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Four Foundations of Mindfulness in Theravada Buddhism

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Abstract

The four pillars of mindfulness give us a systematic way to think about the different levels of awareness. Mindfulness has been described as a process, an event and as a mental factor that arises and passes away momentarily. As a result, we are able to view things more clearly and immediately for what they truly are: transient, unsatisfactory, and not self-existent.

Keywords: Mindfulness, Four Foundations, Buddhism, Theravada

Introduction

The four foundations of mindfulness are:

Consideration of the body,

Consideration of the feelings,

Consideration of the mind, and

Consideration of the mental events, mental states, and their emergence and waning, as well as the causes of such emergence and waning.

It might seem to people who would need to delve at different times into the realities of their bodies, feelings, mind, and mental phenomena, and that different techniques would be necessary for these inquiries. But such is not the case. Breath Meditation by itself reveals to them the truth of body, feelings, mind, and mental phenomena—and with no need for special methods or volition on their part. By holding to the breath and the nose tip alone, all will be manifested to them in time without their needing to look or concentrate elsewhere. This is the teaching of Buddha.

The Seven Factors of Enlightenment

Furthermore the Buddha told that *anapanasati* produces the seven factors of enlightenment:

1. Mindfulness, (*sati*)
 2. Investigation into phenomena [the quality or nature of things], (*dhamma vicaya*)
 3. Energy, (*viriya*)
 4. Bliss or rapture, (*piti*)
 5. Relaxation or tranquility [of both body and mind], (*passadhi*)
 6. Concentration (*Samadhi*), and
 7. Equanimity, (*upekkha*).
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And the capstone of Breath Meditation is freedom (liberation; nirvana) itself. It is no wonder, then, that Arahant *Upatissa*, the author of the *Vimuttimaggā* (The Path of Freedom), said about Breath Meditation: This has been praised by the Blessed One. This is the abode of the Noble Ones, of Brahma and of the *Tathagata*. The Noble Ones (*Aryas*), Brahma (the Creator of the lower worlds) and the Perfectly Liberated (*Tathagatas*) abide in the State of being inherent in *Anapanasati*. Breath Meditation is the treasury wherein the Treasure of Liberation is to be found.

In the *Dhātuvibhāṅga Sūtra*, Buddha's doorway into meditation is described in this way: The Blessed One took a seat, folding his legs in half crosswise, erecting his body, and establishing mindfulness in front of him, or more specifically, establishing his awareness *parimukha*-in front of his face at the tip of his nose. So focusing attention on the tip of the nose is a requisite for meditation in general. Buddha's account of meditation in the Maha-Assapura Sūtra is further evidence of this: "He sits down, folding his legs crosswise, setting his body erect, and establishing mindfulness in front of him (*parimukha*)."¹In the practice of *anapanasati* the ideal place for observing the breath is the tip of the nose. The Buddha attained Awakening while focusing on his breath during meditation. At the very tip of his nose, he discovered what he was seeking for. Nirvana does not lie far away. It is right at the tip of one's nose through the practice of *anapanasati*.

The *Anapanasati Sūtra*, as translated in the aforementioned passage, states that when a yogi sits down, he folds his legs crosswise, postures his body upright, and establishes mindfulness in front of him (*parimukha*). He then breathes in and out while remaining conscious of both. This implies that mindfulness of in-and-out breathing at the nosetip becomes the focus of one's attention in the foreground of his mind. Soma Thera, in *The Way of Mindfulness*:

The Satipatthana Sūtra and Its Commentary, renders this verse: A bhikkhu who has travelled to a forest, the base of a tree, or an empty space sits down, crosses his legs across his lap while maintaining an upright posture, and awakens mindfulness in the subject of meditation, namely the breath in front of him. He takes a conscious breath in and one mindful breath out. In the commentary he explains the expression arouses mindfulness in front as meaning that the meditator fixes the attention by directing it towards the breath which is in front. Nyanasatta Thera, in *The Foundations of Mindfulness* says that the expression in the Satipatthana Sūtra means setting up mindfulness in front. *Parimukham* may be literally translated as —in front of the face, but it may also be rendered above [*pari*] the mouth [*mukha*] in other words, the nosetip. So there is a firm basis to understand the Buddha's words as instructing people to fix their attention on the nosetip for the practice of Breath Meditation. The *Visuddhimaggā* says: The bhikkhu who is possessed of this mindfulness and understanding should not look for these in-breaths and out-breaths elsewhere than at the original place of contact [the nosetip]. Thus, indeed, the bhikkhu should not seek the in-breaths and out-breaths elsewhere than at the original point of contact, and he should set the mind on the original place of contact and keep that before his mind.

