Mindfulness of Breathing
(Ānāpānasati)

Contents

I. Benefits of Concentration

"Having taken a stand in virtue, a wise person develops concentration."

In the teaching of the Buddha, there are two types of meditation practice, concentration and insight. Unlike during the Buddha's time when concentration was highly regarded, people today often overlook the practice of concentration. Many think mindfulness alone is enough for realization.

What does the Buddha have to say about the matter? *"O recluses, develop concentration! Those who have concentration see things as they really are."* What "things" are to be seen as they really are? The five aggregates of clinging.

The five aggregates of clinging, when seen as they really are, turn out to be other than they appear. They are radically impermanent, thoroughly unsatisfactory, and utterly impersonal, that is, without self. Penetration of this truth makes enlightenment possible. One also clearly and directly sees the cause of suffering, which ultimately is craving grounded in ignorance. One further sees that when the causes cease, suffering comes to an end.

Just as when we wish to penetrate and clearly see invisible cells in a glass of water, we need a microscope to focus and enhance our vision. Another way of saying "focus and enhance" is *concentrate*.

Likewise, if we want to see the true nature of the five aggregates, we need to develop concentration. It serves as the proximate cause of insight, because a concentrated mind is radiant, pure, united, malleable, objective, free of prejudice, preference, and lust for base sensual pleasures. This makes the discerning mind clear, powerful, and penetrative. And when it turns its enhanced focus first onto the body then onto the mind, ultimate realities are revealed. Their true nature comes to be directly known and verified, removing all doubts.

But apart from this important task, there are other benefits of developing concentration up to the level of jhāna. Concentration provides a blissful abiding here and now through the experience of a happiness beyond the sensual in this very life. Arahants in particular have not only reached the goal with the help of concentration, they benefit for the remainder of their lives by mastering it. Although Arahants have eradicated all defilements, they still have to bear the burden of the body. But through jhāna they are able to temporarily transcend this burden. They enter the jhāna and can dwell blissfully with a unified mind for an entire day.

Furthermore, concentration is the basis of supernatural powers. The power of jhāna concentration allows one to develop mundane psychic powers, like the recollection of past lives, the divine eye (clairvoyance), the divine ear (clairaudience), knowing the minds of others, seeing their births and

deaths according to their karma, and the supernatural powers of levitating, flying through the sky and space, bodily visiting other worlds, making many independent bodies out of one, walking on water, going through walls, diving into the ground, etc. For these abilities to be brought under one's will and conscious control, one has to master the fine-material and immaterial jhānas.

Concentration enables one to be reborn in a blissful plane of existence, the fine-material planes. The secret is mastering the jhāna,which means being able to enter and exit it at will and as often as one determines, then maintaining it up to the moment of death. This death-proximate karma conditions the arising of rebirth-linking consciousness in the fine-material plane. In this plane, there is no experience of physical pain such as human beings endure, merely the bliss of jhāna.

The jhāna concentration can be used as a resting place for samatha meditators. This is explained by a simile in the commentary to the discourse "Two Kinds of Thoughts". (*Dvedhavitakka Sutta*, Majjhima Nikāya 19) Sometimes during battle warriors on one side might feel tired while their enemy feels strong. At that time, with many arrows flying, those warriors feeling weak retreat to the fort. Behind its

walls they are safe. They rest until their weariness subsides. Feeling strong and energized again, they leave the fort and return to the battlefield.Jhāna is a fort, a *temporary* release, a safe resting place for insight meditators who are at war with Mara battling ignorance and craving.

II. Different Meditation Subjects

There are many ways to develop concentration. In the Path of Purification, 40 serenity meditation subjects (kammatthāna) are described. Why did the Buddha teach different serenity meditation subjects? It was a skillful means to suit the different temperaments of beings so that more could experience its benefits. Different meditation subjects lead to different levels of concentration. For example, four elements meditation, recollection of the virtues of the Buddha, and the recollection of death lead only to the attainment of access concentration. Other meditation subjects, like mindfulness of breathing, the ten kasinas, and the four sublime abidings (loving-kindness, compassion, appreciative joy, equanimity), can lead to the attainment of the fine-material jhānas.Still other meditation subjects, such as giving attention to boundless space or

boundless consciousness, lead to the attainment of the immaterial jhānas.

Here, I would like to recommend mindfulness of breathing as our meditation subject. It is certainly one of the most popular and easy to learn subjects, perhaps owing to the fact that it is what the Bodhisatta was practicing under the bodhi tree when he attained enlightenment. Or perhaps it is because we are breathing all the time and one can easily develop jhāna concentration using the breath.It is considered the foremost among the various meditation subjects of all supremely enlightened Buddhas, and many of the Buddha's disciples, because it serves as the basis for attaining distinction in insight or simply abiding in bliss here and now in this moment.

III. Mindfulness of Breathing (Ānāpānasati)

1. The Practice of Mindfulness of Breathing

The Buddha often praises mindfulness of breathing: *"Recluses, this concentration through mindfulness of breathing, when developed and practiced much, is both peaceful and sublime, it is an unadulterated blissful abiding, and it banishes at once and stills unskillful, unprofitable thoughts as soon as they arise."*

There are four stages of development for mind-

fulness of breathing.

1) Breathing in long, he discerns, "I am breathing in long"; or breathing out long, he discerns, "I am breathing out long."

2) Or breathing in short, he discerns, "I am breathing in short"; or breathing out short, he discerns, "I am breathing out short."

3) He trains himself, "I will breathe in experiencing the entire breath body." He trains himself, "I will breathe out experiencing the entire breath body."

4) He trains himself, "I will breathe in calming the bodily formation." He trains himself, "I will breathe out calming the bodily formation."

