We don't have to try to analyze them or try to figure out why they're there. The way to pull the snake along is just stay with the breathing, stay with the next step, the next step, because that's where the present moment is. It's always going to be there with the breathing, but in a simple relaxed way. And then begin appreciating the kind of freedom that gives, the kind of space that gives, after for a brief moment you're not preoccupied with something else. You're not preoccupied with your usual preoccupations, the usual things you think are so important, the usual fantasies, delusions of grandeur, delusions of the opposite.

You can give freedom to that. You don't have to resist anything or fight anything. You don't have to accept anything, but also not reject anything. Just leave yourself alone. But stay here in the present moment. Don't get swept away. Stay here and trust the simplicity of just now, just here.

And so in a very simple way that the *Ānāpānasati Sutta* is being taught, it's kind of like offering it, being offered to you, here's a path that can make things a lot easier for you. Not disrespecting the sophisticated mind and culture and all these things that are there, but it's not necessary to be caught by them. It's not necessary to stop because of them. And where does a stop? We stop paying attention to the present. We stop being with the next breath.

And so this giving ourselves over, immersing ourselves in the experience of breathing without pushing anything away. And the extent to which the Buddha addresses all of our huge collection of psychological emotional problems is he says at the end of the first set of instructions, relax. And that's actually quite profound. Literally what he says is to relax or calm the bodily formations. They were the *saṅkhārā*, but here in this context, *saṅkhārā* are all the reactive tensions that we build up in our body.

And this is one of the ways that the body-mind relationship is so intimate, that if we're de-

tached in the mind, chances are we'll tense in the body. And if we relax the body, we tend to relax the mind. And so as we get more sensitive, we're doing *ānāpānasati*, staying with the breath, staying with the breath. And then at some point, as we stay with it, one of the natural ways that the attention can be an opening is you start feeling more of your body. And that's often when we feel the tensions in the body, the holding patterns in the body.

And the instructions are when you do that, soften, calm the body, calm the body. And it may be simplistic. It maybe seems to ignore a lot of the important big issues we have in our life that deserve our full undivided attention, and everyone else also has to listen as we discuss it and talk about it. Maybe. But here we're being invited to do something very, very different than maybe what we were taught growing up, taught by our culture, taught by our whatever it is. It is something that in its profundity is also phenomenally simple.

The simplicity is profound. You don't have to do much. You're not here to fix your problems. You're here to let them dissolve. As I like to say in this practice that we do, none of your problems will be solved, but it's possible that all your problems will dissolve. Isn't that nice?

So we're always trying to solve things. And so this paradigm shift is this shift to another way. This way that the *Ānāpānasati Sutta* is pointing to shouldn't be taken as being universal, like this is the only way that we can process and deal with our life. There's definitely times for other approaches to work with the different issues of our life. Very important to do so. But at least in this way that this practice is done, it's offering a very different way than most people are familiar with.

And so to really understand that I think is really helpful if you would like to try it. If you think, oh, this might be interesting, maybe I can put aside my usual approaches, usual ways of thinking, usual ways of making something happen. Maybe it's okay to relax. Maybe it's okay to recognize that I have all these issues and problems or challenges. There's nothing wrong with it, there's no crime to have. But maybe it's okay just to leave them alone except to recognize the tensions that come with them. And maybe those tensions can relax. Maybe I can soften that.

Now, so to know something as simple as breathing. And then the instructions are as you begin to hang in there and stay with the breathing, have some continuity, something begins to shift and change. The awareness becomes more acute. Some of our preoccupations fall away. There is some building of concentration.

The latest trend in *Theravāda* Buddhism is to not use the word concentration, but to use the word immersion. It's very interesting that it's kind of a current in some little subsections of

Theravāda Buddhism. The immersion, to be immersed in the world of breathing, immersed in your experience. And just like with walking in the mountains, with this practice, we really want to bring all of who we are along. This is not a denial of anything. But it's also not involvement with the many things we tend to be involved in.

So you can say hi, wave. Oh, there's anxiety. Hi, I know you. Hi. But we're not, you know, you can be there, but we're staying here. You can be my friend. We can be friends. Why don't you sit on my shoulder? That's what I've done. I did once with my fear. You can sit right there. It's okay, we can be friends, but just sit right there and we're going to continue here with the activity.

And so it is not a denial. But to the degree to which, so then the instructions are know breathing, immerse yourself in this world. And then as you do that, become aware of your whole body. Just sense and feel your body. And this is one of the great gifts of life.

The whole psycho-physical system we have, I believe, in my pop psychology, is that our whole system was evolved long ago in the plains of Africa to be in the present moment in a holistic way so that all the intelligences, all the different intelligent ways in which we feel and sense and understand and process, can all work in concert. Because only then could you really manage with hunting, gathering, survival in this ancient world where there was no YouTube to get instructions on what to do.