Experiencing the Whole Body

When the Buddha says experiencing the whole body, he is not referring to the physical body, but to the breath itself in its entirety, the idea being that each moment of the breath is

keenly and clearly perceived by the meditator without any haziness or fuzziness in his awareness. This is important never is consciousness of the breath lost or superficial. For the breath is the sole subject of meditation. Buddha also says in the Ananda Sūtra: I'll tell you that the in-and-out breath is regarded as a body among bodies, which explains why the monk on that particular occasion chose to remain devoted to, vigilant, attentive, or mindful of, the body in and of itself.

The sūtra says such things as: Breathing in a long breath, he knows, I am breathing in a long breath; 'Breathing in a short breath, he knows, I am breathing in a short breath, 'I to convey the idea that a person is to be aware of the *entire* breath not just the fact that he is inhaling or exhaling, or just a tenuous awareness at the tip of the nose. He must experience the entire breath, even though he does not follow it in and out of the body. That is also why Buddha refers to the breath as a body. It is a complete thing, of which a person needs to be completely aware. The *Visuddhimaggā* says: Breathing, because of being included in the tangible-object base, is a certain body.

According to the *Visuddhimaggā*, *anapanasati* also enables people to contemplate the feelings in the feelings to impale directly into the very core-source and nature of all feelings or states of mind (*bhavas*), to comprehend their basis, their primitive nature. It also says that through Breath Meditation a bhikkhu abides contemplating mental objects in mental objects as well.

Having said that, it is needed to point out that during Breath Meditation a person can sometimes become aware of the entire body, from top of head to soles of feet the total physical entity as if the whole body is being held or suspended within the breath. He is then experiencing the body consisting of life force (*prana*), of which the breath is its most objective manifestation. That is why Buddha said: I tell you that this the in-and-out breath is classified as a body among bodies.

Awareness of the Breath

According to Buddha, "he knows, I am breathing." Knowing implies that it involves conscious experience and purposeful knowledge of the breath. But perhaps even more important is the Buddha's assertion that the practitioner will know I am breathing. This has more than one significant truth for its practitioners.

The first one is supremely practical: Breathing is not utterly automatic, nor is it a purely physical function. Buddha's declaration assures his followers that through *anapanasati* the subconscious becomes conscious, that they become aware of The Breather.

Secondly, the Buddha's statement that one can know: *I am breathing* informs him that although he is watching the breath and letting it be spontaneous, at the same time he is engaging in a subtle act of will (or: feeling, imagining, intending, sensing or thinking) for the breath to move at/in the nosetip during his inhalations and exhalations. It is not a matter of forcing or of intense will, but it is a subtle setting of the sails to ensure that the breath and awareness of the breath will continually be centered in the tip of the nose. It is something that he is doing, though in the subtlest possible way.

This emphasizes that the practice of *anapanasati* is not passive but subtly active as a person consciously center his attention on the tip of the nose and make himself feels or perceives the breath moving there—actually making the breath

move there by an act of will, however slight. Furthermore, breathing in deliberately on occasion in no way interrupts or disturbs the process. There will be times during meditation when one's experience of the breath will be very objective—as though he is watching something completely separate from him—and at other times he will be very aware that he is doing the breathing intentionally. It is natural for this to move back and forth and also occur simultaneously.

Thirdly, Buddha says that by means of Breath Meditation a person will come to know the true nature of his I; that by observing the breath he comes to be aware of the observer, the whol of his that is separate from and untouched by the duality that is embodied in the breath process, that full awareness of the dual breath leads him to the non-dual consciousness which both produces and perceives the breath. He breathes, and he knows he breathes, and he comes to know who he is. This is the purpose of Breath Meditation.

(This statement may seem inconsistent with contemporary Buddhist thought, but the historical fact is that until the wiping out of Buddhism from India in the thirteenth century, one of the largest schools of Buddhist thought was the *Puggalavadin* the Personalist—school that claimed Buddha had taught the existence of a personl who was different from the five *skandhas*, and who reincarnated with a continuous consciousness. In the *Gangetic* plain the *Puggalavadins* were in the majority and were also to be found throughout.)

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