To begin, sit cross-legged or lay both of the legs evenly on the floor. For elderly people, they may sit on a chair. Tilt your head down a bit. Keep the body erect. Skin, flesh, and sinews should be untwisted so that feelings that would arise moment by moment if they were twisted do not arise. Release any tension in the body, which could be the manifestation of

hidden attachment or resentment toward oneself, certain other people, or the situation. Why choose to keep something harmful? Let it go. When the mind is clear of defilements, the body is at ease.

Start with breathing in and breathing out. Be aware of the breath around the nostrils or upper lip where the breath touches. Do not follow the breath into the body, whether up to the top of the head or down into the belly. This prevents one from developing one-pointedness of mind because the mind is constantly moving up and down. Instead, gently place your attention under the nostrils where the breath touches in order to constantly remember the in and out breath

The simile of the gatekeeper illustrates this. Just as a gatekeeper does not question people entering or exiting a town by asking, "Who are you? Where are you coming from? Where are you going?" but is simply aware of each person as they arrive at the gate, so too, where incoming breaths or outgoing breaths are going is not your concern, but they are your concern each time they arrive at the nostrils (gates).

Breathe naturally, as if the breath is breathing all

by itself. There is no particular effort to breathe; the effort is to notice. Do not focus strongly, as this is sure to cause tension in the nose, forehead, and head, hardening and stiffening the nose and making the head heavy. A common mistake by most meditators is not realizing that the more effort they exert, the more restless they become. Excessive effort causes irritation and makes the mind restless. As energy inclines naturally towards agitation when there is an excess of energy and little concentration, restlessness overwhelms the mind. And gradually they become discouraged and downhearted, causing them to lose faith and interest in the process so that they stop short without reaching the goal. Be careful to constantly notice the breath while taking care not to focus too strongly on it. Balanced effort that avoids extremes of restlessness and laziness is the way. Foreigners in Burma who have been practicing a while eventually come to this realization if they are to succeed. Local yogis often make faster progress in concentration than them, because the Burmese know how to practice in a relaxed manner. Foreigners are inclined to be goal-oriented. By placing unnecessary pressure and anxiety on themselves few of them break through. This is counterproductive. Ease and consistency are much more valuable than hard struggle.

Simply be aware of the in and out breath, alert but at ease. Do not attempt to control your breath, instead control your *mind*. Do not let the mind drift or be swept away by fantasizing, planning, questioning, reasoning, doubting, regretting, etc, or by overshooting the object of the breath. Avoid paying attention to the cold or heat of the breath, which are characteristics of the fire element. If one pays attention to such things, it becomes four elements meditation rather than mindfulness of breathing. Just breathe naturally without straining mind or body. *Sustained* attention on the breath is needed to develop concentration. Let go of all expectations. An expectation is a subtle form of greed for the Dharma. It makes the mind tense up. Rest the mind in the breath. If you find it difficult to concentrate on the breath at the beginning because of restlessness, do not be discouraged. It is perfectly natural for the mind to wander here and there. "The mind wanders at will," according to the Buddha. If it were naturally still and concentrated, there would be no need for meditation to still it and concentrate it.

To pacify restlessness, the *Path of Purification* encourages one to use the counting method. Slowly count at the end of each breath cycle like this: "In-breath, out-breath, one; in-breath, out-breath, two; in-breath, out-breath, three...in-breath, out-breath, eight." Count up to eight ideally. But in any case, never less than five or more than ten. Counting less than five is monotonous and encourages restlessness. And if you count beyond ten, your mind will turn its attention to the number rather than its intended object, which is the breath itself. Determine that you will not let your mind drift or wander after each set of eight. Count until the mind settles on the breath. Then you may drop the counting, which is simply an aid, and stay with the breath.

2. Make Mindfulness Continuous

When the mind becomes calm after half an hour or an hour, give up counting and proceed to the first stage. "Breathing in a long breath, one understands: 'I breathe in long'; or breathing out long, one understands: 'I breathe out long.'" Long or short refers to the duration of time, both of which are relative and to be decided for oneself. If it takes a long time to breathe then it is a long breath,

if a short time, it is a short breath. Do not expend energy making the breath long or short or else you will grow weary. Let the breath happen naturally. The attitude is just like that of a person leisurely sitting on the riverbank observing the flow of the river. Whether the river flows swiftly or slowly is not the person's concern. The only concern is to be aware of it as it manifests without trying to change or control its natural rhythm. We are observing, not attempting to control. The exercise here is to know if the breath is long or short, continuously.

While concentrating on the breath, one may sometimes feel hot tingling in the legs or some other sensation that becomes much more prominent than the breath. If you intend to practice pure concentration, do not shift attention to it, or else concentration on the breath is broken. For mindfulness of breathing, the breath is the only object, whether sitting, standing, walking, eating, attending to chores, or lying down. No attention should be given to any other object except the breath. Concentration develops quickly if attention is continuous. With breaks, the momentum cools down. When one wishes to make fire from two sticks, it is necessary to rub them together continuously. If we break every so often, they just cool off, defeating the purpose.

3. Learning from the Pain

For those who do not sit regularly, very soon they will be challenged by the pain. When the mind starts to settle down on the breath, pain may arise in the knees, back, feet, or shoulders. The usual reaction of the mind is to dislike the pain, so we move to get rid of it. We need to get rid of the pain so that we can be more comfortable. But, often the pain comes back and we become agitated. Wanting to get rid of it is just the manifestation of anger. Pain is our great teacher, and it offers us valuable lessons that we can all benefit from learning:

First, no one likes pain. No one likes it because it hurts. If we ourselves dislike being hurt, then we should consider that others feel the same way. So pain reminds us to practice self-restraint to avoid inflicting pain on others psychologically, verbally, or physically.

