

JULY 1, 2021

Mindfulness of Breathing, Part 1

The best-known Buddhist text in the West is the Dhammapada. And the best-known verses in the Dhammapada are the first two, beginning with the lines, *Mano-pubbaṅgamā dhammā*: “Phenomena have the heart or the mind as their forerunner.”

These verses establish an important principle of the Dhamma: that the mind is not a passive entity, a side-effect of physical processes. It’s not just on the receiving end of outside stimuli, reacting to what’s coming in through the senses. It plays a role in actively shaping experience, in line with its desires and intentions: choosing which stimuli to look for, how to interpret them, which ones to respond to, and how to respond.

The fact that this principle is placed first in the Dhammapada indicates its importance. Yet even though we know these verses, we tend to forget them when we come to meditation practice, thinking that in meditation the mind has to play a passive role, simply accepting whatever is coming up in the senses in the present moment and not trying to influence it, thinking that this is insight.

Yet the principle that the mind comes first permeates all the Buddha’s wisdom teachings. In the four noble truths, the cause of suffering is not outside stimuli, it’s the mind’s own craving and ignorance. The end of suffering doesn’t happen on its own, it comes from fabricating a path of practice.

Similarly in dependent co-arising: Many of the factors leading to suffering come prior to sensory input. Two in particular stand out: *fabrication* (intention) and *attention* (under the factor of name and form). For a meditation method to give rise to discernment and insight, it has to direct attention to precisely these factors. Otherwise they stay in the dark, underground.

Now, when we look at Buddha’s instructions on breath meditation—the method he taught most frequently—we find that the steps he lays out do precisely that: They focus attention on the processes of fabrication (intention) and attention.

There are sixteen steps in all, divided into four sets of four, called tetrads. Each tetrad deals with one of the frames of reference for the establishing of mindfulness: body, feelings, mind, and mental qualities. These frames of reference, in turn, are the themes for getting the mind into concentration.

The Buddha put four steps into each tetrad apparently for ease of memorization, because when we see how he elaborates on these steps in other parts of the Canon, some of the tetrads contain a number of implied steps. So to understand them, it's good to know what those implied steps are.

This evening we won't have time to cover all four tetrads, so I'll focus the discussion on the first two, dealing with body and feelings. We can save the other two for later meetings.

The main thing I want you to notice tonight is that even though these tetrads focus on body and feelings, they do so in a way that underlines the role that the mind plays in shaping them.

Part of this focus lies in the way the Buddha uses the word *fabrication* in the two tetrads. In each case, he first tries to sensitize you to the fact that you fabricate this aspect of your awareness through your intentions. Then he has you use that sensitivity first to energize yourself, and then to calm yourself. In this way, he's having you develop tranquility and insight together. As he says elsewhere, insight is developed by understanding fabrications. Tranquility comes from calming the mind down and allowing it to enjoy the resulting sense of stillness. So when you use the processes of fabrication to calm the mind down, you're gaining both insight and tranquility together.

The emphasis on fabrication means that you're not just learning about the breath here. You're also learning about the mind. Some people object to doing breath meditation, on the grounds that when you die, you won't have a breath to focus on, so your meditation object will abandon you right when you need it. But given that we're using the breath to become more sensitive to the mind's activity of fabrication, the breath is actually leading us *to* the mind in a way that helps us master the processes of fabrication, knowledge that will be especially useful both in daily life and as we encounter death.

One more point before looking at the two tetrads: It's not the case that the four tetrads are to be followed in numerical order. Actually, each tetrad deals with an aspect of experience that's constantly present throughout the meditation. When you're with the breath, feelings are right there, your mind state is right there, mental qualities are right there. This means that the four tetrads have to be practiced together. As you focus on the breath to get the mind to calm down, sometimes the issue is breath, sometimes feelings, sometimes the state of mind and the mental qualities you're bringing to the breath. So your focus will have to shift among these tetrads to deal with the problem at hand. In all cases, though, you stay anchored in the breath to ensure that you're staying with what's actually going on in the present moment.

The four steps in the first tetrad are: discerning when the breath is long; discerning when the breath is short; training yourself to breathe in and out sensitive to the whole body; and then training yourself to breathe in and out calming what the Buddha calls bodily fabrication, which is a technical term for the in-and-out breath. All these steps fall under the body in and of itself as a frame of reference.

In the second tetrad, you train yourself to breathe in and out sensitive to rapture, to breathe in and out sensitive to pleasure, to breathe in and out sensitive to mental fabrications—feelings and perceptions—and then to breathe in and out calming mental fabrications. These steps fall under feelings in and of themselves as a frame of reference.

Let's look at the steps in these two tetrads in detail.

In the first tetrad, the first two steps consist of simply discerning distinctions between breaths: How do you experience the difference between long breathing and short breathing? Ajaan Lee would add a few more variables here. He would note that there are a lot of other ways you can adjust the breath, too: in long, out short; in short, out long. You can do heavy breathing, light breathing; fast, slow; shallow, deep.

