The Breath Inside the Breath

Reflections on the Anapanasati Sutta

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Notes

While quotes from contemporary publications are footnoted, sutta references simply give the collection and sutta number. Here are the abbrevitations I use:

- Majjhima Nikaya, Middle Length Discourses – MN
- Samyutta Nikaya, Connected Discourses – SN
- Anguttara Nikaya, Numerical Discourses – AN
- Digha Nikaya, Long Discourses - DN

Introduction

The Anapanasati Sutta, the Discourse on Mindfulness of Breathing, Majjhima Nikaya 118, is one of the most elegant teachings in Early Buddhism. Its meditation instructions are both poetic and practical. Their logic draws us in and leads us inexorably to awakening. One feels the skilled, compassionate, and wise hand of the Buddha guiding you forward. Its form is simple, its teachings profound, and its challenges daunting. Thich Nhat Hanh says that when he first encountered the sutta he thought he'd "discovered the greatest treasure in the world."[1] The Buddha says that mindful breathing creates "an ambrosial pleasant dwelling." (SN 54.9)

The sutta contains five main sections, one laying out the setting in which it was given, a second, considered the heart of the sutta, giving the meditation instructions, and three more detailing the fruits of the practice. The role of the sutta in Theravada Buddhism has fluctuated over time, sometimes given prominence, sometimes submerged beneath more popular commentarial texts. In recent decades there has been a revival of interest.

What makes the sutta so appealing is that it promises to give us guidance on the most fundamental tool used in Buddhist meditation: mindful breathing. For me, what makes it even more interesting, is that once engaged in a serious way, that promise becomes much more complicated. What at first seems straightforward and transparent, becomes in application, something of a puzzle.

Finally, what makes the sutta so durable is that on the one hand it describes a step-by-step process for attaining enlightenment, the highest goal of Buddhist practice, and at the same time, can be utilized for much less ambitious spiritual, psychological, and meditative purposes. Wherever you are on the Buddhist, or simply the mindfulness path, you can learn something

[1] Nhat Hanh, 2003, p. 3

valuable from this sutta. And it can open doors in your practice that will take you as deep as you want to go.

I was inspired to write about the sutta when sitting a self-retreat in December of 2021. There I worked with a short chapter from Ajahn Pasanno's book *Nourishing the Roots* called "Mindfulness of Breathing: Food for the Heart." This clear and succinct encapsulation of the sutta was a valuable guide for a week of meditation. After deciding that I wanted to take on the challenge of writing about the sutta, I quickly realized that I needed more guidance. Thus I began to study three other books: *Mindfulness of Breathing,* by Bhikkhu Analayo, *Mindfulness with Breathing,* by Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, and *Breathe, You Are Alive!* by Thich Nhat Hanh. I also listened to and took extensive notes on the recordings of Bhkkhu Bodhi's talks on the sutta. My primary source for a translation of the sutta is Bhikkhu Bodhi, though at times I use parts of other translator's versions. Thereby this book became a kind of conversation with these authors/teachers. At times I have felt a great longing to ask various of them questions, and fortunately Ajahn Pasanno has been available for such inquiries. Bhikkhu Bodhi also responded generously to one of my questions.

It's not enough, though, to write a book about what other people say about the *Anapanasati Sutta*. Rather I am bringing my own experience and struggles in working with the sutta, and further with meditation and Buddhism in general, to this undertaking. In some ways I feel I've dug deeper into my meditative experience in this book than any of my previous ones. I wanted to expose the myriad nuances, confusions, and excursions of my practice over more than forty years. I don't do that as some sort of meditation memoir (an awful thought), but because I believe, as one sutta puts it, "we are different in body, but one in mind." (MN 31) I don't think that my experiences are unique. I believe they are some of the things that happen to people when

they try to meditate. And my experience as a meditation teacher tells me that a lot of meditators need to hear that they, too, are not unique. We call this "normalizing," helping people to stop thinking there is something wrong with them or that they are personally flawed in some way by showing them that their experiences are actually quite common, normal.

I suppose there are also times when I feel alone in my struggles, *ab*normal—don't we all? And writing about them feels like a way of not being so alone. As you'll learn as you read this book, I'm a depressive. I'm incredibly fortunate that I have been able to manage this condition to the point that it doesn't have a significant destructive impact on my life anymore. But at times when I've heard some upbeat dharma talk or meditation instructions, I've felt like a loser, someone who doesn't fit into a spiritual community that sometimes feels too much like cheerleading camp. I mean, the Buddha's teaching is about suffering and how to end it, so shouldn't we be addressing the first part of that proposition not just the second?

N.B. Some Buddhists will object to my characterizing myself as a depressive on the grounds that any label is reifying a self. To be clear, I use that language in the relative sense, not as a definition. It would be more accurate to say that over this lifetime certain depressive mind states have been prevalent, but such language becomes ponderous over the course of a book. Therefore, I hope you will understand that anytime I say that I "am" something it is meant in this sense as patterns that manifest, rather than a solid self with certain definitive qualities.

Part I: The Setting

Most of the books, talks, and commentaries on the *Anapanasati Sutta* focus on the sixteen steps that describe mindfulness of breathing. In fact, when I was first exposed to the sutta, I was surprised to find there were other parts. The opening, what I call "The Setting" can read like a superfluous embellishment meant for scholars and monks, but I see it differently. In these tidbits found throughout the suttas, we learn the details of the Buddha's world: the places he taught; the people who were his followers and antagonists; and some of the events that inspired particular teachings. In this way, these ancient, sometimes dusty suttas come alive, become more real, more immediate, and more human. These aren't mythic tales but the surviving details of a remarkable human being's life. I like to put myself there—probably way in the back row—among these devoted followers listening to the dharma conveyed by my master.

The sutta begins with a traditional opening, "Thus have I heard." This is said to be the voice of Ananda, the Buddha's attendant for the last twenty-five years of his life. Ananda is known as the person who recited the Buddha's teachings at the First Council, three months after his death, his "Parinibbana" or final and complete enlightenment.

As in many suttas, Ananda tells us where the discourse was given and who was there. Here the Buddha was at Savatthi in the Eastern Park in "the Palace of Migara's Mother." Right away I'm thinking, "Who's Migara? And doesn't his mother have a name?" Although the sutta doesn't tell us, the book *Great Disciples of the Buddha*, edited by Bhikkhu Bodhi, fills us in. Oddly enough, the person referred to, Visakha, a great lay follower of the Buddha, was actually

Migara's daughter-in-law, but because she converted him to Buddhism, she was known as his "Mother." I suppose we'd say she was his *spiritual* mother.[2]

Many of the Buddha's suttas were delivered instead from Jeta's Grove, Anathapindika's Park, which was also in Savatthi. Bhikkhu Bodhi suggests that it might have been on the other side of town, the Westside.