Second, if we ask other meditators, we soon find that they share the same experience of pain. It is natural for everyone to feel pain after sitting still for an extended period of time. So why feel bad or berate ourselves? Instead, we can exhibit compas-

sion for ourselves and others based on this common understanding.

Third, we learn that our bodies are unsatisfactory. Without pain we delusively go about thinking that our cherished bodies provide happiness. But now pain seems endless, one type after another. In daily life, without realizing it, we are constantly changing postures. This conceals our bodily pains. With increased concentration pains are exposed. To ease or mask the pain, we change posture. But soon another pain arises somewhere, and it seems there is no end to it! The mind becomes extremely agitated, and we want to quickly do away with the pain. Such a reaction makes the mind and body even hotter and the pain unbearable.

According to Abhidhamma, every mental state produces consciousness-born matter. An angry mind produces a great deal of consciousness-born matter with fire element as its predominant factor, which literally burns the body. If we are diligent in watching the mind, we will awaken to the fact that it is the mind that knows the pain. Without mind, physical pain cannot be apprehended. Having a mind is also unsatisfactory and distressing *(dukkha)*. As it turns out, body and mind are not our

refuge, not our protection, they are devoid of satisfaction. This is the lesson of pain in accordance with truth.

Fourth, we learn about the impersonal nature of "our" body from pain. It does not yield to our wishes. We come to understand what the Buddha means in pointing out, *"If the body is mine, it will not inflict pain. Because it is not mine, it inflicts pain. Thus we should cultivate equanimity towards it"* (Aṅguttara Nikāya 22.590). If we can contemplate pain as not mine, not myself, and mere cause and effect, then the observing mind can grow dispassionate and detached from it, looking upon it almost as if it were another person's pain. We come to a point when the body is in pain but the mind is at ease. Pain arises because of an imbalance of elements, mostly due to excessive hardness, heat, and vibration. It is merely an aggregate of materiality. It is our identification with and clinging to pain as "*my* pain" that makes it unbearable. This practice, when frequently undertaken, becomes very useful in times of illness and as we approach death. We become able to face them with courage and equanimity.

If while meditating our discomfort becomes a cause of dismay, doubt, or disappointment rather than a cause for the arising of insight, it is then much better to change one's posture mindfully,

keeping attention on the breath as we move.

When one has overcome the pain, one still has to face other obstacles that impede progress. These obstacles cause the mind to become dark, unwieldy, intractable, and attaining jhāna becomes utterly impossible. What are these obstacles? They are known as the five hindrances *(nīvarana):* sensual desire, ill-will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and remorse or worry, and skeptical doubt.

IV. The Five Hindrances

1. Sensual Desire

Sensual desire (*kāmachanda*) is the desire for the six sense-objects of pleasing visible objects, sounds, smells, flavors, tactile sensations, and mental objects. The impingement of these six sense-objects binds one who has not developed mindfulness of breathing. The eye constantly pulls in the direction of agreeable forms, the ear toward agreeable sounds, the nose toward agreeable smells, the tongue toward agreeable flavors, the body toward agreeable tangibles, and the mind toward agreeable mental objects. It is like having six animals — a snake, crocodile, bird, dog, jackal,

and monkey — tied with a strong rope bound to a strong post. Those animals with distinct domains and feeding grounds would each pull in a different direction: The snake pulls in the direction of an anthill, the crocodile toward water, the bird toward the sky, the dog toward the village, the jackal toward the charnel ground, and the monkey toward the forest (Samyutta Nikāya 35.247). But in a retreat setting, the five sense-doors are kept closed, only the mind is to be directed to its meditation object.

For those who are passionate, the mind very quickly loses interest in concentrating on a single object, which yields no enjoyment in the beginning. The mind lingers on the sensual pleasures it formerly delighted in, for example, sex, drugs, and rock and roll. Strong attachment to one's children and spouse is also a great obstacle to progress. One's mind frequently chats with them and worries about them rather than settling peacefully on the breath. Pet lovers think of their pets. These seem like compassionate thoughts, but neither the children nor animals benefit. The meditator's own good is being sabotaged through distraction, worry, and concern. Take precautions and provide for loved ones in advance of the retreat so that peace of mind will be possible. Longing for a soft, comfortable bed and

delicious food can be disturbing as well. The cultivation of contentment is necessary during times of intensive practice.

Sensual desire actually arises due to unwise reflection on an object that is agreeable to the senses. We mistakenly think that agreeable objects provide lasting happiness. A sensual object is either sensuality itself or that which produces sensuality. The antidote is to reflect on the dangers of it. The Buddha compares sense desires to water tinted with a fusion of different colors. In such water one cannot make out one's own reflection. So, too, when one is obsessed with sense desires, one cannot see one's own good, or the good of others, or the good of both (Aṅguttara Nikāya 5.193).

There are six ways to abandon sense-desires:

1) Reflecting on the foulness of the object of attraction cures lust, for example, and gluttony is dispelled by spitting out chewed food and reflecting on how repulsive it has so quickly become.

2) Devoting oneself to meditation on impurity, such as the 32 body parts.

3) Guarding the sense-doors by anchoring one's mind on a single meditation object, in this case, the breath.

4) Moderating food intake: moderation is im-

portant because when one is well fed, lust for other sense desires increases.

5) Being in supportive spiritual friendships: giving and receiving support from noble friends (*kalyana mitta*) in meditative endeavors is invaluable. The Buddha once explained to Ananda, *"Noble friendship is not half of the spiritual life. Noble friendship, Ananda, is the entire spiritual life!" He further explained: "Of a recluse, Ananda, who has a noble friend, a noble companion, a noble associate, it is to be expected that he will cultivate and practice the Noble Eightfold Path."* (Samyutta Nikāya 45.2)

6) Talking about suitable topics: about the austere life, talk conducive to detachment, to freedom from passion, to cessation, tranquillity, enlightenment, and to nirvana, namely, talk about wanting little, about contentment, solitude, aloofness from society, about rousing one's energy, talk about virtue, concentration, and wisdom.

