



Early Buddhist Meditation, Part 4: Mindfulness of Breathing

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This is the fourth in a series of five explorations of the topic of early Buddhist meditation, which in the present case takes up the practice of mindfulness of breathing, or perhaps, to place a spotlight on what will be a continuous theme throughout this exploration: mindfulness *with* breathing.

The distinction proposed in this way between being mindful “of” and “with” breathing is meant to draw attention to a difference in actual practice, in that meditation on the breath can either focus on the breath or else be more peripherally aware of it in such a way as to encompass other aspects of the present situation within the field of attention. That is, meditatively relating to the breath can be more prominently a training in focusing and concentration or else rather give pride of place to an openly receptive mindful awareness. Whereas the former modality appears to be fairly standard in different Buddhist practice traditions, closer inspection shows that the instructions found in the early Buddhist discourses much rather point to the latter modality, namely an open mindfulness rather than just focusing.

A Gradual Reduction

The instructions in the early discourses on how to relate mindfulness to the breath present a rather sophisticated form of meditation that proceeds through 16 distinct steps of practice. These will be explored in more detail below; for the time suffice it to mention that these 16 steps, corresponding to four tetrads of four steps each, serve as an implementation of the four establishments of mindfulness. The attainment of concentrative absorption, in contrast, is not explicitly mentioned at all.

Closer study of relevant textual sources shows a gradual reduction of this scheme of 16 steps in the course of time (Anālayo 2022). A first stage in this direction takes up just

the first tetrad, corresponding to the first four steps, as a way of cultivating contemplation of the body. In itself, this is of course correct, as each tetrad indeed corresponds to one of the four establishments of mindfulness, with the first tetrad being an implementation of the first establishment of contemplating the body. However, this correlation serves to reveal the underlying dynamic of the whole scheme of 16 steps; it is not an invitation to take out just one tetrad and practice it on its own. Yet, this is precisely the result of the present stage in the gradual process of reduction, namely that it makes the first tetrad appear to be a stand-alone practice.

In the course of textual evolution, a simile also comes into use to explain the practice of this first tetrad. The simile describes a turner who needs to distinguish between making long and short turns when working at a lathe. Such a distinction between long and short, applied to the breath, is the theme of the first two steps in the first tetrad. Note that in this way only half of the actual practice of this tetrad finds illustration through this simile. Eventually, with further reduction evident in yet another text, the same simile comes together with indeed only the first two steps.

Later exegesis then employs another simile, in place of the one about a turner working at the lathe. This other simile illustrates the meditation practice, in the way it has come to be perceived by the time of this stage in development, with the example of cutting a log of wood with a saw. The person engaged in cutting should focus just on the place where the teeth of the saw cut the wood, without getting distracted by giving attention to other parts of the saw as it moves forward and backward (let alone paying attention to other parts of the log). This aptly illustrates the way meditation on the breath is commonly taught, as the scheme of 16 steps has gradually morphed into just focusing on the physical sensation caused by the breath at the place where it is perceived as entering and leaving the body.

A problem that practitioners can encounter with this approach is the arising of distractions. The area of observation is rather narrow, mainly from the tip of the nose to the upper lip, and the touch sensation to be felt there is relatively uninteresting and does not naturally capture attention. In order to counterbalance the tendency of the mind to wander

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off, later practice traditions have developed auxiliary methods such as counting the breath.

Another problem can arise for practitioners prone to taking a more forceful approach to meditation by trying to push through quickly. At times, trying to force the mind to stay with the sensation of the breath can result in headaches, tiredness, or exhaustion, as well as in fostering a form of narrow-mindedness. This can even manifest in a general increase in irritability, self-centeredness, and dogmatic holding on to one's own viewpoint. The reason is simply that when the mind has been trained to focus on a rather minor, circumscribed segment of the present moment—the sensation of the breath at the nostrils or upper lip—this naturally strengthens a general tendency of the mind to focus on any other minor, circumscribed part of what is happening, thereby increasing the probability that the practitioner adopts a tunnel vision in daily life rather than a broadminded perspective.

The 16 Steps: the First Tetrad

The instructions given in the early Buddhist discourses for cultivating mindfulness with breathing begin by describing how the practitioner retires to a secluded spot, assumes the sitting posture, and mindfully breathes in and out, following which the scheme of 16 steps unfolds (Anālayo 2019). Throughout this scheme, the alternation between inhalation and exhalation provides a constant background rhythm to the meditative experience, reflecting the theme of impermanence.

The first tetrad in this unfolding begins with recognition of the breath as either long or else short. Such a distinction does not imply a practice of continuously and intentionally lengthening or shortening the breath. The Buddha himself is on record for having tried and then given up breath control during the period when he was still in search of the path to awakening. What leads to liberation of the mind from an early Buddhist perspective is above all the uninvolved observational quality of mindfulness—to be directed in the present case to the natural process of breathing—rather than just trying to enforce control, be it of the breath or of the mind.