The purpose of discerning distinctions in the breathing is to see what really feels good right now, because ultimately—as we'll see in the section on feeling—you're going to try to be getting to a state where you're sensitive to rapture, sensitive to pleasure. These states of rapture and pleasure don't just happen on their own. These feelings are called "pleasure not-of-the-flesh," the pleasure associated with strong concentration, and that pleasure doesn't happen without your intending it to happen.

How is that going to happen? Through the way you intend to breathe. So you want to get sensitive to variations in the breath. What kind of breathing feels good right now and what way of breathing would induce, say, a state of rapture?

That requires the next step, which is to train yourself to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out. Ajaan Lee notes that as you become sensitive to the whole body, you will sense subtle energies flowing through the body in sync with the breath. This perception is useful, because in other suttas where the Buddha's talking about concentration, he says that you then want to take whatever sense of feeling or pleasure or rapture you've developed and you let it permeate the entire body, suffuse the entire body. Having a sense of the breath flowing throughout the body makes it easier for those feelings to flow without interruption as well.

Now, there's an implied step that follows here, which is that when you

become aware of the whole body, you try to energize the body as you breathe in and breathe out. That's because the next step is to calm bodily fabrication. As the Buddha says elsewhere, in his explanation of the factors for awakening, if you try to calm things down before they're energized, you go to sleep, which is not what you want. So you've got to energize things first.

This is why Ajaan Lee, when he gives breath meditation instructions, says to start out with long breathing, deep breathing, and then let the breath adjust to what seems to be just right. Otherwise, you're going to put yourself to sleep. The important point here is that you don't just stay with whatever way the body is breathing on its own. You're going to take advantage of the fact that you can adjust the breath to create feelings of rapture and pleasure.

In the fourth step of this tetrad, you train yourself to calm bodily fabrication. This doesn't mean that you try to suppress the breath. It's simply that as the mind grows calmer, the breath naturally grows more gentle on its own. This is where you can see how the state of the mind has an influence on the breath. You can actually reach the point where the in-and-out breathing stops—again, not because you're holding it or suppressing it, but simply that you feel no need to breathe: The breath energy in the body is sufficient. In fact, there's one sutta where the Buddha says that's precisely where bodily fabrication has been calmed: when you're in the fourth jhana, where the sense of the in-and-out breathing has stopped. The oxygen-use in the body is very low at that point.

I've heard different explanations as to whether there's oxygen exchange going on through the skin. Some people say yes; other people say no. What's important for you as a meditator, though, is that the sense that the energy in the body is sufficient. You don't feel the need to breathe, because you feel breath energy already saturating the body. All the breath channels are so well connected that if there's a lack of breath energy in one part, the excess energy in another part will flow right there, so everything is kept in balance.

The question sometimes is asked, why does the Buddha use a technical term, *bodily fabrication*, when he's simply talking about the in-and-out breath? The answer, as I've already indicated, is that he's pointing to the role that your intentions play in shaping the way you breathe. The breath is a rare bodily function that can be both automatic and intentionally shaped. The Buddha is emphasizing this so as to turn your attention inside, toward the mind, and the mental processes that will play a role in calming the breath: choosing what to pay attention to, which intentions to follow, which intentions to drop.

That's the first tetrad.

The steps in the second tetrad are these: You train yourself to breathe in and

out sensitive to rapture, to breathe in and out sensitive to pleasure, to breathe in and out sensitive to mental fabrication—which are your feelings and perceptions—and then to breathe in and out calming mental fabrication.

With regard to the first step, of inducing rapture, note that the word for rapture here, *piti*, can also mean refreshment. In some instances and for some people, these sensations will be strong and clearly rapturous. For others, they will be gentler and simply refreshing. This is not a measure of the power of your concentration. It's simply an indicator of how much energy your body has been lacking, and how it responds when the energy becomes more full.

The Buddha says elsewhere that the kind of rapture you're trying to induce here is both physical and mental. You induce physical rapture by the way you breathe; you induce mental rapture by the perceptions you cultivate.

For instance, if you breathe out in a way where you're squeezing the energy out of the body, that's not going to help with the physical sense of rapture. You have to breathe out in a way that doesn't squeeze things. You can tell yourself, "I'll put energy into breathing in. Let the body breathe out on its own. I don't have to squeeze the breath out." You also have to be careful not to squeeze anything at the end of the in-breath or the end of the out-breath. This, too, is a common mistake when people are doing breath meditation: They want to have a clear dividing line so that they can know, "This is the in-breath; this is the out-breath." So they make a little squeeze between the two in the energy field of the body.