Sometimes it is good to ask oneself the purpose of meditation or of going on retreat to meditate intensively. When life comes to an end, we have to take leave of all the sensual objects we cherish, so why not learn to detach from them first?

2. Ill-Will

Ill-will (*byāpāda*) is annoyance, agitation, resentment, hate, disgust, and/or dissatisfaction aimed at oneself, other people, objects, or situations. How does anger arise toward other people while meditating? When the mind is well concentrated on the breath, some meditators may loudly walk in or out without due consideration for others, so owing to the mind's distraction we get angry at that person. A meditator once reported: "My neighbor kept massaging her leg, disturbing me so much!" In this case, instead of paying attention to her breath, one was pampering her body with a massage, while the other was meditating on someone else's doings and causing herself to become angry.

At times we may remember the wrongs others have done, and reflecting in this way, the mind becomes agitated. Practicing forgiveness lets go of resentment. It might be the result of our own past unwholesome karma; in which case, learning to accept it with equanimity is the best course.

At times, anger may arise towards oneself. The more one exerts effort in meditating, the more restless one becomes, due to expectations and an excess of energy. As one fails to meet one's expectations, one gets angry at oneself. Be kind and gentle to yourself. Let go of expectations and practice with equanimity instead. Results do not come from harboring expectations but from right effort, which means being mindful of the breath all the time. Then, the result will unfold itself. Whenever anger arises, the mind becomes hot like boiling water. How can calm and concentration develop with a "hot" mind?

There are other ways to soothe anger as well:

- reflecting on the fact that karma is one's own property,
- sympathetic and helpful companionship of noble friends,
- stimulating talk that assists one in developing thoughts of love, serenity, patience, bliss, and

tolerance that supplants anger.

3. Sloth and Torpor

Sloth and torpor (*thīna-middha*) is dullness and drowsiness, which means physical tiredness (sloth) and mental sluggishness (torpor). Both lack zest, interest, and driving power. When we are overcome by sloth and torpor, little progress can be expected. It first manifests as head drooping, nodding, and body swaying. We cannot feel or grasp the breath at all. Usually sloth and torpor arise because of a lack of interest in the practice. As a result, one soon is overcome by boredom, disinterest, and inattention. Why would someone lack interest in the practice? It is because one does not understand the tremendous benefits of concentration. Concentration is the proximate cause for wisdom. Wisdom based on deep concentration penetrates things and sees them as they really are. Training in concentration is a very great task, a worthy task. To undertake the training, one needs superior effort. Bearing in mind the worthiness of the outcome, effort never shrinks from the task. Confronted with a job requiring great energy, diligence, and persistence, we rise to the occasion.

How do we overcome sloth and torpor? We can wisely reflect on inspiring stories of monastics and meditators rousing effort to overcome all difficulties. For instance during the Buddha's time, there was a man who, awakening to the hallucinatory nature of life in the world, renounced his property and became a monk. He practiced with great persistence. He was afraid he might fall asleep during meditation, so in the middle of the night, he would walk and walk instead of sleeping, so much so that

the soles of his feet bled and he was unable to continue his walking meditation. So he started to crawl on the ground. A hunter saw him and, mistaking him for an animal, pierced his back with a spike. It caused him severe pain but even then, he nei-

ther gave up nor relaxed his effort. Tales of such heroic effort often inspire in us a greatness we did not know we were capable of until we met the challenge. They uplift the mind and cast out torpor. It may be for this reason that Siddhartha's austerities and struggle under the bodhi tree grow more awesome with every retelling, infusing listeners with the spirit of a warrior who overcomes all obstacles.

The Buddha urged us to contemplate the suffering in impermanence to rouse a sense of spiritual urgency. *"In a monk who grows accustomed to seeing the suffering in impermanence and who is frequently engaged in this contemplation, there will be established in him a keen sense of the danger of laziness, idleness, lassitude, indolence, and thoughtlessness, as if he were threatened by a murderer with drawn sword."* (Aṅguttara Nikāya 7:46)

The Buddha prescribed a sequence of means to overcome sloth and torpor. The cause is unwise attention. So the first method is to not pay attention to thoughts that cause lassitude. If one does not succeed by this method, one might reflect on the excellence of the Dharma (the teachings that lead to enlightenment and Nirvana). This stimulates a dull mind. If this fails, one may pull one's ears, rub

one's limbs, get up from one's seat mindfully and refresh one's eyes with cold water, give attention to the perception of light to cultivate a mind full of brightness. Or one might walk up and down, being aware of going forward and back. By doing so it is quite possible drowsiness will vanish.

If none of these methods prove useful, the antidote is to nap for a short while, keeping in mind the thought of rising, because it may be due to physical

fatigue from sleep deprivation.

Overeating or following the wrong diet may be the cause of dullness and sluggishness. Eat moderately, particularly on retreat, taking only enough to sustain the body for the day's striving rather than eating until you have to loosen your belt!

Sloth and torpor is likened to stagnant water overgrown with water plants. In such water one cannot see one's reflection; likewise, a mind obsessed with sloth and torpor loses its clarity. One cannot see one's own good, the good of others, or the good of both.

4. Restlessness and Remorse

Restlessness and remorse (*uddhacca-kukkucca*) occur when the mind is either planning for the future or recollecting the past. It is a scattered and distracted state of mind going every which way like a heap of embers and ash hit by a stone. Such a mind has no power. As soon as it tries to focus on the breath, it quickly loses attention. Restlessness drives the mind from thought to thought. The mind behaves like a monkey jumping from branch to branch without stopping. This is common for an untrained mind long accustomed to indulging in sense pleasures. All mind has known for so long is being scattered, restless, and frustrated in its efforts to find enduring happiness. Now that we are instructed to focus on a single breath object, in the beginning it finds no enjoyment in it at all. Instead, the mind prefers to dash about wildly

looking for fresh pleasure as it was formerly used to getting. Like a fish tossed out of a pond and onto dry land, it jumps and struggles, wanting nothing more than to go back into the water.