By now the Buddha had been teaching for many years. To have two monasteries in one city is pretty impressive. There for this teaching are many of his senior disciples, a Hall of Fame list that includes Sariputta, Maha Moggallana, Anuruddha, Ananda, and others. (*Great Disciples of the Buddha* fleshes out their histories, and there we learn many fascinating details of their lives.) The sutta now tells us that the elder monks have been teaching the newer ones. *Great Disciples of the Buddha* tells us that each of these elders had a kind of specialty, whether in concentration, wisdom, loving-kindness, or something else that they would teach. What's interesting here is that we realize that the Buddha himself isn't doing that much hands-on teaching at this point. There are so many monks around him—hundreds it seems—that he has to farm out that task to his enlightened followers. So, right away we're getting a look into the world of the Buddha's followers. After decades of teaching, he must have become so popular that it was relatively difficult to get close to him. That being said, many suttas are addressed to a particular person, monk or layperson, so he wasn't actually inaccessible.

Now the Buddha tells the assembled group that he is so happy with the progress of all these monks that he's going to teach for another month. What we're learning is that this is the end of the traditional three-month Rains Retreat, and the Buddha has decided to add a fourth month. This is big news because during the Rains Retreat the monks are required to stay in one

[2] Thera, et al, p. 251, 2003

place, and now, as word goes out that the Buddha is going to be teaching for another month, other monks start streaming in from outlying areas where they had been holed up. They're all excited because they hadn't been able to see the Buddha during the retreat, and now they'll get their chance.

In announcing that he's staying for the extra time we're told he's going to wait through the "Komudi full moon." Bhikkhu Bodhi's notes on the sutta tell us that this full moon is so named because a certain water lily with a similar name blossoms at that time. This is one of those irrelevant details that somehow moves me. First, just because I'm imagining this beautiful flower blooming, but also because it's so specific. I love that they named a month after a flower that bloomed at that time of year, like if we named a month "Wisteria." These are the types of details that convey authenticity to these texts, turn them from vague generalities into real events we can imagine happening in this distant past.

The importance of the teaching that is going to follow is signaled when the Buddha says: "So arouse still more energy to attain the unattained, the unachieved, to realise the unrealised." (MN 118. 4) What he's saying is that, "A lot of you are getting close to enlightenment, and I'm going to give you a teaching that will help you take that last big step. Just hang out for another month and see if you can make it." (He didn't actually say any of this. It's just what I infer from the text.) Another subtext here is that the Buddha can read people's minds. I mean, maybe he's just getting a report from the teachers who are working with all these monks, but given what we're told about the Buddha's psychic powers, it seems likely that he was tuning in to the progress of his followers.

Now we come to the night that these teachings were offered. Here we learn that "the Blessed One was seated in the open surrounded by the Sangha of Bhikkhus." Again, I'm inspired

by imagining this gathering on a cool Indian night. However, in terms of this sutta being an accurate description of events, we have to wonder how everyone would have been able to hear the teachings. Without a microphone or jumbotron to project his voice and image, the Buddha would have had to shout to be heard by what seems to be hundreds of monks. Not very contemplative for a dharma talk. A simple fact like this reminds us not to take the suttas too literally. At times we hear about royal visitors who arrive with five hundred elephants, for example. We're given to understand that numbers like this are just meant to convey "a lot" rather than an actual number. So, presumably, though there were quite a few monks around, it was not so many that they couldn't hear from the cheap seats.

You might ask, am I trying to have it both ways, talking about the events described in the sutta as actual, historical happenings, then turning around and saying it's not all literal. And you would be right. The truth is, I'm not depending on the historical accuracy of the suttas to make my points. I suspect that the descriptions of events in the suttas have some basis in history and also diverge from reality. What's really important is the teachings and guidance the Buddha gives, and his reflections on the human condition. The settings and characters just bring it all more alive. They aren't necessary for you to know in order learn from and benefit from what he taught. I suppose that's why many people skip over the introduction to this sutta. I just have a fondness for narrative elements and like to dig around in them for clues or pointers.

Now the Buddha proceeds with praising the Sangha who are present. Here are a few things we learn: this group is "free from prattle," they aren't wasting time in gossip. "It consists purely of heartwood," the best part of a tree, the most solid part. They are "worthy of gifts," so people should support them, it will bring good karma. And my favorite, they are "an incomparable field of merit for the world," their existence is actually affecting the world, their

goodness and enlightenment reaching far beyond their physical location. This is why at the end of many Buddhist events—retreats or talks—we "dedicate the merit," hoping that our effort to become enlightened has far reaching consequences beyond ourselves. It's also why we hear of hermit monks who spend years meditating on compassion for all beings; they believe that their mental cultivation is actually bringing benefit to the world. Take that however you like. Believe it or don't.

Finally, the Buddha begins a kind of countdown, describing the various stages of enlightenment the attendees have attained, starting with the fully enlightened arahants—the fourth stage of enlightenment according to the early Buddhist teachings--then stepping down through the other three stages. After that illustrious group, the Buddha starts to talk about the various elements of the path that those who haven't attained these stages are working with. These include the four foundations of mindfulness, the four kinds of "right striving," four bases for spiritual power, the five faculties, the five powers, the seven enlightenment factors, the Noble Eightfold Path. Next we learn that some monks are developing the Brahamaviharas—loving-kindness, compassion, altruistic joy, and equanimity—the "meditation on foulness" (learning to let go of sense desire by reflecting on how unsatisfactory sense pleasure ultimately is), and the "perception of impermanence."

The last line before the section introducing the sixteen steps says some monks "abide devoted to the development of mindfulness of breathing."

I find it intriguing that mindfulness of breathing comes last. We know from the opening of the sutta that the Buddha is planning to push the monks forward in their practice in hopes they will all become enlightened this month. And the method he plans to teach to accomplish that end is mindful breathing. And yet, this can read as if it were the lowest or least important practice.

He places it last and he seems to be following a descending order, starting with the fully enlightened ones. So, is mindfulness of breathing the least worthy of these practices? If so, why is he offering it in this context?

Ajahn Pasanno straightened me out on this question. First, he pointed out that the list from the four foundations of mindfulness to the Noble Eightfold path encompassed what is known as the "Wings to Awakening," thirty-seven elements that the Buddha called "the heart of his teachings," according to Thanissaro Bhikkhu in his book of the same name. This observation from Ajahn Pasanno points us to one of the challenges of studying the suttas. Oftentimes, as in this case, there is a kind of code you need to know in order to understand what's really going on.

Further Ajahn Pasanno suggests that rather than presenting some kind of diminishing order of practices, the Buddha is using a kind of dramatic rhetorical device to build up to a climactic moment. If the Anapanasati Sutta were a TV show, this would be the cliff hanging end of the episode—cut to commercial. "Next week, the sixteen steps of the Anapanasati Sutta."

Part II: The Sixteen Steps

Part of the elegance of the *Anapanasati Sutta* is the simple structure: sixteen instructions divided into four "tetrads," of four steps each. The four tetrads parallel the Four Foundations of Mindfulness: body, feelings, mind states, and *dhammas*.

The first two instructions are only about the breath; the succeeding fourteen include mindfulness of the breath combined with mindfulness of some other object. There is a kind of rhythm to these instructions as each step tells us to bring mindfulness to the in-breath and its partner object, then the out-breath and its partner object. Just as the breath swings in and out, the music of the sutta flows as well.