The sequence of progressing from longer inhalations and exhalations to shorter ones reflects a natural evolution in actual practice. Due to increasing calmness of body and mind, the amount of oxygen required lessens, and the breath becomes shorter. Note that the evaluation of length here is best taken to refer to the active phase of inhaling or exhaling. This will indeed gradually become shorter. At the same time, however, the gaps between an inhalation and an exhalation (or an exhalation and an inhalation) will become longer, so that the time of a whole breath cycle may indeed appear to be longer than previously. Closer inspection shows that, nevertheless, the actual moving phase has indeed become

shorter, and it is only the gap between one motion and the next that has expanded, again due to needing less oxygen.

The third and fourth steps in this tetrad call for experiencing the whole body and calming bodily activities. Before turning to these individually, it is worthy of note that from the third step onward the instructions present the remainder of the practice as a form of mental training. This can be understood to convey that, even though the first two steps of recognizing long and short breaths involve a form of observation that takes the breath itself as its main object, this changes with the remainder of the practice. The breath recedes to the background in the arena of mindful observation, allowing room for extending awareness to other dimensions of the present moment. In the present case, this can involve becoming aware of the whole body in the sitting posture and then of its naturally calm condition; with the other tetrads, such a more comprehensive meditative vision then encompasses feeling tones, mental states, and Dharma-related perspectives.

In terms of actual practice, in the particular approach presented here, the recommendation would be to broaden mindful awareness from the earlier attention paid to the length of the breath to encompassing the whole body in the meditation posture. This is similar to zooming out with a camera, whereby the frame of the picture to be taken expands and more of the panorama is included in the image. In later tradition, this step has at times been taken to call for experiencing the breath in the whole body, even pervading the whole body with the breath. Although from a practical perspective this can be an interesting approach, it is not the implication of the instructions in the early Buddhist discourses.

Once the field of meditative attention has broadened from the breath to the whole body, with the next step the practitioner notes how any activity that may be going on in the body becomes calmer. This is first and foremost of course the breath itself, which already has been on a trajectory of increasing calmness through the preceding steps. Due to the broadened scope of attention, such calming can be seen to involve the whole body as well. This can manifest in a sense of ease and relaxation, making it effortlessly possible to stay settled in the sitting posture and thereby allow practice to proceed to subtler realms of exploration, namely feeling tones as the main theme in the second tetrad.

The 16 Steps: the Second Tetrad

Based on the sense of bodily ease and relaxation reached with the conclusion of the first tetrad, the second tetrad takes off from the experience of joy while breathing in and breathing out, which in turn can lead to the experience of happiness. The type of joy mentioned here is obviously of a wholesome type and can at times be quite delicate, mainly taking

the form of the subtle joy of being with mindfulness in the present moment. If, for whatever reason, joy should not perceptibly manifest, the next step is always within reach in the form of the happiness of contentment. This reflects an overall important dimension of meditation practice in general, in that wholehearted dedication to the path of practice pairs best with a sense of acceptance of the present moment as it is, rather than shouldering the burden of anticipations and expectations of how meditation should be and by when results should palpably manifest. Results will come in due time, but hankering for them can become a significant obstacle to progress and therewith precisely to the ripening of the fruits of practice.

The progression through joy and happiness makes it natural for the practitioner to remain collected rather than succumb to distraction, simply because the very pleasantness of joy and happiness exerts an attraction on the mind that tends to counter whatever promises of pleasure a distraction may hold. This is the advantage of harnessing wholesome types of joy to meditation practice, as with neutral feeling tones related to a bland object of meditation, it will be easier for the tendency toward distraction to captivate the mind.

Due to the increase in inner stillness reached at this point, it becomes possible to experience mental activities, the third step in this tetrad, and to allow them to subside naturally, resulting in a calming of mental activities in the fourth step. All of this takes place against the background of the unceasing alternation between inhalations and exhalations.

The 16 Steps: the Third Tetrad

The four steps of the previous tetrad present a natural way to settle the mind and allow it to become calm, wherefore with the first step of the present tetrad it becomes possible to experience the mind as such. This can take the form of experiencing the bare condition of knowing, distinct from those mental activities that are more actively involved in processing what is being known. This knowing dimension or consciousness is something present at all times but usually unnoticed due to various mental activities dominating the foreground of the attentional field. Once these calm down, however, this quality of knowing can be more easily apperceived. Close inspection shows that, however stable and continuous it may appear, this too is impermanent; it is just a process of being conscious or knowing, nothing more. Remaining peripherally aware of the inhalations and exhalations serves to underline this insight into impermanence.

The experience of the mind as such comes with a dimension of gladness as well as of concentration or composure. Paying attention to these two dimensions is the task of the next two steps, leading up to the conclusion of this tetrad in the step of liberating the mind. Liberation in early Buddhist thought can stand for temporary meditative states or else

permanent freedom of the mind from defilements. In line with this broad compass of meaning, the conclusion of the third tetrad can be taken as an occasion to deepen tranquility, even as a launching pad to enter concentrative absorption. Although such an attainment is not explicitly mentioned in the instructions, for some practitioners an inner experience of light can manifest with particular strength and stability at this stage of practice, paying attention to which can then lead to deepening concentration. Opting for this possible trajectory requires leaving behind the peripheral awareness of the process of breathing and of the perception of impermanence that form the backbone to the scheme of 16 steps itself. The reason is that entry into deep states of absorptive concentration requires thorough unification of the mind with an object that is stable (such as an internally perceived image that does not move), which would not leave room for continuous awareness of something that is constantly changing.