You want to learn how to resist that temptation. You don't need that clear a dividing line. Think of the in-breath flowing into the out-breath, and the out-breath flowing into the in-breath. Don't squeeze to make a distinction between the two. You'll find that if you don't squeeze the energy out as you breathe out, and you don't make a little squeeze as you're switching from one breath to the next, a sense of fullness begins to develop in the body. That, Ajaan Lee would identify with rapture. It's a sense of refreshment, a sense of energy flowing around.

Then you can do the same thing with pleasure. Wherever there are feelings of pleasure in the body, breathe in a way that protects that pleasure. Don't squeeze it; don't destroy it.

Once you've got these feelings established, then allow them to spread through the body, following your sense of the breath permeating the whole body.

As you do this, you're using your intentions to shape the breath and the feeling, and then the feelings will have an effect on the mind. The perceptions of

breath energy flowing, the pleasure flowing, will also have an impact on the mind, making it more focused, happier to be here in the present moment. You're seeing feelings and perceptions as mental fabrications in action. That's the third step in this tetrad.

Then, for the fourth, you want to see which perceptions, which feelings will calm the mind down. There might come a point after a while when you decide that the rapture is just too much. This is where you have to learn how to change your perceptions. Ajaan Lee and Ajaan Fuang would talk about having the energy flow out the arms, out the palms of your hands, flow down your legs, out the soles of the feet. I've also found it useful to think about the energy flowing out through the spaces between the fingers—or else flowing out through your eyes if there's an excess energy in your head. There are ways of simply holding these perceptions in mind—without pushing anything physically—that will allow the excess energy to release.

Or you can think of the body being like a big colander: You've got little holes in the pores of the body. Or your body is like a sponge: The energy can flow out in any direction; there's nothing to hold it in. Usually, the problem with excessive rapture is that you start identifying the breath with the flow of the blood in the body, and the flow of the blood begins to push against the walls of the blood vessels. That leads to a perception of pressure. You want to hold in mind the perception of permeability, through which that energy can flow out.

Another way of calming mental fabrications has to do with perceptions of the breathing process as a whole. When you begin, there's a sense that the breath is coming into the body from outside. After a while, though, you develop a sensitivity to how the breath energy actually originates inside the body: the only thing coming from outside is the air. This is in line with the Buddha's way of analyzing the breath: He doesn't say that it's a tactile sensation felt at the skin. Instead, it's part of the wind property in the body itself: the flow of energy in the body as felt from within.

So look into the body to see where the breath seems to originate. Ajaan Lee talks about "resting spots" of the breath—the tip of the nose, the middle of the head, the base of the throat, the tip of the breastbone, above the navel—but there are other possible spots as well. Focus attention on wherever the breath seems to originate, and think of breath energy radiating from that spot. If there are any feelings of tension that seem to get in the way of that radiating energy, think of them dissolving away.

An even subtler perception is one where you think of every cell in the body breathing, and all the cells are breathing together: No one spot takes precedence;

your attention is evenly distributed throughout the whole body. It's like a photograph taken in the pre-dawn hours when the light is diffuse and every detail has equal importance. This perception can have an extremely calming effect both on the breath and on the mind. At the same time, it helps you not feel threatened or fearful if the breath stops, because you have a feeling of full breath energy in every part of the body. You're not starving yourself of breath energy at all. In fact, the opposite: The breath energy feels satisfying and still.

These are some of the issues that come up when you're dealing with rapture and pleasure, and then trying to calm the effect that these feelings, along with the perceptions that go with them, have on the mind. You calm the mind down, one, by the way you breathe, two, by the perceptions you're holding in mind, and you ultimately get to a feeling of equanimity, the calmest type of feeling, which will have a very calming effect on the mind. You can get the mind into very deep states of concentration this way, by using perceptions that are more and more calming.

The overall process is similar to the first tetrad. As I said there, when you calm bodily fabrication to the point where the in-and-out breath seems to stop, it can take you all the way to the fourth jhāna. In this tetrad, when you calm mental fabrication, you can develop states of concentration that take you all the way through the formless jhānas, where there are very refined feelings of equanimity, and perceptions so subtle that it's hard to say whether they're perceptions or not. In the very highest level of concentration, the texts say that perceptions and feelings can actually cease. The two tetrads help each other along in this way.

So that's the second tetrad.

Here, too, you'll notice the emphasis on the role of the mind, in the components of mental fabrication. In the case of perceptions, this is obvious: Perceptions are products of the mind. But this is also true in the case of feelings: The Buddha says elsewhere that the pleasant feelings engendered in concentration come from careful attention, which is an act of the mind. And, of course, we're fostering feelings not-of-the-flesh, which can occur only when you intend to give rise to them.

It's in this way that even though the first two tetrads focus explicitly on body and feelings, their real purpose is to call attention to the role of the mind in shaping your sense of the body and your feelings: through the way you talk to yourself about the breath, intentionally change the breath, and create feelings of pleasure by the careful way you pay attention to the breath. As you gain more sensitivity in this area, you come to see that the Buddha's basic principle is right: All phenomena really do have the heart and mind as their forerunner. This is the

beginning of real insight into how the mind contains the causes of suffering, but also the potentials for bringing suffering to an end.