So in place of strong effort we need persistent effort, loving perseverance, and patience to gently bring the mind back again and again from external interests to what is soon to be its greatest interest, the breath. With the rope of mindfulness we anchor attention on the breath

If we let our mind go according to its will, nothing can be accomplished. Restlessness is the mind's powerlessness. We need to tame the mind to make it powerful. The process is like taming a calf. One ties it with a rope to a firm post in the ground. Naturally, in the beginning the calf will pull away and do everything but sit still. It wants to be wild and slavishly obey its instincts. It resists taming and training. But with the rope securely tied to the post, there is a limit on how unruly the calf can be. After struggling for some time, sometimes quite wildly, the calf tires, grows calm, and is still. It is now ready to train, which makes it useful and opens up the possibility for a greater happiness than it could ever know behaving impulsively and recklessly.

Likewise, if we wish to tame the mind, we tie it with the rope of mindfulness and anchor it to the

breath. If this is maintained, a miracle happens: The mind gradually grows calm and contented, experiencing a serenity and stillness it has never known.

Excessive effort also provokes restlessness. When there is an excess of energy, even if the motivation is good, check the mind. "Am I too excited? Am I frustrating myself? Do I expect something to happen? Am I anxious that the breath is not clear?" Expectation nourishes anxiety and results in restlessness, all of which oppose serenity. Let go of them. When restlessness becomes overwhelming, be mindful of it without giving in to frustration or self-criticism. When effort becomes excessive, it is time to cultivate the enlightenment factors of tranquility, concentration, and equanimity to calm and appease it, just as we might toss wet grass, wet timber, and cool water to extinguish a bonfire.

Remorse is another facet of this hindrance that blocks progress in serenity and insight meditation. We may regret misdeeds of the past or fret over good left undone. Before we came to know the Buddha's liberating Dharma, we may have killed or beaten, stolen or taken what was not given, had inappropriate sexual relations that harmed others, lied in order to cheat people, or indulged in intoxicants that led us unwittingly to be heedless and do things we now regret. Now having come to know

the Buddha's teaching, we understand that these are unwholesome deeds that can produce unwelcome consequences when their time ripens. So we experience remorse. But one must reflect whether remorse or worry now for those past misdeeds is wise or beneficial. Will it help us now or hinder us?

Some may feel remorse over good deeds left undone; for instance, feeling sorry one did not start the practice earlier in life. Now the body seems too old and weak to sit for long enough to feel a satisfying pace of progress. Each person has different reasons to feel remorse. Remorse disturbs the mind. The best way to overcome remorse is to recognize its unwholesomeness and let go of it. The fact that it

is possible to let go of it is exemplified by the case of Venerable Angulimala. He was a mass murderer who, it is said, had killed 999 people. The Buddha saved him from ruin, as he was about to kill his own mother. Nonetheless, he did not permit remorse to overwhelm his heart. He became a monk and practiced restraint until his attainment of full enlightenment. If it is possible for someone with that much to regret to let go and concentrate on what good can be done now, there is hope for us all.

Sometimes we worry about what has not yet happened. We worry the house will be burglarized, pets will go unfed, the stock market will drop…. It is wise to take precautions but unwise to worry. What will happen will happen, what will not happen will not happen. Has worrying ever changed the outcome? It is a cognitive distortion to imagine that if we stop worrying then bad things will happen, as if the worrying itself were keeping them at bay. We must recognize that worry is just a drain on our energy! Best to let go of it. The Buddha likened restlessness and remorse to agitated water whipped up by the wind, on account of which one cannot see one's own reflection. When the mind is filled with restlessness and remorse, one cannot see one's good, the good of others, or the good of both.

There are other ways to let go of restlessness and remorse:

- knowledge of the teachings,
- questioning,
- association with elders more experienced in the practice of virtue, concentration, and wisdom,
- sympathetic and helpful companions,
- stimulating talk that helps develop calm and confidence.

5. Skeptical Doubt

Skeptical doubt (vicikicchā) is uncertainty, indecision, and a lack of confidence in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Noble Eightfold Path leading to enlightenment. A doubtful person, when instructed to concentrate on the breath, may think: "What's the use? What benefit is there to just be aware of the breath? How can I attain jhāna by simply concentrating on the breath?"

If the mind is obsessed with skepticism, one will lack devotion, energy, and perseverance. And one will be unable to commit oneself to any course of

spiritual training, let alone succeed in it. The best way to begin the practice is with trust and confidence in the dharma, following a qualified teacher's instructions. When doubt arises, approach the teacher with questions. Listen to relevant talks and engage in discussions to clarify any arising doubts. The Buddha likens skeptical doubt to muddy water lacking clarity. Just as one cannot see one's reflection in it, so a mind obsessed with doubts about the practice will not see how the practice is a benefit to oneself and others.

The Buddha states that reflecting on what is wholesome and unwholesome, blameworthy and blameless, to be practiced and not to be practiced, of low and high value, when done intensely, keeps out fresh doubt and expels doubt that has already come into existence.

It is important for meditators to be clear that these are the five corruptions of mind that hinder concentration and insight. Corrupted by them the mind is not malleable but unwieldy, not radiant but brittle, and unready for attaining jhāna. When these hindrances arise, there are antidotes to apply to overcome them. Sometimes it is also useful to take these hindrances as objects of observation. Simply being aware of their presence allows wisdom to see their passing away. Moreover, it is also a good idea to know what causes them to arise and avoid it. Dealing with causes is more effective than effects. After surpassing these hindrances, the mind will concentrate well on the breath.