And so in what's happened in modern society, we've lost touch with so many different parts of ourselves. To the degree to which we become whole in the body, we open up and feel our whole body. To that degree, we start reintroducing all these different intelligences we have so they can work together. We bring everything together that way. So to feel the whole body is not just an indulging in the body, it's a way of waking up the body. So it all begins operating together. It's a remarkable thing that happens.

But in that opening up to the body, then we feel the tensions. And the simple instruction is soften, calm, relax. Most translators use the word tranquilize, but that's a little bit funny for some people who speak English. So I say calm, make a calming of the body.

So then in this process of kind of pulling the snake by the front rather than pushing from behind, as we relax, if you hold your hand or fist or muscle really tight for a long time, then finally you have a chance to relax. Immediately there's a good feeling in the hands. It feels like blood going. There's a sense of release, relief. There might even be a sense of pleasure that's very different from the tension that we had.

So as things begin relaxing, musculature of the body is relaxed in a nice way. It tends to

release good feelings, good sensations. And one of the things the Buddha then says, as he goes along with *ānāpānasati*, staying with the breathing, notice the joys and happiness, the joys and pleasures that come from just being alive in this meditative way. Don't try to make yourself happy. Don't try to make yourself joyful. But even in subtle ways it feels good.

It starts feeling good to sit down and be sitting in a posture. It feels good to be, it can feel like relief to not be caught up in the usual busyness of the mind, in the tensions and stresses of everyday life. It's good to come on retreat and feel the stresses dissipate and quiet and disappear. And some of you maybe are just so, you know, if I bring it up, maybe it's unfortunate, but, you know, it could be that it's such a relief not to have to look at the news for a week. So there's all kinds of ways in which there starts to be these pleasures that come here as we practice.

So the Buddha gave the instructions, breathing in feel the joy, when you're breathing out feel the joy. As you're breathing in feel the happiness. As you breathe out feel the happiness. It doesn't have to be fireworks, joy and happiness. It can be very, very subtle. But this is valuable, it's useful to start noticing it.

And what he's not saying so much is spend time feeling how you're sad, spend time feeling how you're angry. Don't ignore that fact, don't push it away, don't deny it. But that's not where the pulling forward goes. That's not where the embodiment is. That's not where the path keeps opening toward freedom.

And whether you agree or not, you don't have to agree with what I'm saying, or feel like it's wise for you to do it this way. But this is the instruction in *Ānāpānasati*, that as you begin relaxing the body, and all along you have this beat of breathing in and breathing out, as you relax the body, be sensitive to how some of what might happen here feels good. And it's possible that there are good feelings in the practice even when you feel things that are unpleasant. Remarkably.

I've had very strong meditative joy at the same time as I had very intense physical pain, and I would have thought that those two don't go together. If you have intense physical pain, you have a duty to be miserable. That's what it's all about. But no, the two don't have to be united. It doesn't have to be that way. It's possible to have deep peace in pain. It's possible to have deep peace and anger. It's possible to have a sense of joy in the whole system, and have sadness.

Some of the most distressing insights that I had in my meditation, that were really kind of painful to see, happened in the context of my feeling a lot of meditative joy. And I could feel

both were there, so the joy was there to hold these distressing insights. So it wasn't just distressing insights, and that's the end of the world. It was, oh, I can hold this. There's a room here. There's a different context for it. There's a different orientation here than I ever knew was possible. That I learned from the meditation.

And it helped me immensely so that because before that I would just lock on to some of these difficulties that I had. I'd lock on to my distresses and my fears. Because I thought, I don't know if I thought, but that's where my system was oriented to, or what I believed you're supposed to do, or that was so important, I thought. But to see you don't have to do that was really life-changing for me. I can just let it be, and in letting it be there could also be this whole other side that was going on. There was well-being.

So to begin to appreciate, give a little priority, don't be attached, don't try to make it happen. No need to be discouraged if it doesn't happen. But be sensitive at some point in this process to the sense of well-being that comes from doing the practice. Because this is something mindfulness, attention, will then feed and grow.

Remarkably, the Buddha used, for his understanding of the inner psychology of human beings, language of feeding. What are you feeding? And what is the food you feed? One of the primary foods is your attention. So you have to be very careful what you're feeding with your attention.

If you're preoccupied and caught up in some attachment, you're actually feeding the attachment. There's a way that if you spend too much time lost and immersed in anger, your attention is feeding the anger more. If you are bringing this food of awareness and bringing it to how you feel happy, feel safe, feel secure, feel settled, feel peaceful, that's what can grow. That's what you're feeding.