SEPTEMBER 3, 2021

Mindfulness of Breathing, Part 2

During the last session, we talked about the Buddha's instructions on mindfulness of breathing, which come in sixteen steps, divided into four tetrads of four steps each. We noted that the tetrads correspond to the four frames of reference in the establishing of mindfulness: body, feelings, mind, and mental qualities. These frames of reference, in turn, are the themes for getting the mind into concentration.

We also noted that you don't necessarily practice the tetrads in a row—1, 2, 3, 4. All four frames of reference are present as soon as you focus on the breath, so they're all here together right now as you're meditating. You develop the breath as a full-body process at the same time that you develop feelings of refreshment and pleasure, get the mind to settle down, and release its various burdens related to the world. Because all these activities are going on at once, you have to shift your attention from one tetrad to another, depending on which area of your concentration needs the most work: working with the breath energies, working with feelings, working with the state of your mind, and working with your understanding of specific mental qualities that go into developing the mind.

The other important point we noted is that even though "mind" is emphasized only in the third tetrad, it plays a major, active role in all four. It fabricates your sense of the body as it adjusts the breath; it creates feelings of pleasure and equanimity, along with calming perceptions to calm itself down. And as we'll see this evening, it plays an active role in the third tetrad as well. In other words, you don't simply watch mind states arise and pass away, willy-nilly. You intentionally give rise to skillful states and intentionally abandon unskillful ones.

This brings us to the paradoxical nature of meditation: When you meditate, the mind is training the mind. It's both teacher and student—or, if you see meditation as a sport, both the trainer and the athlete being trained. As teacher, it learns instructions from outside, but it has to do the actual training. As student, it has to follow the instructions. This means that, as you meditate, the mind has to learn how to read itself: to see what state it's in as you begin to meditate, and then to try to get itself to act in a way that brings it into a better state, to reflect on how well it's succeeding, and then to continue to make adjustments until it settles into a state that's just right.

Two points are relevant here: When we think of the mind training the mind, it's useful to think of the mind as a committee, with different members playing different roles. These are the different senses of self you have inside that are in constant dialogue. In meditation, we're training three of these senses of self in particular: the self who wants to enjoy the results of the practice and provides motivation, the self who is developing the skills needed to bring those results about, and the self who watches over the whole process, to see how well the other selves are doing and to suggest improvements. That's the first point.

The second point is that for the mind to bring itself into balance, it will need a variety of meditation techniques for dealing with specific problems. The Buddha didn't teach a one-size-fits-all vipassanā or concentration technique. He emphasized breath meditation as his central technique, teaching it in more detail and more often than any other technique, but he would also teach it in conjunction with other techniques. As he said, if you try to stay with the breath but there's a "fever" in the body or the mind, switch to another theme that you find inspiring, one that allows the body and mind to calm down, and then return to the breath.

Or in Ajaan Lee's terms, the breath is a home for the mind; the other themes are places where it goes foraging for whatever food it needs that the breath doesn't provide.

So as you're practicing, reflect every now and then on the state of your mind. If it's not falling into the three ideal steps that this tetrad sets out for the mind—gladdened, concentrated, and released—then you might want to make some adjustments in your practice. Remember: You're meditating on the breath, not for the sake of the breath, but for the sake of the mind. Always keep the well-being of your mind as your top priority.

The steps in the third tetrad are these: The first step is to breathe in and out sensitive to the state of the mind, the second step is to breathe in and out gladdening the mind, the third step is to breathe in and out concentrating the mind, and the fourth step is to breathe in and out releasing the mind.

The first step is simply a matter of noticing what state of mind you're bringing to the meditation as you sit down, and watching it as you try to get it to stay with the breath, to see whether it's happy to stay with the breath, or if something is getting in the way.

This sounds simple, but it's actually a central skill in the practice: the ability to step back from your own moods and to recognize whether they're skillful or not. If they're not, you have to be willing to change them.

The Buddha said that his own practice got on the right path when he was able

to step back from his thoughts and divide them into two sorts: skillful and unskillful. Instead of judging them as to whether he liked them or not, he decided to see where they came from, and where they would lead. If they came from unskillful attitudes—the desire to fantasize about sensual pleasures, ill will, or harmfulness—he knew that they would lead to unskillful actions, and that would lead to long-term harm. So he had to be willing to bring those thoughts under control. If his thoughts were based on skillful attitudes—like renunciation, goodwill, and compassion—he let himself think them until he was ready for the mind to settle down to rest in concentration.

As you've probably noticed, you won't succeed in stopping unskillful thoughts simply by telling them to stop. You first have to convince yourself that you don't secretly side with them. Instead, you'd be happy to have them stop. This is where the next step comes in, gladdening the mind: You actively try to make yourself take delight in abandoning unskillful thoughts and developing skillful thoughts in their place.