Before we start our journey through the sixteen steps of the sutta, I want to discuss various foundational elements to meditation practice, as well as some of the preliminary instructions.

TIME AND PRACTICE

Time is the often-unacknowledged prerequisite to any meditative progress. People seek out the ideal meditation system with the belief that it will work like a pill: just follow the system and you'll get the results you're after. That's a very materialistic and mechanical way of looking at meditation. And, while it's true that different techniques may tend to bring different types of results—and this all varies from person to person—there is no substitute for time. The more the better, generally speaking.

It's a cliché that we live in an instant results culture, and it's obviously true. With this attitude, people want quick outcomes with minimum input. A one-minute meditation is good. A

one breath meditation is better. While some small benefit might come from such brief efforts, no serious meditative practice can be done so quickly. That's simply not how meditation works.

I think of it as "spiritual time," or "sacred time." It works at its own pace. There is no hurrying the process. No matter what wonderful meditation practice you adopt, you're going to have to put in significant time to reap any results. Not only that, but you are going to have to *keep* putting in time. This is probably why there are very few truly accomplished meditators in the Western world.

So, when I say you need to put in time, how much am I talking about? Let's start with one example: Theravada monastics. Their tradition requires that they take a three-month meditation retreat every year, called the Rains Retreat because it was done during the rainy season in ancient India. For a Thai Forest monk, they would need to do ten of these retreats before being assigned the title "Ajahn," which indicates that they are now a teacher. Ten three-month retreats. Very few of us will practice that much in our lifetime, much less in ten years. So, we know that the upper range of time is really limitless.

When I go on retreat it usually takes anywhere from two to four days to "settle in," that is, for it to feel as if I'm getting quiet, focused, and gaining real clarity and insight. That's three days of silence, each day involving something like six to eight hours of sitting meditation, as well as applying mindfulness to all activities with no outside distractions. That's a start. Once I get settled, every succeeding day helps to carry my practice deeper and wider. Note, too, that ten days is a standard length for a lay retreat. On longer retreats, for some reason it seems to take longer to settle in. So, on a three-month retreat, it might be a week or two. Even then, though, "settling in" is relative: at some point on almost any retreat, something in your mind or some external event or interaction will trigger a flood of thoughts and feelings that seem to destroy all

the accumulated calm. This can actually become a valuable opportunity for working with internal disturbance, but at the time it just feels overwhelming.

In daily life, time is more at a premium. I try to sit for at least thirty minutes in the morning, but if I stretch it to forty-five minutes or an hour, I can clearly discern different effects. If I add a second sit in a day, I get even more out of it. But I don't always put in the extra time. Why not?

The challenge of meditation is the beginning. Oftentimes when I start meditating I feel agitated. My mind is busy, my body unsettled; it doesn't feel good and I don't want to do it. It takes faith and determination to sit through that and get to the other side. Faith because I have to believe that it will get better; determination because I'm essentially fighting against the strong tendency to stop. I almost have to intentionally remind myself that it's worth it, that if I put in the time, my meditation will get deeper and clearer.

Of course, many people face the more practical obstacle of busy lives. With responsibilities like work and family to take care of, people feel a time squeeze. With the advent of remote work and being constantly connected through the internet, we can get to a point of overwhelm. This is another argument for disconnecting and meditating regularly, but maybe it doesn't feel possible. And even when we do have time after a busy day, we might not have the energy to practice, but rather collapse on the couch and watch TV or read Twitter. It's hard.

The forward thrust of our lives, the busyness itself, can make it even harder because the habit of doing, of activity, has to be broken in order to stop, sit, and breathe. And when we are so conditioned and habituated to moving forward and accomplishing things, it's challenging to step in and stop. But that's what we must do if we want the benefits of meditation.

Each of us is responsible for our own time and energy. If we really want to meditate, we will likely be able to find or make the time.

Time. There is no substitute.

WHAT IS MINDFUL BREATHING?

Perhaps the most common instruction in Buddhist meditation training is to follow the breath. I recall the first time I was given this guidance. It was in a Shambhala Buddhist center in Burlington, Vermont, the summer of 1980. I had been practicing Transcendental Meditation for almost two years, which involved repeating a mantra, a Sanskrit word with supposed spiritual power (although I didn't know what the word meant). The previous night I'd gotten drunk and had a fight with my then-girlfriend who already practiced Buddhist meditation. In a misguided effort to somehow patch things up, I decided that I needed to learn Buddhist meditation. A rational person might have figured the problem wasn't the meditation but the drinking. (I figured that out five years later. The girlfriend was long gone by then.)

Nonetheless, there I was sitting on a cushion on the floor of the meditation center with what I recall as two teachers. Why two? I do not know. They told me I should meditate by paying attention to my breath. Easy. Simple. Being shy and insecure I didn't have the wherewithal to ask what it meant to "pay attention to the breath." I could feel my chest rising and falling. Was that it? Was there some other way to do this? The instructions seemed vague. I'm breathing. So what? I needed more. I left the center and quickly gave up on whatever they were trying to teach me.

That fall I moved to Los Angeles where I found a Buddhist monk who had recently returned from eight years in Sri Lanka. In his weekly class he would set up a cassette machine playing a guided meditation from Stephen Levine and leave for forty-five minutes. From those

tapes I began to get more information. Soon I embarked on a series of progressively longer meditation retreats, five days, twenty-two days, and the following year, three months. The instructions on these retreats began to clarify how I was supposed to use the breath in meditation. I was told to feel the sensations at one of two places: the nostrils or the belly. I have practiced (and eventually taught) in this way ever since. Recently, however, as I've begun an exploration of the Anapanasati Sutta, the Discourse on Mindfulness of Breathing, I found myself thrown back to that first encounter with the breath in Burlington. Reading and listening to teachings from some of the leading Buddhist authorities on this sutta, I began to see that there were nuances and indeed, substantial questions that I was forced to address about what the Buddha meant by "mindful breathing."

The range of questions that came up made me want to try to catalog the various teachings I encountered. I wanted to be able to look at conflicting perspectives; understand the cryptic instructions in the sutta; tease out the relevant from the merely technical; and finally, be able to practice fully this teaching that is said to result in the cultivation and fruition of the seven factors of enlightenment, and lead to, "true knowledge and deliverance."

THE STORY OF MY BREATH

I want to step back now and tell you a little about my experience with breathing—not just in meditation, but in my life. I don't know if my problems with the breath are particularly unusual, but as I've reflected on the sutta and my meditation practice, I've realized that breathing hasn't always been so straightforward for me. And, if it can be a problem for me, it must be for others as well. So, I tell you all this to encourage you to reflect on your own experience with the breath.

My first real issue with the breath came after I'd been smoking (cigarettes) for five or six years, around twenty-years old. I was having a persistent cough and developed chronic bronchitis. My doctor then told me that if I didn't quit smoking I could develop emphysema in

five years, a very disturbing thought. I managed to quit soon after that, although I continued to smoke marijuana heavily for fifteen years.

