



Change your breath, change your life

Breathing Meditation under Four Establishments of Mindfulness

From Breath to Nibbāna

In kāyānupassanā meditation, the first method is “ānāpānasati” or mindfulness of breathing. From the moment, we were born we have been inhaling and exhaling. But most of us are not aware that we can use breathing to establish mindfulness and purify our minds. But the Buddha discovered this over 2500 years ago. Since then, millions of people have benefited from this method. So, this is a tried and tested way that yields result. His teachings of the Four Noble Truths are as follows:

1. There is suffering in this life
2. There is a cause for this suffering
3. This suffering can be overcome and that state is called “Nibbāna”
4. There is a process to overcoming this suffering, which is the Noble Eightfold Path.

We need to keep this at the forefront of our minds as we learn about meditation.

When beginning meditation of mindfulness of breathing, we must first find an appropriate spot to be seated. Acquire a spot under a shady tree, or an empty space, solitary spot where you won't be disturbed is best suited for this. Any spot where you will not be disturbed would be suitable. If one plans to meditate with others in a room, everyone should plan to close their eyes and sit quietly and they will each be isolating themselves. This is suitable as it is in accordance with empty space.

Then the Buddha instructs, “Nisīdati pallankm ābhujitvā,” when practicing the mindfulness of breathing meditation, the meditator should sit. “Ujum kāyam panidhāya,” the meditator should sit with folded legs, cross-legged with a straight back. For most people this is a very difficult thing to do. There are solutions to this problem. You can make yourself a solid cushion or a little seat about three to four inches high. We should not become accustomed to leaning against the wall. We should not be discouraged if others can sit for a long period with cross legged and straight back but we cannot do it. It takes a little practice and we will be able to do it in the end. It is very important to have a balanced and stable body posture so we can sit for a long period without being distracted by our posture. This way, the first requirement to breathing meditation is fulfilled.

“Parimukham satim upatthapetvā,” now, we have to focus on our breathing and meditate. Our breathing is the subject or "nimitta" of this meditation. We don't need to attempt to focus on any other "nimittas" or subjects. Here the Buddha explains what the subject of breathing is very clearly. “So satova assasati,” he breaths in mindfully. “Sotova passasati,” he breathes out mindfully. Buddha advised us to be aware that we breathe in, and breathe out.

However, you can contemplate the great qualities of the Buddha as the initial step before starting breathing meditation. Think for a few a minutes about the Buddha's great qualities in any language you are comfortable with, recollecting the meaning of each quality: The Buddha is liberated (araham), fully enlightened (sammā sambuddho), endowed with true knowledge and virtue (vijjā carana sampanno), well gone (sugato), knower of all worlds (lokavidū), incomparable teacher of those to be tamed (anuttaro purisadamma sārathi), teacher of gods and humans (sattha deva manussānam), the Buddha (buddho), the Blessed One (bhagavā). In this way, create a pleasant mind by recollecting these great qualities of the Buddha. When you think about the Buddha, your mind clears and settles down as suspended particles in a murky pond settle on the bottom and leave the water clear. You begin to feel content and happy. This contentment and happiness becomes a great aid in the development of meditation.

So, now, you inhale with mindfulness and you exhale with mindfulness. This is all you need to do at this stage. This introductory step is not difficult. You can see for yourself how simple this sounds. However, once you try to stay aware of the breath entering and leaving your body, you should soon realize how disobedient your ordinary mindfulness is. You will realize that it is not that easy to sustain mindfulness on a single subject. This, too, is then anatta or non-self because it is not something within your control. You will realize how your thoughts leap from one attraction to another. One moment you are aware of your breath, the next moment your thoughts roll along memory lane, and the next moment building

future dreams or your thoughts attach on to external sounds. You will soon understand the nature of this mind. So, what do you do now? The answer is viriya or effort. When your mind starts to wander bring it back gently to the breath. You have to keep in mind that the Buddha taught the meditator to shed both attachments and aversions while developing mindfulness. Avoid having conflict with such mind states.

There are three skills to sustain mindfulness of breathing. These are:

1. **Ātāpi:** improving through perseverance the skill of subduing the accumulated weaknesses of your mind.
2. **Sampajañña:** using your intelligence skillfully.
3. **Satimā:** the skill of staying totally aware and mindful.

In summary, the way to build up the establishments of mindfulness is through perseverance with intelligence and profound awareness. When you grasp the importance of these three skills, you are no longer the casual meditator. You are the meditator who understands that if your mind splits from an attraction to attraction or if your mind splits from aversion to aversion, then you are not ready to meditate. So, you create an atmosphere where you can focus on meditating. You can isolate yourself, sit with folded legs and a straight spine and be mindful of your breathing. Even if your mind wanders to the past or to the future, persevere and gently draw back to your breath. The mind must be totally free of anxiety in order to be successful at this. You must not be discouraged if your thoughts keep splitting to different focus points. Persevere and gently draw it back to your breath. Mindfully you will inhale; mindfully you will exhale. This practice should enhance your life immensely.

In the mindfulness of breathing meditation, we learned how to be aware of in breath and out breath. Gradually, our mindfulness tends to remain on the breath. This means that without being distracted we are able to sustain our attention on our breath. This is the first step of the mindfulness of breathing meditation.

In the next step of Ānāpānasati meditation, you will be able to distinguish the differences in your breath. Sometimes you will feel a long inhalation, which means you are having a stretched breathing. Since you were mindful about your breath, you realize that you are taking a lengthy breath in. Other times, there will be lengthy exhales. You will recognize those lengthy exhalations since you are mindful of your breath. Suddenly, breath could be short. Since you are aware of your breath, you will realize that your inhalation is short. When you are breathing out short exhalations, you will realize them since you are mindful of your

breathing out is short. You notice this because of your sustained attention on the breath.

The Buddha taught a beautiful simile for this awareness of long and short breaths. There is a clever carpenter planning to carve a piece of wood. He takes the piece of wood in hand and sometimes uses long strokes and other times uses short strokes to smoothen the wood. When the stroke is longer, he knows it is long. When the stroke is shorter, he knows that it is short. Likewise, you are mindful and aware if your breath is long or short. Now, you can sustain your mindfulness on your breath without external distractions. However, this depends on your perseverance, intelligence, and mindfulness. That is, if you stop persevering, your mind can drop back to the state where it was before you started meditation.

“Sabbkāya patisaṁvedi,” then as the third step, you direct your attention to the complete breath. That is, you observe when an inhalation starts, continues, and ends. You observe the beginning, continuation, and the end of the exhalation phase of a breath as a certain entity of the body. So, with improving the sensitivity you observe a breath as a certain entity of the body. This entity of entire breath is referred to as kāya sankhāra or a fabrication of the body, as a breath is associated with the body. When your mind becomes settled in this way, your breath becomes lighter.

“Passambhayaṁ kāya sankhāraṁ,” as the fourth step, with improving tranquility you experience this lightening of your breath.

Again, in mindfulness of breathing meditation you first practice sustaining your awareness on your breath, then you observe differences in length of your breath, next you follow the complete breath, and then you observe the inhalation and exhalation as one entity as it becomes light, calm, and tranquil.

In the Buddha’s teachings, there are no inferior goals. We do not meditate as a memory aid or for health reasons, although they are by products of meditation. Meditating for health and memory skills is very much a worldly concept. The Buddha’s way of meditation is a revolution for freedom of thought. So, if you want to follow this method, we must understand our goal, learn and practice the teachings and meditate. Only then can we achieve a true and honest effort; a genuine need aligns with our conscience and a real desire to understand life.