If, when you try to stay with the breath, you notice that the mind is happy to stay there, then you can keep your focus on the steps of the first and second tetrads.

If it's not happy with those steps, then you have to talk to the mind to get it in the right mood—what the Buddha calls verbal fabrication, or directed thought and evaluation: You try to talk yourself into being happy that you're here mediating and that you've got this opportunity to watch your own body and mind, to gain freedom from your attachment to thoughts that you know are not good for you.

Sometimes you can get the mind in the right mood simply by changing the way you breathe, to give both body and mind more energy. This is where you can tell yourself to emphasize the steps of breathing in a way that gives rise to refreshment and pleasure, and to stay with those steps as long as it takes for the right attitude toward the practice to permeate the mind.

But sometimes you might have to abandon the breath for the time being and focus on some other topic that will energize the mind.

For instance, recollection of the Buddha, recollection of the Dhamma, or recollection of the Sangha can be energizing. With recollection of the Buddha and the Dhamma, you can reflect on what a good thing it is that there has been someone in the world who gained release from suffering through his own efforts, and then taught the way to others, entirely for free. We're fortunate that those teachings are still available, and that we now have the opportunity to follow those teachings. With recollection of the Sangha, you can think of all the

members of the noble Sangha who have told of the hardships they faced in the practice, often many times harder than anything you're facing, and yet they were able to overcome them. If they could do it, why can't you?

Try to think of the practice of the Dhamma as a challenge, and members of the noble Sangha as people who found joy in taking on that challenge as an adventure. This way of gladdening the mind is especially helpful when you find yourself facing physical pain or mental difficulties. Instead of thinking of yourself as a victim, try to approach the difficulties as an adventure in finally overcoming things that have held power for far too long in your mind. When you can convince yourself that you're glad to have this opportunity, and that you can find the inner strength to take on the challenge, that's half the battle right there.

Other themes that can gladden the mind are the four brahma-vihāras: unlimited goodwill, unlimited compassion, unlimited empathetic joy, and unlimited equanimity. Choose whichever of these four themes you find most useful right now, and first think about what it means. With goodwill, you're wishing for all beings—yourself included—to be truly happy. To be happy, we have to act in ways that are harmless. The Buddha didn't say to think simply, "happy, happy, happy." He taught that genuine goodwill starts with the wish, "May beings not mistreat one another." So when you're wishing for your own happiness, the ideal way to express that wish is this: "May I understand the causes for true happiness and be willing and able to act on them." Then you extend the same thought to others.

In this way, your goodwill isn't hypocritical. In other words, you aren't asked to pretend to like people who are behaving horribly, or to wish that they be happy regardless of what they're doing. Instead, you're expressing the wish that they see the error of their ways and are willing and able to become more skillful.

Is there anyone for whom you can't honestly wish for that to be true? There may be a few who you would like to see suffer first before they change their ways, but you have to remind yourself that people who suffer rarely see the connection between their suffering and their own misbehavior. Often their suffering inspires them to behave even worse. So the wisest course, for the well-being of the whole world, is to focus on the desire that all beings will learn to behave skillfully.

When you think these thoughts for a while, you can take joy that you're freeing yourself from any ill will. This sense of joy lifts up the mind and puts it in a position where it can more easily come back to the breath.

These are some of the ways in which you can bring in various perceptions to gladden the mind and lift its energy level.

Then the next step is to breathe in and out concentrating the mind. In this case, you're trying to get the mind steadier and more focused. Sometimes, when there's too much energy, you have to clamp down on it a little bit if the mind is getting too scattered.

Here again, you first try to use the breath to get the mind more concentrated. If focusing on the whole body is too distracting, focus on one spot and make the breath there as satisfying as possible, so that it feels really good to direct all your focus on that spot. If any pressure builds up, think of it spreading out from that spot in all directions. Don't follow it out. Just stay focused in your center. I've found that a spot in the middle of the head is good for this kind of practice. Then, when the mind feels more firmly established, you can think of letting the range of your awareness expand until it fills the whole body. Then your concentration will be firmly established in a larger frame of reference.

Sometimes, though, to get the mind more concentrated, you have to talk to it so that it loses its interest in thinking about other things. This is where you can bring in an alternative topic of meditation that's more sobering, such as recollection of death. You don't know when death is going to happen, but you do know when it does happen, you're going to have to be well prepared, because your mind could easily latch on to some vagrant craving. If you're not in control at that point, it's like handing your car keys over to any crazy person who comes running past you on the street. You have no idea where the crazy person is going to drive you. So you want to have some control over your mind. This kind of reflection can get you more solidly focused and can calm the mind down.

Finally, the last step in this tetrad is to breathe in and out releasing the mind. Now, this can mean release on many levels. To begin with, you're releasing the mind from its fascination with sensuality, its fascination with sensual thoughts and plans, and from the hindrances in general, which, in addition to sensual desire, include ill will, sloth & drowsiness, restlessness & anxiety, and doubt. When you can drop that fascination, you can get into the first jhana.