In my mid-twenties I took up jogging. After several months of daily running, I got a pain in my chest. When I went to a doctor, he told me I had a sprained sternum which resulted from the fact that I had an unusually small chest cavity, and as my lungs grew with the running, there hadn't been enough room for them. It was a strange thing to learn, but helped account for the past problems.

No other dramatic issues have arisen since then, but every time I have a cold or flu the cough lingers for months. Fortunately, I avoid covid, but after a severe cold a couple years ago, I have had a persistent cough that doesn't abate.

What does all this have to do with anapanasati? When I meditate I often find myself needing to draw in a deep breath. It's possible that my small lungs don't provide me with enough oxygen when the breath gets shallow in meditation. And since the sutta suggests that we'll start with longer breaths and progress to shorter, I wonder if I'm "doing it wrong."

To add to this concern one of my teachers used to say that when you were starting to develop samadhi, it was best not to take deep breaths. Thanks…

CHALLENGES OF THE SUTTA

The *Anapanasati Sutta* is one of the two key meditation instructions in the Theravada Buddhist tradition, the *Satipatthana* being the other. The sutta has been explored extensively historically as well as in contemporary teachings. While I have been exposed to, read about, and been guided by teachers on the subject of the sutta, this current exploration is for me a fresh and deeper look. What I discovered in this process was that I need to talk about what could almost be called two

different versions of the sutta: the scriptural understanding and another, perhaps less rigorous version. Because the scriptural teaching suggests a level of concentration that few of us can regularly or perhaps, ever attain, to gain value from the sutta, we need this second understanding to apply the teachings to our needs. I am not suggesting an alternate reading that supplants the original, but rather an additional reading that attempts to open up certain aspects of the sutta. This second reading is not original to me, but I hope will bring together ideas that may not have been viewed in this wholistic way.

My sense of the need for this additional reading perhaps comes out of my own failings as a meditator, my inability to consistently attain the states the traditional reading directs us to. Instead of deciding that this inability excludes me from working with the sutta, I have chosen to find other ways to apply the aspects of the sutta to my own experience. These other approaches evolved organically through my years of insight meditation. Focusing on the Anapanasati now, has allowed me to refine my thinking around this approach and put it in the context of this specific sutta.

All this is not to say that I have personally abandoned my attempts to follow the traditional path of the sutta. I most emphatically have not. When able, I continue to work with the instructions as written and as understood by students of the sutta.

Among the aspects of the sutta that I find difficult are the elements that ask us to either experience or develop particular pleasant states. As someone with a history of depression, my meditation does not always lead me to the joy and happiness that the sutta suggests will arise if one simply follows the instructions. Yes, that can happen, and has happened for me at times; however, at other times such feelings have simply not been accessible for me. When that is the case, I don't want to give up on the essential project of applying mindful breathing to the

meditative experience and developing insight out of that. Rather, I have tried to find other routes to insight and, indeed, happiness that are essentially about opening to, even inviting in, the difficult mind/body states that arise from depression and other challenging emotions. Bringing the four foundations of mindfulness to bear on such states has been a critically important part of my own spiritual and emotional life's journey.

I've often wondered why I couldn't find applicable teachings in the early Buddhist canon for the emotional challenges I have faced. I've never been able to find an answer to that question, though it's one I've taken to some of the preeminent authorities. In the end, I don't think it's particularly important to find such teachings. My sense is that, with a little openness and creativity, we can adapt the traditional mindful practices to all kinds of mind states that aren't addressed in the suttas.

THE AUTHORITIES

These five teacher/monks inform this writing: Ajahn Pasanno, Ajahn Buddhadasa, Venerable Analayo, Bhikkhu Bodhi, and Thich Nhat Hanh. The first four are Theravada monks, the fifth, a legendary Vietnamese Zen monk. I draw from these writings:

Nourishing the Roots, Ajahn Pasanno.

Mindfulness with Breathing: A Manual for Serious Beginners, Ajahn Buddhadasa.

Mindfulness of Breathing: a Practice Guide and Translations, Venerable Analayo.

Breathe, You Are Alive!: Sutra on the Full Awareness of Breathing, Thich Nhat Hanh.

And I draw from Bhikkhu Bodhi's recordings, "A Systematic Study of the Majjhima Nikaya," available online.

I also spent an afternoon in one-on-one conversation with Ajahn Pasanno. That conversation has helped me clarify my understanding of the sutta.

I go between Bhikkhu Bodhi's and Venerable Analayo's translations as my primary version of the sutta. The subtle differences in translations raise other questions that from time to time will come up.

Ajahn Pasanno offers a simple, concise, and direct approach that makes what can seem inaccessible much more in reach. Ajahn Buddhadasa gives a thorough, systematic approach, steeped in traditional Theravada understanding while informed by his own original and at times iconoclastic approach to the Dharma. Analayo brings his thorough scholarship along with deep practice to analyzing and offering a meticulous approach to Anapanasati.

Thich Nhat Hanh's approach probably most closely resembles that of Ajahn Pasanno. There is a gentle precision to his teaching that has made him the most widely known of these five.

Two of these teachers are no longer alive, Thich Nhat Hanh having recently passed and Buddhadasa having died in the 1990s. I saw Thich Nhat Hanh speak twice in large public talks, but never encountered Buddhadasa. I have sat two retreats with Analayo and had a couple very brief conversations with him (though I've had many in my head). My relationship with Ajahn Pasanno is more direct, having spent time at the monastery where he has been abbot and encountered him in small meditation groups in the Bay Area. He also generously spent a couple of afternoons going over one of my earlier books.

I tell you all this because this writing is partly a conversation with these four teachers, as well as others who pop up. Because of my relationship with Ajahn Pasanno, this can be an actual conversation, which will certainly help. With the others, there is, at times, a sense of frustration for me that I can't clarify with them what they mean or ask them to elaborate certain points. One of the great challenges of studying, teaching, and writing about meditation is that the experience

is entirely internal and subjective, so that the words we use to communicate what we should do and how we should understand what is happening are necessarily abstract and imprecise.

The deeper I got into this study of the sutta the more I began to question my competence to be talking about it. I go in and out of feeling I have an intuitive grasp of the material to feeling intellectually flummoxed. This, then, points to the problem of communication. When I over-intellectualize the meditative process, I lose touch with the actual experience. However, when I get absorbed into the experience, I can lose touch with any practical understanding of what is happening. The whole thing just morphs into a mushy blur of calm, peace, joy, and altered states of consciousness. While that can be a very pleasant experience and certainly has value on several levels, it doesn't lend itself to verbal explanations or elucidation.

SATIPATTHANA AND ANAPANASATI

When I began my practice in 1980, I didn't even know the word sutta. Sutra, yes; sutta, no. It wasn't one I heard from my teachers. At the time, Buddhism was being taught (where I encountered it) as a kind of blend of traditions, Theravada, Mahayana, Vajrayana. I thought I was learning "Vipassana," only to realize years later that vipassana isn't a Buddhist tradition at all, but simply a term applied to a style of meditation developed mainly in Burma, but also in Sri Lanka and Thailand. It is, in fact, taught in the Theravada Buddhist tradition.