Alternatively, if liberating the mind is taken up in the sense of being related to progress in insight, the present step of practice can be conjoined, for example, to the doctrine of not-self. Breathing can take place without having a sense of ownership toward the breath or the body, or even the mind. Even the bare quality of knowing can be liberated from any sense of appropriation and reification.

The 16 Steps: the Fourth Tetrad

Whereas the previous three tetrads can be understood to combine tranquility with insight in various ways, the last is predominantly concerned with the growth of liberating insight. At this point, according to the approach to practice presented here, the theme of impermanence shifts from a continuous background presence—through attention paid to the alternation between inhalations and exhalations—to the forefront of attention, in the realization that all aspects of subjective experience are changing phenomena. Just as the breath itself, everything else is a constant coming and going, arising and passing away, a continually changing process.

A full appreciation of impermanence in this way can lead to realizing that the breath and everything else—including the mind that is aware of the breathing process—is constantly fading away, which elicits dispassion, in the sense of disenchantment and a diminishing of attachment. What fades away will eventually cease, and this is precisely the next perspective to be adopted. The progression from impermanence via fading/away and dispassion to cessation then has its culmination in a profound sense of letting go.

A way to relate these four steps to actual meditative experience could take the form of clearly noting the arising of each inhalation or exhalation, its persistence for a little while as a changing process, followed by its passing away. Each of these three dimensions exemplifies *impermanence*. Paying attention

predominantly to change while persisting and passing away can in turn be used to implement *fading away/dispassion*, and attention directed just to passing away can drive home the fact that everything is bound to *cease*. The recommendation here is just about how the mind pays attention, what it foregrounds; the idea is not to influence the breath in any way. Throughout the scheme of 16 steps, breathing should remain natural, and the individual steps reflect modes of observing and contemplating this natural process. For *letting go* as the final step in the final tetrad, attention could in turn be paid to the gaps that occur after each inhalation and each exhalation, the moment of stillness when the present one ceases and the next one has not yet arisen. This mirrors one way in which the supreme letting go into the realization of Nirvana could take place, namely by attending to the gap right at the edge of the ceasing of the present moment, before the arising of the next moment.

Breathing and the Four Establishments of Mindfulness

The four tetrads correspond to the four establishments of mindfulness. In other words, based on continuous awareness of the process of breathing, dimensions of that very experience of sitting in meditation and being aware of the breath can be explored that relate to the body, feeling tones, mental states, and dhammas.

Whereas contemplation of the body in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and its parallels covers a range of sometimes challenging perspectives on the nature of the body, the same contemplation in the present case comes without such challenges, and the task is only to proceed from the breath to being mindful of the whole body and then relaxing it. The same pattern continues with the second and third tetrads, which take up pleasant feeling tones and a calm state of mind, whereas the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* also covers painful feeling tones and various defiled states of mind. The instructions in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* clearly set in at a more basic level, whereas mindfulness with breathing builds on previous expertise in dealing with hindrances and defilements in order to weave together tranquility and insight in a seamless meditative progression.

Alongside the clear prominence given to tranquility in this way, the overall purpose of the 16 steps is nevertheless to lead to liberating knowledge, for which purpose the four tetrads are to be combined with the awakening factors. Closer inspection shows that the qualities enshrined in the set of seven awakening factors are to some extent implicit in several of the steps of the first three tetrads (Anālayo 2019).

From the viewpoint of the approach to practice presented here, the recommendation is to proceed once through the entire scheme of 16 steps, so as to activate the underlying dynamics of this progression and thereby also the seven awakening factors. The speed of such implementation of the whole scheme

is up to the individual practitioner and could be anywhere between one and many breaths for each step, and this count can also vary for different steps at different times. After the progression has been completed once, practitioners are invited to inspect their present condition of body and mind in order to decide which of the four tetrads seems to be the best choice in the present moment. Progression through that tetrad can then lead to abiding in the respective final step and allowing room for silent dwelling, without further mental activity apart from just remaining mindful of the condition brought about by that tetrad's final step: calming bodily activities (first tetrad), calming mental activities (second tetrad), liberating the mind (third tetrad), or letting go (fourth tetrad). Should a distraction arise, once this is noticed, moving through one of the tetrads can give the mind something to do until it is ready again to dwell silently in the concluding step of that tetrad. Such dwelling silently can take place based on various modalities of letting go, namely by either letting go of bodily activities, or letting go of mental activities, or letting go of whatever fetters the mind, or letting go as completely as possible, perhaps even eventually letting go into the realization of Nirvana.

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Data availability Guided meditation instructions corresponding to the practices described in this article are freely available at <http://agama.research.dila.edu.tw/bhikkhu-analayo-meditation-instructions>.

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