When you've been there for a while, you can bring back the step of being sensitive to the mind. Is there any disturbance in your concentration? Here we're not talking about disturbances coming from outside. We're talking about disturbances in the concentration itself.

In some cases, the disturbances are the beginnings of thoughts that would distract you. In a case like that, once you're established with a full-body awareness of the breath, you can keep watch to see if any thoughts are beginning to form. Usually, they'll start as a little stirring in the breath energy, in an area where it's hard to decide whether it's a physical sensation or a mental sensation.

It's a little bit of both. If you decide that it's a mental sensation, you tend to put a label on it—that it's a thought about such and such—and then you get into it and ride with it.

So you've got to stop the process as quickly as you can. It's like being a spider on a web. The spider sits in one spot on the web, but because the strands of the web are all connected, it'll sense any disturbance anywhere in the web. As soon as there's a slight vibration in the web, it'll run over and deal with any insect that's gotten caught in the web, and then return to its spot.

In the same way, if you sense a little disturbance anywhere in the breath energy in the body, you leave the center of your focus, and go over to zap that little stirring to disperse it. Then you return to your spot.

That's one kind of disturbance.

Another kind of disturbance is in the actual state of concentration itself. For instance, when you're already in the first jhana, you're engaged in directed thought and evaluation. After a while, though, you reach a point where you realize you don't need to do that anymore. The breath is really good, feels fine—you don't have to keep thinking about adjusting the breath and spreading the breath, you can just be with the breath—then you can drop the directed thought and evaluation, and yet still stay with the breath. In fact, you can settle into the breath even more firmly, with a strong sense of oneness.

A similar process continues through the various levels of jhana: You release the mind from the rapture, you release it from the pleasure, release it from the need to breathe—not that you force the breath to stop, simply that the breath energy in the body is so full and well-connected that you don't feel any need to breathe.

You can even release the mind from the need to focus on the body. You can have a sense of space or sense of awareness as your topics.

Those are some of the ways you can release it, ultimately on the way to total release.

It's in this way that you can use the mind to train the mind—to read its moods, to make it glad to be abandoning unskillful thoughts and developing skillful ones, to get it more concentrated, and to release it, step by step, from its various burdens.

So even though, in breath meditation, we're focusing primarily on the breath, we can't help but learn about the mind—and learn how to train the mind—at the same time. In fact, that's what the practice is all about. We're not here to get the

breath, we're here to use the breath to get to the mind. When you can learn the skills of making the mind happy to be here, you're well on your way to getting the most out of the practice.

OCTOBER 8, 2021

Mindfulness of Breathing, Part 3

For the past two sessions, we've been talking about the Buddha's instructions on mindfulness of breathing, which come in sixteen steps, divided into four tetrads of four steps each. We noted that the tetrads correspond to the four frames of reference in the practice of establishing mindfulness: body, feelings, mind, and mental qualities, all in and of themselves. These frames of reference, in turn, are the themes for getting the mind into concentration.

We also noted that you don't necessarily practice the tetrads in a row—1 then 2 then 3 then 4. All four frames of reference are present as soon as you focus on the breath, so they're all here together right now as you're meditating. You develop the breath as a full-body experience at the same time that you develop feelings of refreshment and pleasure, and get the mind to settle down—its awareness filling the body—all the while releasing the mind from its various burdens and concerns about the world. Because all of these activities are occurring at once, you have to shift your attention from one tetrad to another, depending on which aspect of your concentration needs the most work at any one time.

We also noted that although each tetrad has four steps, there are cases where some extra steps are implied. This point was true with the first tetrad, and it's especially true with regard to the fourth and last tetrad, which we'll discuss this evening. It's another case where the Buddha gives you four steps, but there are some missing steps that we have to fill in from his teachings in other suttas.

This fourth tetrad is the one that corresponds to the fourth frame of reference in establishing mindfulness: mental qualities, or dhammas. Some people have asked: What's the difference between this tetrad and the third, which corresponds to the mind as a frame of reference?

There are two ways of answering that question. The first has to do with the image of the committee of the mind. If you see the mind as having lots of voices, with lots of different opinions, you might think of "mind" as a frame of reference concerned with the mind as a whole—the times when the committee has come to an agreement—whereas "mental qualities" refer to the individual members of the committee. In particular, when you're focusing on this tetrad, your purpose is to get rid of specific members that obstruct mindfulness and concentration, and to encourage members that help the mind to settle down.

This connects directly with the second way of answering the question. Remember the Buddha's basic formula for establishing mindfulness: "keeping focused on the body in and of itself, ardent, alert, and mindful—putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world." This formula describes two activities: keeping focused on the topic of your concentration, and putting aside any thoughts related to the world that would pull you away from that focus. The first three tetrads, for the most part, are concerned with the first activity, maintaining focus: keeping the breath, the comfortable feelings associated with the breath, and your awareness of the breath all together, filling your sense of the body.