I also had no idea that, although there existed a huge collection of suttas compiled soon after the Buddha's death, much of what was taught in contemporary Theravada or Vipassana circles, was based on the much later writings of the *Visuddhimagga* or *The Path of Purification*, a set of commentaries on the suttas collected around 500 CE, a thousand years after the Buddha's lifetime. The suttas and the commentaries sometimes agree and sometimes diverge. The commentaries attempt to systematize a lot of the meditation instructions, and that can be very

useful. But they also wind up putting us a step away from the original, oftentimes making claims and definitions that, when put up beside the suttas, seem somewhat out of tune. I've also found the commentaries to be highly technical, at times speaking in a language that is inaccessible to me. I don't think I'm the only contemporary student of Buddhism who at times has closed the *Visuddhimagga* in frustration, feeling at a complete loss as to what it was talking about. It seems surprising in a way, that the suttas, which are much older, can actually be more readable than the later commentaries. That isn't to say that the suttas themselves don't present enormous challenges. They do.

Nonetheless, it was often versions of the commentarial teachings that I and others were receiving under the umbrella of vipassana forty years ago. I have to credit the Western teachers of that time who were able to distill what their own Asian teachers were telling them into easily understandable terms. My own occasional personal encounters with teachers such as Anagarika Munindra and Thangpulu Sayadaw as well as reading Mahasi Sayadaw and others left me at a loss. Without my Western teachers I would have given up any attempt to learn Buddhist meditation, or indeed, Buddhism from them.

So, when the first great collection of translations was published in 1995, the *Majjhima Nikaya* or *Middle Length Discourses*, we had questions. Lots of questions. A close reading of *Majjhima Nikaya* number 118, the *Anapanasati Sutta* evokes many of those questions.

Early in the Anapanasati Sutta as well as near the end, the Buddha tells us that this practice "fulfills" the four foundation of mindfulness. This makes explicit the relationship between these two suttas, Anapanasati and Satipatthana. And all of the texts I explore here talk about the correlations between the Satipatthana Sutta and the Anapanasati Sutta. They are like relatives,

siblings or cousins. They each follow a pattern of four aspects: body, feeling tone, mind (or mind states), and dhammas, insights or impersonal phenomena. However, there is a critical difference. While the Satipatthana is primarily pointing at areas of experience that we should explore however they arise, the Anapanasati is much more directive, assuming a positive result from focusing on these areas. Although they both contain claims that they lead to enlightenment, the path laid out by the Anapanasati is more explicit. The stages of the Anapanasati look more progressive. For example, in the area of feeling tone, the Satipatthana says to be aware whether such experiences are pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, as well as observing how they arise and pass (impermanence). The Anapanasati in this section tells us to experience joy and happiness; it is assumed that we have arrived at pleasant states at this point in our practice. It then tells us to calm the activities of mind uncovered in this stage of mindfulness.

In the area of mind, the Satipatthana guides us to observe what we could call pleasant as well as unpleasant states—it specifically points to contrasting states like "lustful or without lust." The Anapanasati only points to positive states, gladdening, concentrated, and liberated.

The fourth foundation of mindfulness in the *Satipatthana* sets out a collection of Buddhist teachings to contemplate. Bhikkhu Analayo, in his comparative study of different versions of the sutta concludes that the Seven Factors of Awakening and the Five Hindrances are the ones found consistently across versions. This contrasts with the *Anapanasati's* fourth tetrad, which parallels the fourth foundation. Here the injunction is to contemplate impermanence, fading away, cessation, and letting go. After reflecting on what seem completely different ideas, I've come to call both of these—the fourth foundation and the fourth tetrad—the "Big Picture." We're being asked to step away from our personal view of experience and seeing this greater perspective.

One way to understand all these contrasts is that simple mindfulness requires us to observe whatever is arising without trying to manipulate our experience. However, when we are able to harness the power of mindfulness and become more clearly focused, there is a process that plays out wherein the body and mind become calm and joyful, the mind becomes concentrated and free, and a transformative insight arises.

In the Satipatthana the Buddha tells us that this practice can lead to liberation; in the Anapanasati, he shows us exactly how.

Ajahn Pasanno sums up the differences by saying that the Satipatthana Sutta is a "much more global approach to applying the Buddha's teachings for overcoming suffering. Whereas the Anapanasati is a specific technique for inner cultivation."[3] So, the Anapanasati Sutta is more of a meditation guide, while the Satipatthana generally shows us how to be mindful.

In the Samyutta Nikaya we learn of what might be another reason for the contrast between the suttas. In a section of that collection called the Anapanasamyutta, there are several suttas that introduce the anapanasati practice in the same words as the better known *Anapanasati Sutta.* One of these suttas, entitled "At Vesali," (SN54.9) tells us that the Buddha gave a talk on "foulness" of the body, and then went on retreat for two weeks. When he emerged from seclusion he was surprised to find that the number of monks had dwindled. Ananda told him that some monks thought that if the body was such a source of disgust and suffering wouldn't it make sense to die and be rid of the whole problem. They either killed themselves or recruited someone else to kill them.

This is one of the most shocking stories I've ever read in the suttas.

[3] Pasanno, Conversation with Author, 2022

Apparently some of them misunderstood the "asubha" practices that encourage practitioners (especially monks) to view the body as "foul." Perhaps, I reasoned, the Buddha thought that he should present the mindfulness teachings in a more positive light, leaving out the contemplations of charnel ground and repulsiveness of our organs. Maybe that's why he offered the *Anapanasati* practice with its more positive tone.

It's a good theory, but I don't have any scholarship to back it up. And it may not be so important to prove. What is more useful is not to separate the suttas, but to see them as different versions of the same thing. The differences can simply come down to historical editing anomalies, or the fact that the Buddha gave these teachings at different times to different people. Rather than obsessing over distinctions, it's more helpful to take the broader view of the themes and goals of the suttas.

For instance, the *Satipatthana* suggests we notice the process of arising and passing—impermanence—in each topic of the sutta. The *Anapanasati* only explicitly brings out impermanence in the last tetrad. Obviously both suttas want us to explore deeply the reality of change, they just place that topic differently.

As Ajahn Pasanno says, we find in the *Anapanasati* a more explicit meditation text, a guide to practice. As a partner, the *Satipatthana* can help us to navigate different stages of the *Anapanasati*, especially when our experience doesn't align exactly with the instructions there. I've found that, at times I couldn't connect with the specific of the *Anapanasati*, but that the *Satipatthana* would give me a fallback position to take that allows me to keep on track with my practice of mindful breathing. Especially in those moments when the pleasant or positive states described in the *Anapanasati* were not accessible, the *Satipatthana* provides me with a more

general approach that makes room for the difficult or painful feelings, moods, and mind states that arise.

SECLUSION

The meditation instructions in the sutta begin, "Gone to the forest, to the root of a tree, to an empty hut…"

Venerable Analayo calls this "seclusion." When we meditate we need to withdraw a bit so we can turn the attention inward. Does this mean we can't be mindful in busy circumstances? No, certainly not. But for development of concentration and to work on a deep and complex practice like *anapanasati*, we need some quiet. But don't get stuck in the image of a monk. You can do this in your apartment or anywhere people won't disturb you.

