

Sydney Buddhist Centre: Sangha Evening

Exploring Buddhist Practice - Meditation

Week 5 - The mindfulness of breathing

Introduction

So far in this section we have looked at meditation in a general way. This week we take a detailed, down-to-earth look at how we actually do one of the two main practices used by mitras in the FWBO. In the process we will probably become more conscious of how we apply the practice ourselves, and we will almost certainly pick up some tips and techniques that will make the mindfulness of breathing more fruitful and powerful.

Practical advice on the mindfulness of breathing

(Text condensed from *Wildmind*, by Bodhipaksha, Chapter 3)

Mindfulness

In the short term, the Mindfulness of Breathing practice helps us to become calmer and (paradoxically) more energised and refreshed. In the long term, it helps us to develop more awareness so that we have more freedom to choose our responses in any give situation. For example, in a situation that would normally make us anxious, we can choose to be patient and calm. Over time, we shape our habits instead of letting them shape us. Mindfulness allows us to take full responsibility for our lives and happiness. Practising mindfulness is enormously enriching. Instead of being half-aware of what we are doing, we can fully and richly experience every moment of our lives.

Stages 1 and 2

What's the counting for?

The counting has a number of useful functions. It's very easy to 'space out' instead of meditating - we get distracted without realising it. The counting helps us to get a more objective sense of how much of the time we're distracted, and how much we're remaining aware. It also gives us something to aim for. It's good to have goals.

If you're getting distracted before reaching the tenth breath, you can try harder to reach it, then to get to ten again. Without the counting it's harder

to notice the effects of your efforts. If you put effort into your meditation you will see results.

The numbers also act as an anchor. In the cycle of breathing the point at which we are most likely to get distracted is in the pause between the out-breath and the in-breath, when nothing much is happening. The number is a way of 'touching base' so that we can get through the pause without getting distracted.

When the counting seems boring

Sometimes people want to drop the counting. There can be good and bad reasons for this.

Sometimes we've developed a strong current of stillness and it seems natural to drop the numbers. If so, let go. But often it's just a resistance to structure, or a desire to be passive, and we'd rather just daydream. Be honest about your motivation.

If the numbers seem mechanical, bear in mind that this is not inevitable - it's a product of the way your mind is working. If you approach the numbers gracefully and creatively, they'll seem natural and fluid.

The difference between stages 1 and 2

Most people find that the first two stages feel very different. This is because of the different nature of the counting, which provides a structured way of deepening our experience.

The nature of the counting changes which part of the breath you're most aware of. In the first stage, because you're counting after the outbreath, your mind links the counting with the outbreath. In the second stage, because you're counting before the inbreath, your mind is more aware of the inbreath. Taking a deep outbreath - or sighing - is what we do when we let go of tension. It feels like letting go, relaxing, moving downward, and it has a calming effect. Taking a deep inbreath on the other hand feels like expanding, opening up, rising, and it has an energizing effect.

So while the first stage is a stage of letting go, the second stage is one of energizing. Letting go is the perfect thing to do when starting a meditation - we let go of the tension in our bodies, and of the thoughts in our heads. Then in the next stage you energize your relaxed mind and body. By feeling the energy that comes with the inbreath, you help set up the conditions for being aware.

So there's a natural progression here - relaxing then energizing - and it's important to get these stages in the right order. Of course, if you start your meditation in a tired and sluggish state you might go straight into the second stage, and if in the second stage your mind is racing you may want to

revert to the first stage to slow it down. These stages give us two tools - like a brake and an accelerator - which we need to learn to use appropriately.

Stage 3

Balancing energy

While stage one helps us to develop more calm, and stage two helps us to develop more energy and awareness, the third stage emphasizes the in-breath and out-breath equally, helping us to blend the calm relaxation of the first stage with the energized awareness of the second. In stage three you can be aware of the constant oscillation between the calming out-breath and the energizing in-breath, and allow these qualities to permeate each other.

Using anchors

If the first two stages have gone well, letting go of the numbers can allow us to develop a deeper and more balanced concentration. However the counting has been acting as an anchor for our awareness, so when we let it go we may tend to float off into distraction.

One way to retain an anchor while letting go of the numbers is to use a physical anchor. I sometimes use the physical sensations in my hands in the same way as I use the numbers. At the end of each out-breath and in-breath I take my awareness to my hands. This helps keep me grounded. I maintain my awareness of my hands all the way through the cycle of the breath. I am still aware of my breath, but I'm also keeping some of my awareness in my hands. This isn't as hard as it might sound. I experience my breath flowing towards my hands, and then flowing away from my hands, over and over again. This helps prevent me drifting away from the breath.

You can vary which parts of the hands you are aware of. You can be aware of both hands in their entirety, or you can be aware of only the tips of your thumbs in contact. If you are using the dhyana mudra this can bring a lovely sense of delicate energy into your awareness.

The physical anchor is a more refined anchor than the counting because it's non-verbal - it cuts down on the amount of thinking, so that your mind can develop a deeper level of stillness.

Stage 4

Making the transition

In the third stage we're usually aware of quite a large area of the sensations associated with the breath. We might have been focussing primarily on the belly, or the chest, or the sensations in the head and throat. These involve

large muscles or anatomical structures. In the fourth stage however we're focussing on a very small area of sensations: the rim of the nostrils.

I like to make a smooth transition from the third to the fourth stage, to maintain a sense of continuity and bring the quality of elegance to the practice. I do this by narrowing my focus over a series of seven or eight breaths, gradually homing in on the sensations on the rims of the nostrils. This helps the stages to flow together so that you can keep deepening your concentration. Simply jumping from stage three to stage four is rather crude.