V. Approaching Access Concentration

When one is able to concentrate well on the long and short breath, it is time to proceed to the third stage. One trains thus: "I shall breathe in experiencing the whole body [or extent of the breath]; I shall breathe out experiencing the whole body [of the breath]." This means that one remains aware of the entire breath from beginning to end. It does not mean following the breath in or out of the body. One does not allow attention to lapse during any part of it, even the pause between breaths, dur-

ing which one's attention remains near the nostrils waiting for the breath to return. The gatekeeper remains watching at the gate. Know the whole of the breath, which is touching somewhere between the nostrils or upper lip, from beginning to end. The touching point helps maintain awareness, but the breath is our object of observation. If attention and effort are continuous in this manner, mindfulness will not forget the breath, instead it sinks deeply into the breath continuously for one or two hours. This gives rise to another beautiful mental factor of concentration or one-pointedness of the mind. It is unification of the mind on the breath object. Let concentration be continuous in this manner as long as one can.

To progress smoothly on the path, one must from time to time give attention to three factors: concentration, effort, and equanimity. If one gives exclusive attention to concentration, it is possible that the mind may fall into indolence. At this time, it is advisable to balance the mind with the three enlightenment factors of investigation, effort, and rapture. Giving exclusive attention to energy may result in the mind becoming restless and overheated. At this time it is good to balance the overheated mind with another three enlightenment factors of

tranquility, concentration, and equanimity by just looking at the breath. If one pays exclusive attention to equanimity, the mind may not become well concentrated. But if from time to time one gives attention to each of these three qualities then one's mind will become wieldy, pliant, lucid, and well concentrated. Just like a goldsmith, while taking the gold with a pair of tongs and putting it into a furnace, from time to time he blows on it, from time to time he sprinkles water on it, from time to time he examines it closely. If the goldsmith were to blow on the gold continuously it might be heated too much. If he continuously sprinkles water on it, it would be cooled. If he were only to look on it, the gold would not come to perfect refinement. But if, from time to time, the goldsmith attends to each of these three functions, the gold will become pliant, workable and bright; and it can easily be molded. (Aṅguttara Nikāya 3 :100)

When the mind is well concentrated for some time, move to the final stage: "I will breathe in calming the bodily formation; I will breathe out calming the bodily formation." One should make a mental wish: "May my gross breath be calm." Incline the mind in the direction of the subtle breath, which is difficult to perceive and requires stronger mindfulness. Gradually the breath will become smooth, subtle, and calm all by itself. If the breath becomes subtle and the mind settles and rests calmly on it, most meditators, by the power of concentration, do not feel the nose or body. There exists only the breath and the mind concentrating on it.

At this moment there is no "I" or "other," only the concentrated mind fixed on the breath. Mere mind and matter. If the mind remains calm and con-

centrated on the subtle breath for an hour, then for that period all worry, anxiety, agitation, depression, and unwholesome states of mind are temporarily cut off. This state is rather close to access concentration (*upacāra samadhi*).However, when the concentration is deep but effort is lax, one may fall into indolence.

VI. Appearance of the Sign of Concentration

The sign (*nimitta*) may arise at this stage. If it appears, do not immediately shift attention to it; continue to be aware of the breath under the nose. Just before the sign appears, many meditators encounter difficulties: Most find that the breath becomes so subtle that it is unclear to the mind. If this happens, keep awareness at the place where the breath was last noticed and wait for it there.

There is no need to be perplexed or to think your meditation has regressed. Every other meditation subject gets more evident as one goes on giving it attention. But with continuous mindfulness, breathing becomes more peaceful and subtle. Therefore, stronger mindfulness together with understanding, perseverance, and patience are necessary at this stage.

Do not try to make the breath clearer. It is going in the right direction (subtler). Follow it there. The meditator increases in mindfulness as the breath diminishes in clarity. If one makes the breath coarser and more obvious, one will not develop further concentration. Be aware of the subtle breath just as it naturally is. Heighten the level of mindfulness. Even if one thinks one is not breathing at all, stay calm and stay mindful. Reflect: "I am certainly not a dead person. I am in fact breathing. And it is because of the weakness of my mindfulness that I am unable to be aware of the subtle breath." If one calmly applies mindfulness and understanding in this way, the breath will appear again. At this stage the sign may appear.

At first it appears as a gray color, like a puff of smoke, near the nostrils. This is the preparation sign (*parikamma nimitta*). Please note that the light may appear at different places around the body, but it is considered the sign of concentration only if it appears around or under the nostril. When the sign first appears, most meditators get excited or frightened by this new "extraordinary experience." They perplex: "Am I imagining?" "Am I out of my mind? Why don't I peep?" As a result of this distraction, the sign disappears. The sign is usually

not stable in the beginning. If you keep on peeping at it or shift your awareness from the breath to the sign as soon as it appears, the sign will definitely go away from you. The sign disappears owing to the

instability of concentration. You should learn not to get distracted by the first appearance of the sign.

Just continue to concentrate on the breath. That is how you got here, and that is how you will get to where you are meant to go. When concentration deepens and strengthens, the sign comes back again. For the beginner, the sign comes and goes very often. Many meditators, once they experience the sign, unconsciously develop the desire for the sign to come back again. They meditate with great expectation, but end up in disappointment. This is because their observing mind is now tainted with greed. Having learned the lesson, they give up the

expectation and practice with equanimity. Very soon, the sign comes back. This time, the color changes; it whitens and becomes like cotton. This is called the learning sign (uggaha nimitta). It is not very bright yet.