Ajahn Chah told students who were bothered by a noisy punk band something like, "The noise isn't disturbing you; you are disturbing the noise." In other words, sound comes into your ear, and you react to it. If you are mindful, not averse to the sound, it just passes through. It's only a problem if you make it a problem. So it's important that we don't blame conditions around us for our meditative challenges. Whether coming from the outside or the inside, these will always be there. Our practice is to learn how to let go of aversive or greedy responses to these challenges.

The Buddha said that, ultimately, seclusion is an internal experience. When he tells us we should be "Secluded from unwholesome states," he means we aren't letting the five hindrances capture us. But he also means, we shouldn't indulge in unskillful actions. This, then, brings us to the question of *sila*, the ethical and moral component of the path. This has both an internal and an external impact on our practice and our life. Bhikkhu Bodhi says that, in the context of the

Noble Eightfold Path, the role of *sila* is "mental purification."[4] By practicing non-harming according to the Five Precepts, our inner life becomes more serene, undisturbed by guilt, shame, and fear of exposure. Then, when we live in this way, the practical side of our lives also tends to evolve in a positive direction, increasing the benefits of our ethical behavior.

In my own case, this became apparent after getting sober. Before that time I had taken some long retreats, and I'd certainly progressed as a meditator—at least I could sit still for long periods. However, my life had not progressed, materially and especially emotionally. My addictive behavior meant that, despite spending time in seclusion meditating, the rest of the time I wasn't secluded from unwholesome states. After getting sober I realized that things were out of balance. While my so-called spiritual life seemed fairly evolved, my emotional life was that of a teenager, my professional life was stuck in neutral, and my relationship life was going nowhere. It took five or six years of dealing with these other areas before I began to reach some balance. At that point, my meditation practice shifted from being something of a palliative to an accelerated path of insight. Further, I began to gain access to deeper concentration states. It became clear to me that meditation alone could not transform my life; that any real development involved the pairing of internal and external *sila*.

The truth is, this is what the Buddha teaches, the path of *sila*, *samadhi*, and *panna*, or morality, meditation, and wisdom. The path was always founded on that first piece—*sila*. I had simply chosen to ignore that teaching because it conflicted with my addictive, pleasure-seeking lifestyle. Today much of my work is with people who have struggled with addictions, and it brings me great joy to let them know that dealing with this aspect of their lives before approaching a meditative path is exactly what the Buddha taught. I also find that such folks tend

[4] Bodhi, 1994, p. 23

to progress in their meditation more rapidly than those who have not made morality a special focus in their lives.

POSTURE

"Folding the legs crosswise, keeping the body erect…"

How we hold the body has a huge impact on the mind and on concentration and mindfulness. Think of the high school student slouched in their seat (that was me). Or the rigid posture of a Marine at attention (not me). Neither of these are productive of clarity and calm.

The most helpful posture is one that is upright and aligned, the weight of the body held by the skeleton, not the muscles. It takes some time to find this proper balance, and sustaining it requires vigilance. In the same way that we keep returning the attention to the breath when the mind wanders, we also need to return the attention to the posture when the body wanders. This is not to say that one can't meditate in other postures. The Buddha explicitly said that we could practice mindfulness standing, sitting, walking, or lying down. For someone who struggles with an upright posture it is more than fine to practice lying down. This will simply create particular challenges, especially around staying awake and alert, but that's just part of meditation. There are always challenges.

In practice, establishing posture is the foundation of establishing mindfulness of the body, which is a persistent and recurring aspect of practice. Here is Ajahn Pasanno: "When the body is upright, the mind is more upright." So, establishing posture is not just a matter to getting lined up right, but feeling that alignment, tuning into it as a first step in mindfulness of the body. As we keep correcting the posture throughout a sitting, we are also more broadly being aware of sensations in the whole body.

The question of comfort in posture is important to examine. If we aim only for the softest, coziest couch, we'll find that being sunken in there is not conducive to mindfulness and concentration. We're really trying to find a "middle way" between comfort and rigidity. The classic lotus postures, with legs crossed, are meant to serve this function. If you are flexible enough to assume such a posture, it's worth working with it. At first it might feel awkward, but in time the solidity and balance that comes, not to mention the sense of being grounded, can be a great support to practice. It seems as if many people (even those young enough to learn this posture) are avoiding lotus posture these days. Personally, I miss the years when I could sit like that. While I experience less pain in my sitting now, I also tend to be more sleepy. And, frankly, working with pain in that posture wound up having a tremendous impact on my meditation. I explore this topic extensively in my *Buddhism & The Twelve Steps Workbook.*

BREATHING

"ever mindful, one breathes in; mindful, one breathes out."

While this instruction is simple enough, when one first attempts it, it can be challenging. There are several aspects to this challenge. First, simply paying attention to the breath can make one self-conscious. All of a sudden you might find it difficult to breathe in a natural way. This stage usually passes quickly if we persist. Then, it can be unclear what being mindful of the breath even means. The simplest, and probably most helpful way to think of it is that you are paying attention to the *sensations* of breath. For me this was easiest to pick up at the tip of the nose. I started paying attention to the feeling of air coming in the nose and going out the nose. I like that because it's very specific and the sensation is pretty easy to pick up (although it can get very subtle as you settle).

Venerable Analayo disagrees with me here: "In the *Anapanasati-sutta* the object of practice is the breath itself first of all and not only the sensations caused by the breath. The form of meditation we are practicing here is called 'mindfulness of inhalations and exhalations' (*anapanasati*) and not 'perception of physical touch' (*photthabbasanna*). Although physical sensations related to the touch of the breath are of course what helps us be aware of it, mindfulness of breathing is concerned with the breath itself." Frankly, I just don't know if I'm intelligent or insightful enough to pick up the distinction here. It's hard to be aware that you are breathing without feeling the sensations of breath. He says we're trying to pay attention to the "distinction between inhalations and exhalations" and that sensations "related to the breath are only a means to an end." [5]

So, here I am, barely starting the sutta, not even into the main body of the sixteen steps involved in *anapanasati*, and I'm stymied. Since reading this instruction, I have been trying to see if I could be aware of breathing without feeling the sensations. But wait, that's not quite what he's saying, is it? It's okay to feel the sensations, but that's not the point, he says. Instead, I'm meant to use the experience of the sensations to be aware that I'm breathing. It's hard for me to believe that after over forty years of doing this practice of mindful breathing, I can't figure out what it means to simply be aware of the fact that I'm breathing. Okay, I guess I'll just keep going.

Does it help that Analayo says that just knowing you are breathing supports concentration whereas noticing the particular sensations of breath supports insight? Maybe. Perhaps following the sensations closely is a more helpful way to develop insight into impermanence because then you see on a microscopic level the constant change happening with the breath. But I would think

[5] Analayo, 2019, p.20

such close looking would focus the mind more, thus strengthening concentration. A more open, general awareness of breathing seems like it would reveal more about the mind, giving you more opportunity to notice things like the self arising or clinging happening. Then, when you let go, you can develop insight into the Four Noble Truths, how suffering is caused by clinging and ends when we let it go.