Maintaining subtlety

Because the sensations at the nostrils are so subtle, there can be a tendency to breathe more forcibly in order to heighten the sensation. Try to resist this, allowing your breath to be light and delicate. Instead of breathing more heavily, try to find the subtle sensations by allowing the mind to become more receptive - this is the purpose of this stage of the practice.

If you don't manage to find the sensations on the rims of the nostrils, you can become aware of the breath in your nostrils: cool on the in-breath and warm on the out-breath. Some people find it easier to detect the sensations on the upper lip. Over time, try to refine your awareness so that you become aware of the most delicate sensations possible - these are the true focus of this stage.

If you can detect the sensations of the air flowing over the rims of your nostrils, you can refine the meditation even more. For example, you can notice whether the sensations are more pronounced in the left or right nostril, and you can try to take your awareness into any 'dead spots' where sensations are lacking. Or you can become aware of the sensations at the front of the rims of your nostrils, rather than all around - just to stretch your ability to detect very subtle sensations. There are always greater degrees of refinement to which we can take our concentration.

Occasionally your mind will settle down and you'll notice some interesting and subtle sensations related to your breathing. For example, you might hear a soft internal 'sound', which isn't coming from any physical process. Or you might experience a sensation like silk associated with your breathing but not exactly a part of it. Or you might notice a delightful sense of 'flow' that accompanies the rhythm of your breathing. (These things can be hard to describe.) What seems to be happening is that your mind has moved to a more subtle level of perception, and found for itself objects of concentration that are correspondingly more delicate than the usual ones. Far from being a distraction, such sensations act as doorways into even deeper states of calmness and concentration. Cherish them when they arise, and let your awareness become absorbed in them.

Between stages

It's important to set up your posture at the start of a period of meditation. When you take your attention away from your posture in order to be more aware of your breath, often you'll find that your posture starts to drift. You may find that some parts of your body start to sag, while others become tense, and these changes lead to mental and emotional changes. The tension in your shoulders may be related to some anger you've started to experience. The sagging in your spine may be related to a feeling of despair that's crept in. If you relax your shoulders, the anger will start to disappear; if you straighten your spine you'll start to feel more confident.

As you become more proficient in meditation you'll learn that you can periodically check your posture and make minor corrections, without losing awareness of your breath. A good way to start practising this skill is to check and correct your posture between stages. You might want to do this every time you move from one stage to the next. Later you'll find that you can integrate monitoring your posture into your practice in the way I have described.

A meditation toolkit

Here we're going to look at some ways to use the breath to alter our mental and emotional states. These don't necessarily work immediately, and you may need to give them time. Changing the method every couple of minutes will just lead to frustration and restlessness.

Using the breath to calm the mind

- Take a few deep breaths into the belly
- Take a few slow breaths before letting your breath return to normal
- Keep your awareness low in the body, eg in your belly, for as long as you need to develop calmness
- Pay attention to letting go on the out-breath
- On every exhalation, imagine a wave of relaxation flowing downwards into the earth, sweeping away your tensions and cares
- Imagine your whole body is floating on warm water; with every inhalation you rise, and with every exhalation you fall

Using the breath to stimulate the mind

- Take a few deep breaths into your upper chest (feel the expansion)
- Take a few quick, light breaths, then let your breathing return to normal
- Keep your awareness high in your body, eg in your upper chest, or even your head
- Pay attention to the sense of your body expanding on the in-breath

- On every inhalation, imagine you are drawing energy upwards from the earth, filling every fibre of your being with awareness
- Imagine you are inhaling light with every breath; on every exhalation you breath out your distractions in the form of grey mist.

Why all the emphasis on concentration?

Have you ever had the experience of talking to a friend while you're distracted, and realising that you haven't been listening because you've drifted off on some other train of thought? We all do this from time to time. How can we deepen our understanding of ourselves if we don't experience anything but surface distractions?

Concentration allows us to go more deeply into our experiences. It allows us to experience more intensely, so that we can be more present with other people, and more present with ourselves.

Concentration allows us to really enjoy what we're doing, whether its walking in the countryside, reading a book, writing, or thinking.

Concentration allows us to think more clearly and deeply. When we can stay with a train of thought without wandering off, we can ask more penetrating questions of ourselves and, crucially, be able to hear the deep considered answers that come from our depths. The power of reflective concentration becomes crucial when we move on to vipassana practices that require us to use thoughts and images as the objects of concentration.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1 What is your general experience of the mindfulness of breathing? Do you tend to prefer it to the metta bhavana, or *vice-versa*. Why?

2 "Sometimes people want to drop the counting. There can be good and bad reasons for this." Do you ever feel tempted to drop the counting in the first two stages? Are your reasons related to Bodhipakshas 'good and bad reasons'?

3 Do you notice a difference between stages 1 and 2? If so, do you think Bodhipaksha explains this well? Might there be any other reasons for the difference?

4 Try focussing more on either the out-breath or in-breath at times in your meditation this week. Notice the effects, and be prepared to tell the group about it.

5 Do you tend to become more concentrated when you drop the counting and move into stage 3 of the meditation, or do you tend to become more prone to distraction?

6 Try using a physical anchor in stage 3. Do the hands work for you as an anchor, or does some other part of the body work better?

7 How do you experience the breath in stage 4 of the practice? Try to relate your experience to the description given in the text - eg do you feel the breath on the rims of the nostrils or somewhere else; is there more sensation in one nostril than the other; do you ever experience anything like the 'internal sound', 'sensation like silk', or 'delightful sense of flow' mentioned in the text?

8 Try using some of Bodhipaksha's 'meditation toolkit' in your practice this week. Tell the group about the effects.

9 Do you feel more interested in the mindfulness of breathing after reading this text and trying out some of the suggestions? If so, what does this tell you about a creative approach to meditation practice?