The sign appears to different people in different ways, which is due to differences in perception. These differences are not important. The sign can look like a white thread, a long white light, a star, a wreath of flowers, a stretched out cobweb, a chariot wheel, a cloud, or a tuft of white cotton. It may appear to some as covering the entire face, or like the sun or moon, or like a pearl or red ruby or a yellow color. Even though mindfulness of breathing is only one meditation subject, it can produce various types of signs depending on an individual's perception.

At this stage, guard this sign of concentration, this nimitta, carefully, as a king's chief queen guards the child in her womb. It is important not to give attention to its color or play with it. The meditators very often discover they can play with the sign by intentionally changing its shape or appearance. What fun! But soon they find their concentration regresses because the mind no longer sinks into a single object, which is still the breath. The sign has taken the place of the breath. The sign appears be-

cause one was single-mindedly on the breath, and it will disappear if that is lost. Then comes the question of when one should shift the attention from the breath to the sign?

When the sign is stable for about half an hour and the mind, all on its own, naturally becomes fixed on it, then simply leave the mind on it. Sometimes one will find that, like a magnetic force, the sign pulls the observing mind to it. This is good. Just sink the mind into it. If the sign appears far from the nostrils, do not pay attention to it! If you do, it will probably disappear. Simply continue to concentrate on the breath. By doing so, one will find that the sign comes back and stays under the nostrils. The appearance of the sign is the outcome of deep concentration. It cannot be coerced or forced.

Sometimes, one may find the sign moving in and out along with the breath. And it appears as if the sign is the breath and the breath is the sign. This is excellent. Nothing else has changed. The sign took the place of the breath by coming where attention was kept, so one may simply be aware of the sign and forget the breath. Only in this way, by changing attention from the breath to the sign with sustained attention, is further progress to be expected.

When the mind remains fixed on the sign of

concentration for one or two hours, it becomes clear, bright, then brilliant like a crystal or diamond or morning star. It can be so brilliant that it makes one shed tears. This is called the counterpart sign (*paṭibhāga nimitta*). At this point let the mind fix on it continuously for one, two, or three hours. Then one will reach either access concentration (*upacāra samadhi*) or *jhāna* (*appanā samadhi*). Access concentration is close to, or in the "neighborhood" of, and precedes jhāna concentration.

Both of these types of concentration take the counterpart sign as their object. The difference between them is that in access concentration, the factors of jhāna are not completely developed to full strength. As a result, when access concentration has arisen, the mind first makes the counterpart sign its object and next falls into bhavaṅga mind state, going back and forth. This is just like a small child who is too weak to stand by him or herself. The toddler will fall down again and again. Sometimes due

to weak mindfulness, the mind may also fall into the bhavaṅga mind state with no awareness of the counterpart sign. One feels peaceful and, to one's mind, it seems as if everything has stopped. One knows nothing and may even fall under the delusion that this temporary peace is Nirvana.

But in reality, at such times, bhavaṅga consciousness is still successively arising and passing away. But the meditator does not have sufficient skill to discern this due to the subtlety of these states.

To avoid dropping into this state and to make further progress, one needs the help of the five controlling faculties — faith, effort, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom to balance and uplift the mind, and fix it on the counterpart sign. One must have faith that mindfulness of breathing can lead to the attainment of jhāna. Effort must be raised to keep the mind on the counterpart sign repeatedly. Mindfulness must be present in order not to forget the counterpart sign. Concentration must be fixed on the counterpart sign. And wisdom must know the counterpart sign well.

VII. Attaining Jhāna Concentration

When these five controlling faculties are sufficiently developed and balanced, concen-

tration will go beyond access to jhāna.The factors of jhāna become strong, and the stream of jhāna javanas flows uninterruptedly for a long time. It is just as if a man with strong feet could stand for a whole day.

This extremely serene state is called jhāna because it closely contemplates the object. There is also a derivation of the term jhāna suggesting that it "burns up" the five hindrances, which are adverse states opposed to concentration.

When reaching jhāna in this way, the mind continuously knows the counterpart sign without interruption for one, two, three hours, or even all night. At this time one neither hears sounds nor falls into the bhavaṅga mind state.Some meditators may say that they can hear sounds while in jhāna. While there is a good reason why it may seem this way, it is in fact not possible. Why is that?The jhāna cognitive process takes the counterpart sign as its object, whereas the ear-door cognitive process takes sound as its object. When the ear-door cognitive process arises, the jhāna cognitive process cannot arise. But it is possible to momentarily slip out of jhāna cognize a sound or sense impression, and re-enter jhāna again. And for the meditator new to jhāna, it may well seem as if both occurred simultaneously. With-

out realizing it, one has emerged from jhāna for a split second and re-entered. Unable to discern that the jhāna cognitive process and ear-door cognitive process are occurring alternately, not simultaneously, one proclaims that one can hear sounds in a blissful state of jhāna.

After two or three days when concentration is successively fixed on the counterpart sign for one or two hours at each sitting, one should emerge from the jhāna and turn one's attention to the heart area to look for the bhavaṅga mind-door. This mind-door is luminous, clear, bright, and reflective like a mirror. If one can find the mind-door, one will notice that the same counterpart sign that appears under the nostrils appears here.

There at the heart area, discern the five factors of jhāna:

1) initial application of mind
2) sustained application of mind
3) joy
4) happiness
5) one-pointedness of mind

At first, one discerns these factors of jhāna one by one.

VIII. The Five Factors of Jhāna

1) Initial application of mind (*vitakka*) is the directing and placing of the mind on the object, the counterpart sign.

2) Sustained application of mind (*vicāra*) is keeping the mind anchored on the object. Initial

application is the first striking of the mind on the object, like a bee diving towards a lotus, whereas sustained application is continued pressure like the bee buzzing around the lotus after it has dived towards it.