And so the conversation begins. What say you, Venerable Analayo?

Following the breath in the belly is the other commonly recommended practice. I remember reading that some of the Burmese masters say this is the best place, but I'm not sure why. It does keep your attention away from your head, which might help in avoiding thoughts. For me, I find it more difficult to find a specific sensation there, so it's more like feeling my whole stomach, or even adding in the ribs. This area is particularly good for feeling the breath as a rhythmic movement, which is one nice way of connecting. I'll note that in qigong and yoga practices, we're encouraged to breathe deeply into the belly, so that's another way to connect there.

Some people pay attention to the movement of the chest or the sensation of air hitting the back of the throat. I've never tried either to any great extent. As far as I'm concerned, it's not really important where we pay attention as long as it works for us.

Finally, there is the possibility of following the breath through its entire cycle, from the nose, down the throat, chest, belly, and back out. (More on this in step three of the first Tetrad.) Buddhadasa uses this part of the sutta to suggest that we develop awareness of the many different qualities of breath: long and short, coarse and fine, easy and uneasy. Then he wants us to notice how these different types of breath affect mind states and moods, the mental and physical reactions to these different types. He suggests that we *should* practice controlling the breath,

particularly breathing more deeply because he says that has health benefits. This goes off in a completely different direction from my earlier understanding of mindfulness of breath.

Buddhadasa also suggests we take this practice off the cushion and start noticing our breath throughout the day. Noticing the different qualities of the breath in different settings and different emotional and mental states gives us a whole other idea of what *anapanasati* means. This merges nicely with Thich Nhat Hanh whose whole project is rooted in moment-to-moment mindfulness under all circumstances. In the Thai Forest Tradition, of which Ajahn Pasanno is a longtime practitioner, this is emphasized as well. Ajahn Chah, perhaps the best-known teacher in that tradition, made mindfulness off the cushion a significant focus of his monasteries.

The *Anapanasati Sutta* is concerned with sitting meditation, as its opening makes explicit. However, for anyone interested in applying the teachings of the Buddha to their lives in any kind of meaningful way, mindfulness of the breath throughout the day is probably the best way to do that. It keeps the mind and body grounded in the present moment. It helps us to remain equanimous throughout the day and brings us back to our center when we become agitated or distracted. Its very simplicity makes it the perfect device for staying present in our lives, not requiring any thought, feeling, or action on our part. All we have to do in any moment is remember we are breathing and either feel that experience or simply know it is happening. What better way could there be to expand our meditation practice beyond the limits of our cushion?

I want to add that, even with the variety of approaches we are looking at, and some of the contradictory suggestions, what we are ultimately trying to cultivate is *mindfulness itself.* The breath is just a convenient object that we can utilize to develop mindfulness. Further, mindfulness is being developed not just for its own sake, but in the service of developing insight and finally freedom from suffering.

A NATURAL UNFOLDING

As I've worked with the practice of the Ananapanasati Sutta, I began to see that almost everything I experienced was familiar to me. Bringing mindfulness to breath, body, feelings, mind, and insights is what my practice has been over the past forty or so years. What was different about the specific practice laid out in this sutta is the systemization. In fact, working with the sutta has helped me to understand the path of Buddhist meditation more clearly than ever. Whereas previously the range of experiences I had seemed somewhat random, now I can see where each one falls in the process. This is another reason why I suggest that you learn the sixteen aspects of the sutta. That knowledge will help you to understand what is happening at any point in your meditation practice. Upon reflection, you'll usually be able to categorize what is happening within the anapanasati context, which, in turn, will help to guide you as to where to go or what to do next.

This insight has led me to reconsider what the purpose of the sutta is. Working with it before, I thought it held instructions for how to meditate—and, of course, in one sense it does that—but now I see it as more of a description of a natural process. Instead of a *prescription* for how to practice, it's more of a *description* of how meditation unfolds if we simply engage in mindful breathing and follow the cues that comes up naturally.

This reminds me of the original subtitle of Joseph Goldstein's book, *The Experience of Insight*: "A Natural Unfolding." What we discover in this unfolding is that the sixteen steps are not discrete aspects whereby we drop the previous ones and take on the next one. Rather, this practice builds: starting with breath and body in the first tetrad, we add feeling, meaning that we still are aware of the body when encountering feeling in the second tetrad. With the third tetrad, mind, we begin by seeing that mind contains body and feelings, so that as we open to consciousness we are still peripherally aware of body and feelings. The fourth tetrad essentially

explores the impermanent nature of body, feelings, and mind, so that, it too is building on the previous three tetrads.

All of this brings us, again, to a sense of interconnection, a wholistic practice that contains our entire experience as a human being.

From this idea evolved the names I've given the tetrads:

- Grounding – establishing mindfulness of the breath and body helps us arrive in the present moment, to settle.
- Connecting – once we are settled, we turn to the felt experience, to sense our inner world.
- Opening – we attune now to the need of the body and feelings for more space, and see that they exist in a larger world of mind. We turn to that experience to expand our understanding of who and what we are.
- Realizing – with this growing clarity, we look explicitly at the underlying truths behind all experience: change, the limits of gratification, and the illusion of solidity.

The idea of a natural unfolding can help us in the challenging times of practice, of which there are many. Knowing that there is a trustworthy process, a path tread by many spiritual seekers over millennia can reassure us when the going gets tough. On most retreats I experience days of sleepiness, sitting after sitting of struggling not to nod off. In those times I simply open my eyes and try to stay awake. There is little concentration or ability to even follow the breath. But because I trust in this process, I sit through it.

Later days on retreat often involve physical pain. Sitting still for long periods isn't natural for our bodies, so they rebel. Muscles tighten, joints seize up, pressure, pulling, tightness, heat, and more can build to challenging levels of discomfort. Again, understanding and faith in the unfolding of this process, the natural settling and opening that happens when we sit through these

periods, carries us until finally we find the body becoming comfortable, the mind stabilizing, the feelings calm and pleasant. Here we see the importance of trust and determination on this path. Understanding this natural process holds us through the unfolding.

USING WORDS AND THOUGHTS IN MEDITATION

Meditation is often misunderstood to be an effort to stop thinking. Meditation teachers like me spend a fair amount of time trying to disabuse students of this notion. While discursive, intrusive habitual, repetitive, and obsessive thoughts are clearly a block to mindfulness, the skillful use of words and thoughts is an important tool in practice. In the "Vitakkasanthana Sutta" ("The Removal of Distracting Thoughts,") MN 20, the Buddha says that one who follows the instructions he has laid out will become "a master of the courses of thought." He doesn't say you'll stop thinking, but rather that you won't get stuck in unwholesome or unproductive thoughts. You'll only think what you want to think.

I would be dishonest if I didn't note that the Buddha also says, "Mindfulness of breathing should be developed to cut off thoughts," AN 9.3. But, again, he's referring to thoughts that undermine mindfulness and concentration, thoughts of greed, hatred, and delusion, or if you prefer, the Five Hindrances.