So there's an instruction in *Ānāpānasati*, when we train in breathing in feeling the joy, when breathing out feeling the joy, feeling the happiness, feeling the happiness. But not for its own sake, but so that there can be a deeper and deeper sensitivity to what's going on here. And just like sensitivity in the body showed where there's tension in the body, in *Ānāpānasati*, what we see at some point is where the tension is in the mind.

And so you start feeling what it's like to have some kind of preoccupation of the mind, for something we're hooked onto, we're tight on, we're trying to solve a problem, or trying to make something happen, or just good policy to think about everything that's dangerous and be afraid. And you start feeling, oh, when I do that, there's a contraction in the mind, there's a contraction in the thinking mind, there's a tightness, there's a narrowing, there's constriction.

My mind feels small. Not only that, but sometimes even like everything is going dark because I'm so caught up in my preoccupation.

And to start feeling that is one of the things that the practice brings. The content, the reason why you're contracted, the Buddha doesn't say anything about. Because it seems this emphasis here is on keeping it really simple. Just notice the tension. That's what's important. And then there too, the instructions are, calm the mental tensions, relax the mental tensions, relax, soften.

The word that's being used here for mind could just as well be translated as heart. And for some of you it might make a world of difference to think about this in terms of how the heart is tense, contractions of the heart, soften your heart, calm your heart, calming of the heart. Relaxing the heart, helping the heart feel at home, helping your heart feel settled on itself, helping the heart feel like it's okay just to be here.

You have every right to just be alive, at peace, present in this moment for what it is. Nothing you have to prove. Nothing you have to accomplish. Nothing hopefully here that you have to defend yourself against and push away. Here you're allowed to let your heart settle and just be at ease, just here.

So this is the journey of *Ānāpānasati*, part of the journey. And at the heart of it, the beat of it, is the idea to keep the beat going, is breathing in and breathing out. And so for you to find a way to be with the inhales, be with the exhales, that you enjoy, that's nice for you. If you do it out of a sense of duty, a big should, you're probably not going to enjoy it. There might be ways to experiment and discover other ways to do it.

It's all kinds of ways. I offered you some earlier, but some people like the language of receptivity. Sometimes I've found it was really useful to find the most subtle place where the sensations of breathing were. Like sometimes I would control my breath too much, and so then I'd go to my back rib cage spine and feel the very subtle movements there because those I didn't control. And then it was so much easier and so much nicer. And then I would sneak up to the front rib cage, then sneak up from behind to try to be there with the usual place I feel the breath, the rib cage or the belly, but I snuck up on it before I could control it. So that was kind of fun.

So, you know, you can have a lot of creativity here to see if in your way you can find a way that you enjoy, that's nice for you, that's pleasant, and that you start falling in love with your breathing. I would say that I have a love affair with breathing. And, you know, with any lover, it's not always so good. You know, sometimes breathing and me, we have our differences.

And usually I lose. Usually breathing wins out.

And, you know, of course any good relationships can be difficult. But it's possible to really have this wonderful, delightful, friendly, loving relationship through breathing. In a sense, breathing is a substitute for your loving relationship with yourself, every breath.

So I'll end by saying that this analogy of walking, walking in the mountains, walking with breathing in and breathing out, maybe I can enhance it a little bit more by saying that meditation for walking has a very profound place in Buddhism. Because one of the core Buddhist dedications, kind of a deep emotional relationship to the *dharma*, to the practice, is expressed through walking for refuge, walking to refuge. *Saraṇaṃ gacchāmi*. And the word *gacchāmi* means to walk. Ordinary ancient word for walking.

And so we walk for refuge to the Buddha, or we walk to refuge with the Buddha. We walk to refuge with the *Dharma*, with the *Saṅgha*. And what I love about this is again that walking, you bring your whole self when you walk. You know, you don't leave your hand home. You know, you don't leave one of your feet home or something, you know. All of you comes along.

To bring all of yourself with you to the next breath. Find refuge in breathing. Find refuge in how you're aware of breath. Some of you were not here last night when I did the reflection. As you know, breathing. No, see if you can know it calmly. Can you know it lovingly? Can you know it peacefully?

It isn't just a matter of knowing the breath. It's how you know it that's important. Can you know it pleasantly? Can you know it calmly? If you're experiencing and feeling the breath, can you feel it calmly, feel it peacefully, so you'll never regret that moment of mindfulness? Because that moment of mindfulness, the mindfulness was enjoyable.

So bring all of yourself along in this idea of refuge. Oh, here's where the refuge is, right here, how I meet the next moment, how I'm awake with this moment, one breath at a time. Maybe taking the risk of being radically simple. Maybe there are so many things, so many ways you make it more complicated than it needs to be for the purposes of this practice. You can just let those be on the side, be on your shoulder if they come along. But stay on the path. Keep walking. Keep the next step here, here now, the next breath.

So maybe we sit quietly for a minute or two so maybe you get re-established with your breathing. And thank you, and feel free to carry on as this works for you.