The fourth tetrad is more concerned with the second activity: putting aside thoughts related to the world. In this way, it connects directly with the last step in the third tetrad. If you remember, that step is to breathe in and out releasing the mind. This fourth tetrad goes into the details of how to go about releasing the mind, first from any concerns about the world that would destroy the focus of your concentration, and then ultimately from any thoughts around the world of your concentration itself. In this way, the fourth tetrad first guards your concentration, and then guards your mind from getting stuck on concentration or even stuck on discernment. That's how it brings total release.

The steps in the fourth tetrad are these:

First, as you breathe in and out, you focus on inconstancy, *anicca*, which would also include *dukkha* and *anattā*, stress and not-self. Then you breathe in and out focusing on dispassion, you breathe in and out focusing on cessation, and finally you breathe in and out focusing on letting go.

In following the first two steps, it's not the case that you can go straight from focusing on *anicca* to focusing on dispassion. In other words, you can't simply say to yourself, "Gee, this body of mine is impermanent. It changes, so I'm just going to abandon attachment to it." That doesn't work. It's like saying, "Food is impermanent, and every time I eat, I get hungry again, so I might as well just stop eating." If you did that, you wouldn't last very long. You'd either starve to death or start eating again. There are actually extra steps in between to answer the argument, "Okay, this may be impermanent, but why should I let it go?"

This is where we have to look elsewhere in the Canon to see what those extra steps might be. And we find passages where the Buddha describes five steps in the process. First, you look for origination. In other words, when anger, say, arises, you look to see what's causing it. Now, the word "origination" has two aspects that make it different from simple "arising." The first aspect is that you're looking to see what's *causing* the appearance of whatever it is. In other words,

you're not just watching things appear. You're looking to see what's *making* them appear. And second, when the Buddha talks about origination, almost invariably he's talking about causes coming from within your own mind. So you look to see, "What's the mind doing that's causing this to arise?"

The second step is to watch that mind state passing away. Here the question is: "What's the mind doing when it passes away? What changed in my mind?" Then watch out to see if the mind picks the anger up again.

These first two steps counteract a common impression that a particular instance of desire or anger that has come into the mind is there 24/7 when it's actually not. It comes and it goes, but then you pick it up again. The picking it up again: That's the problem.

You can see this clearly with anger. When anger flares up in the mind, it has a physical component: Your breath changes and hormones are released into the blood. The mind, however, can sustain a thought of anger for only a brief while, and then it fades. Yet the hormones are still in the blood, speeding up your heart rate and affecting your breath. You notice that, and you read it as a sign that you're still angry. So you pick the anger up again. It seems natural, but if you don't want to be a slave to your anger, you have to question that tendency. You don't really have to pick it up again. You could simply let the hormones run their course and then fade away. So why do you *want* to pick the anger up again? What's the allure?

That's the third step: After you've been looking for the origination and the passing away, you look for the allure. What's the attraction of that mind state? Often you find that even though there are aspects of anger that you don't really like, there is a part of the mind that likes anger. It may feel that anger liberates you from some social constraints, so that you can speak and act as you like without caring about the consequences. Or there are times when you somehow feel obligated to be loyal to your anger. You might feel that if you dropped the anger, you'd be admitting that you were wrong to be angry in the first place. Or you might feel that you should remain true to your feelings in general.

Whatever the allure, you have to look carefully for it and admit it to yourself when you see it in action. Sometimes it's hard to admit to yourself that you like your defilements, but this is where honesty is important. Otherwise, if you don't understand the appeal of a particular defilement, you'll never get past it.

Then, in the fourth step, you observe the drawbacks of that defilement. "If I follow through with this, what are the drawbacks going to be? If I keep maintaining this feeling, how am I going to act? And even if I don't act on it, what is it going to do to my mind if I'm constantly going back to this particular

type of greed, aversion, delusion?" The Buddha says you're bending the mind in the direction of those defilements. Nowadays, we'd say you're putting ruts in the mind. As soon as you get near that issue again, you just go right into the rut and get carried away wherever the rut will lead you.

Another way of looking at the drawbacks of that defilement is to see that whatever satisfaction or benefit it may give you is inconstant, stressful, and not-self. It requires a lot of energy to keep the defilement going, but then the results don't give any real, lasting satisfaction.

Once you're clear about the drawbacks, then you can compare them with the allure. When you can see, "I'm putting all this energy into this, and I'm not getting the payback that I want. I'm creating stress and suffering but getting no real satisfaction to compensate for the amount of energy I'm putting into it": That's when you develop dispassion for it and let it go. In other words, it's like seeing that you're making an investment that's actually costing more than it repays. When you can say, "I've had enough of this," that's dispassion, which is the escape from that mind state.