3) Joy (*piti*) is keen interest, liking, and delighting in the counterpart sign. Its function is to refresh the body and mind, pervading it with thrill and rapture.

4) Happiness (*sukha*) is pleasant feeling associated with experiencing the counterpart sign.

5) One-pointedness (*ekaggatā*) is fixing the mind firmly on the counterpart sign, which when well developed is known as concentration (*samādhi*).

Soon one learns to discern all of them at once. When jhāna has been attained in this way, the meditator must discern the *mode* in which he or she attained it. When the jhāna is lost, the meditator will be able to recapture that mode and re-attain the jhāna. While familiarizing oneself with it, it is possible to then repeat the jhāna again and again.

IX. Five Masteries

1) **Mastery in adverting** is being able to advert to the factors of jhāna after emerging from the jhāna.

2) **Mastery in attaining** is being able to enter jhāna whenever one wishes.

3) **Mastery in resolving** is being able to stay absorbed for as long as one has determined to stay.

4) **Mastery in emerging** is being able to emerge from the jhāna at the time determined in advance.

5) **Mastery in reviewing** is being able to review the factors of jhāna from which one has just emerged.

X. Attaining the Second Jhāna

When one becomes skilled in these five masteries, one proceeds to the second jhāna. If, without becoming proficient in the first jhāna, one tries to go to higher jhānas,one will not only miss the first jhāna but will be unable to attain the second. One loses both jhānas. To attain the second jhāna one needs to enter the first jhāna, emerge from it, and reflect on its faults and the advantages of the

second jhāna.

One considers that the first jhāna is close to the five hindrances and that the jhāna factors of initial application of mind and sustained application of mind in the first jhāna are gross. They make the mind unsettled compared with the second jhāna, which is free of these two factors. With the wish to remove these two factors and be left with only joy, happiness, and one-pointedness of mind, one continuously concentrates on the counterpart sign. In this way one is be able to go higher and reach the second jhāna.

XI. Attaining the Third Jhāna

One then practices to become proficient in the five masteries of the second jhāna. When one has succeeded and wants to develop the third jhāna, one reflects on the faults of the second jhāna and the advantages of the third. Namely, the second jhāna is close to the first, and the factor of joy in the second jhāna is gross. This makes the mind less subtle than the more sublime third jhāna, which transcends joy. Reflecting in this way, after arising from the second jhāna, cultivate a desire

to attain the third jhāna, and again concentrate on the counterpart sign until attaining the third jhāna, which is possessed of two jhāna factors: happiness and one-pointedness of mind. The Buddha points out that "the happiness of the third jhāna, which is devoid of sensual pleasure, surpasses all mundane happiness."

XII. Attaining the Fourth Jhāna

Once successful in the five masteries of the third jhāna, proceed to develop the fourth jhāna. Reflect on the faults of the third jhāna and the advantages of the fourth. Consider that the happi-

ness in the third jhāna is emotional compared to the subtlety of equanimity in the fourth jhāna .Reflecting in this way, after arising from the third jhāna, cultivate a desire to attain the fourth jhāna. Again concentrate on the counterpart sign until attaining the fourth jhāna, which is possessed of equanimity and one-pointedness of mind. Then practice the five masteries of the fourth jhāna.

With the attainment of the fourth jhāna, the breath stops completely, yet one is not harmed by this in the least. This may sound impossible, but it is verifiable. The experience of countless meditators proves it is true, in spite of what science or the medical establishment may have to say about it. This completes the fourth and final stage in the development of mindfulness of breathing: "Calming the breath body I will breathe in," and, "Calming the breath body I will breathe out."

XIII. What Is the Sign of Concentration (Nimitta)?

Jhāna consciousness takes the counterpart sign as object. But where does the *nimitta* or "sign" come from? Most mind states that arise dependent on the heart-base produce breath-

ing. A *nimitta*, which comes from the breath, is the outcome of a deep, intensified, and profoundly concentrated mind. The ordinary mind cannot produce a *nimitta*.

What is this sign of concentration, the brilliant light, experienced in meditation? It is not magic. I remember talking about this light once in California, and the American audience thought I was talking about stage magic. The Buddha recalled how he perceived light while he was still a Bodhisatta (Majjhima Nikāya 128). But how?

Every consciousness that arises dependent on the heart-base can generate a great deal of consciousness-born particles (cittaja rupa-kalāpas). In each *kalāpa* there are eight inseparable elements (earth, water, fire, wind, color, smell, taste, and nutritive essence). Serenity-meditation-consciousness (*samatha-bhāvanā-citta*), which transcends sensual

pleasures, can produce many powerful consciousness-born kalāpas internally. The color element in those kalāpas becomes very bright. The more powerful the serenity-meditation-consciousness and insight-meditation-consciousness are, the brighter the color. Because these kalāpas arise simultaneously and in succession, the color of one kalāpa and the color of another arise so closely together that, like electrons in an electric bulb, light occurs.

Furthermore, in each kalāpa produced by serenity-meditation-consciousness, there is fire-element,

which can also produce many generations of new kalāpas. This is called temperature-born kalāpas. Likewise, the color in those kalāpas is bright due to the power of concentration. When the brightness of one color and the brightness of another color arise closely together, it manifests as light. This occurs not only internally but also externally, that is, outside of the body. Therefore, the meditator sees brilliant light under the nostrils or in all directions. A darkened room may appear bright to someone in possession of the sign. However, that same light can spread in all ten directions and encompass the entire world system or go even farther, depending on the power of the serenity-meditation-consciousness. The Buddha's great disciple Anuruddha's divine-eye-consciousness produced light up to 1,000 world systems. (Aṅguttara Nikāya 3 .128)

The Buddha defines Right Concentration as the first four jhānas.
Sayalay Susila USA 2011