So that's how you go from contemplating inconstancy to contemplating dispassion—the fifth step in this five-step process, and the second step in the fourth tetrad of breath meditation: You train yourself to breathe in and out focused on dispassion.

The fact that you were fabricating these things yourself is why dispassion then leads to the next step, contemplating cessation.

How does dispassion lead to cessation? To make a comparison with watching TV, you thought you were just watching a particular show, but now you realize that you've actually been creating the show yourself. You've been backstage, directing the actors, playing all the different roles, and doing all the camera work and stage work behind the scenes. On top of that, you now realize, "This is a lousy show. The lines are bad, the acting is bad, why do I continue creating this show?" If you were just watching the show, the fact that you lose interest wouldn't stop the show. It would keep running without you. But because you're creating the show and you lose interest, the show will have to stop when you see no reason to continue with it.

Or it's like fixing food. You've been eating horrible food, and for a long time you've been complaining about it. But now you realize, "I've been the one fixing the food all along, and I've been putting energy into this that I wasn't aware of. There must be something better." That's when you let go. You stop fixing the food; the food ceases.

It's at this point that you realize that what the Buddha taught about the

power of the mind is true: It really is responsible for your experience of the senses. When it stops fabricating in the present moment, all experience of the senses falls away. What remains is an experience of the deathless, something totally unfabricated. You know that it isn't originated, because you did nothing to shape it or make it happen. It's outside of time and space, so no change can touch it. Even your first glimpse of this, at the moment of stream-entry, is really amazing.

Then, the Buddha says, after the cessation, the final step in the fourth tetrad is to train yourself to breathe in and out focused on relinquishment. You let go not only of the defilements you've been analyzing, but also of all the effort you've been putting into analyzing them. In other words, you let go of your attachment both to the defilements and to the path of practice—the concentration and discernment—that put an end to those defilements.

On an everyday level, as you're trying to gain release from ordinary defilements in the early stages of the meditation, this is what happens: You've been using your tools—your mindfulness and your powers of analysis—to deal with a particular problem. Once that problem is solved, you put down your tools and get back to the topic of your concentration. When you move on to another problem, you have to pick the tools up again. But when you've cleared away all the obstacles to concentration, you can start focusing on your attachment even to concentration and discernment, seeing that that attachment, too, is a problem, because concentration and discernment are fabrications. Once you can take that attachment apart, then you put all the tools of the path down for good. You let go even of your acts of discernment. That's the ultimate letting go.

The word the Buddha uses, *paṭinissago*, means not only letting go, but also giving back. You've been holding on to these things all along as your tools, but now you're giving them back to nature with the thought, "Okay, nature, you can have them, I don't need them anymore." Because at that point, you've found something better. As the Buddha said, you've found the clear knowing that sees that there is something deathless. When you let go of everything, you're released into that deathless dimension.

That briefly covers the fourth tetrad in the Buddha's breath meditation instructions.

To summarize the sixteen steps in those instructions: Their purpose is to develop insight and tranquility at the same time. You develop insight by looking at things in terms of fabrication, and tranquility by calming fabrication. The Buddha mentions calming bodily fabrication and calming mental fabrication. He

doesn't mention verbal fabrication, but still, all the instructions in the breath meditation, where you say to yourself, "I will now breathe in doing this, I will now breathe in doing that": That's verbal fabrication. The Buddha talks in terms of fabrication because he wants you to understand how much the mind is actually participating in fashioning your experience, even with things as basic as the breath. That's the insight part. Then the calming of fabrications is the aspect of the practice related to tranquility. The reason he doesn't tell you to calm verbal fabrications is because there are times when you can calm them, and other times when you have to start using them again, talking to yourself as you reflect on your practice and make adjustments in it all along the way.

As you practice these steps, you're also fulfilling the instructions for the establishing of mindfulness and developing all seven factors for awakening.

It's in this way that the sixteen steps are a complete practice. As you practice them all together, as Ajaan Lee expresses it, you're practicing four in one. As he points out, when you're focused on the breath properly, you've got the tetrad related to the breath, you've got the tetrad related to feelings, the tetrad related to the mind, and the tetrad related to dhammas, all right there.

And it's not just Ajaan Lee who says this. When the Buddha himself recommends focusing on the different frames of reference for the establishing of mindfulness as they relate to mindfulness of breathing, he always says that you're focused on the breath even as you're engaged with the feelings associated with the breath and the mind states associated with the breath. As for the activity of putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world—which is the function of establishing mindfulness in terms of dhammas in and of themselves—that's what keeps you from leaving your focus on the breath.

These activities are all centered right here. When everything is focused here, you get to see clearly what the mind is doing right here. That's when you can begin to see its power. You can train it to become more skillful and, eventually, to stop creating suffering. And because the mind acting in the present was the source of the suffering to begin with, when you've taken care of the mind right here and now, there will be no more suffering coming from anywhere to weigh it down. That's the end of the problem.