Many practices use thoughts, from mantras and the Gathas of Thich Nhat Hanh (see the second tetrad "Breathing and Experiencing Joy"), to the noting practice of Mahasi Sayadaw or the reflective phrases of loving-kindness meditation, thoughts are a part of many forms of meditation. The key is to use them wisely and discreetly. As Analayo says, this practice "requires the judicious use of concepts." If you are just numbly repeating a mantra or ritually reciting words of loving-kindness, you're not "mastering" your thoughts. We need mindfulness to guide us. As we pay attention to the unfolding of our practice, over time we will learn when it is helpful to drop in some words and when it is best to let go. Here there are no hard and fast rules.

We must depend on our growing awareness and intuition. We become creative and responsive in our practice. Analayo suggests that we "briefly formulate the relevant concept explicitly in our mind and then rest in the resulting experience without continuing to employ concepts."[6] Ajahn Pasanno says, "Thoughts are there to help as reminders." We aren't pushing for or trying to force a particular state to arise, just gently reminding ourselves—and our mind—where we would like to head.

How we use thoughts, then, depends on our level of concentration. If we are somewhat scattered, it can help to settle us to repeat some words or just use a word or phrase as a pointer. The Anapanasati Sutta gives us helpful words for this, many of which I use. You can guide yourself through the sutta just by using key words, "experiencing the whole body," then bringing attention into the body. "Calming the body," and again, just feeling what that means. This is another reason to memorize the key words of the sutta so as to keep yourself on track. When you are feeling settled, the words can fall away, and you simply move through the different spaces.

In practical terms, what we do is say some word or phrase to ourselves, and then check where we land. The words are not the practice; the feeling or mind state they arouse is what we're going for. We're tuning into the felt experience that arises or doesn't arise. Sometimes we'll say the words to ourselves and nothing will happen because our mind isn't ready to go there. Other times, the right cue can bring on a significant opening. We need to be patient and accepting, seeing that we aren't controlling this process, but trying to encourage it.

When talking about the jhanas, some of the standard words in the suttas are that the mind will become "malleable and wieldy." What this means is that a concentrated mind is easier to guide. You can "incline the mind," as the saying goes, toward something like piti or sukha,

[6] Analayo, 2019, p. 36

toward calming or gladdening, and the malleable mind will pick up the cue and go to that place. This is one of the remarkable effects of concentrated meditation. The words dropped in like that, far from distracting or agitating the mind, actually settle it further.

In the "Thoughts on Practice" sections I will share some of the cues that I use to move through the sutta.

GROUNDING: The First Tetrad

The natural unfolding of the first tetrad is expanding from mindful breathing to feeling the whole body and then letting the body settle. Grounding in the breath and the body.

'Breathing in long one understands, 'I breath in long'; breathing out long, one understands, 'I breath out long.'"

"Breathing in short one understands, 'I breath in short'; breathing out short, one understands, 'I breath out short.'"

"One trains: 'experiencing the whole body I shall breathe in'; one trains, 'experiencing the whole body I shall breathe out.'"

"One trains: 'calming the bodily activity I shall breathe in'; one trains: 'calming the bodily activity I shall breathe out.'"

As we embark, now, on the heart of the sutta, a few thoughts from Bhikkhu Bodhi. First, he says he prefers to call the sixteen parts of the sutta "aspects" rather than "steps," since he doesn't see them as sequential. While I find that helpful, in writing about these aspects, it's much easier to enumerate them as steps, but please remember that they aren't always happening in order. He says that these aspects, "look at the practice of mindfulness of breathing from different perspectives. As we will see, these are from the perspectives or frameworks of the different

foundations of mindfulness… It's not the case, as I understand it, that one progresses from the first factor to the second to the third to the fourth up to factor sixteen**."**

This tetrad is found in precisely the same language in the *Satipatthana Sutta*. There it is the first exercise under mindfulness of the body. It is also the one place in the *Satipatthana* where the Buddha suggests that we aim for a particular result, "calming the body." So, it is the one place that contradicts my previous point about the contrasting approaches of the *Satipatthana* and the *Anapanasati*. Let's just say, it's the exception that proves the rule (an expression that has never made sense to me).

To become a mindfulness meditator, the first tetrad is really all you need. It gives you the introduction to simple mindfulness of breath, then broadens that to the whole body, and finally offers the tools to "stress-reduction," with "calming bodily activity."

Having said this, I should note that Venerable Analayo disagrees. He says that it greatly limits the value of *anapanasati* to simply practice mindful breathing. There are, after all, twelve other steps beyond this tetrad and they explore a great range of experience and insight. The sutta is not just trying to help us to be mindful, but to develop the seven factors of enlightenment that can potentially bring us to the fulfillment of the Buddhist path. Mindfulness of the breath is only a support in that development, not an end point.

So, maybe I should have said, "to get started as a mindfulness meditator" these steps were all you'd need.

Steps 1 and 2 – Understanding long and short breaths

"Breathing in long one understands, 'I breathE in long'; breathing out long, one understands, 'I breathe out long.'"

"Breathing in short one understands, 'I breathE in short'; breathing out short, one understands, 'I breathe out short.'"

Let's start with step 1: "breathing in long, one understands, 'I breathe in long.'" It's an odd turn of phrase, but very intentional. You are not just taking a long breath, but you know that you are. Immediately, though, a question arises: "Am I supposed to intentionally take a long breath?" Typically when we teach mindfulness of the breath we say, "Don't try to control the breath. Just feel it as it is." This instruction seems to contradict this suggestion. What do the authorities say?

Ajahn Pasanno: "There's no need to control the breath. It's just a matter of knowing what the breath is. There's no right or wrong way to breathe. There's no 'Oh, you've got too many long breaths in there. You're doing it all wrong! You should have a few short ones.' That isn't the case at all; it's whatever the body is comfortable with…The most important thing is the knowing." [7]

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu talks much more about using the breath in intentional ways, correlating it with yogic pranayama breathing. "When a breath is long, how pleasant is it? Is it natural and ordinary? What kinds of calmness and happiness arise? In what ways is it different from the short breath. We begin by studying the long breath to find out its properties, qualities, influence, and flavor…Finally we observe how the body works in relation to the long breath." [8] Here he asks us to explore the chest and abdomen, how they expand and contract, and all the other elements of movement in the breath. He points out that some assumptions we have about the breath are wrong, so we should see for ourselves.

[7] Pasanno, 2021, p. 12
[8] Buddhadasa, 1997, p. 54

The question arises, who should we believe? Passano or Buddhadasa? Buddhadasa is asking us to take long breaths at this stage and watch what happens. Passano just says, know you are breathing.

Thich Nhat Hanh brings in the Chinese version of the sutta where apparently step one is just being aware that you are breathing in and out, and only step two addresses the question of the length of the breath.[9] I think this is a more natural way of approaching the whole process. I find it more important to devote time just establishing a connection to the breath before starting to look at the length. Frankly, most times when I work with this practice, I don't pay attention to the length of the breath at all. Asking myself whether a breath was long or short simply doesn't hold my attention. Most of the time my breaths just seem "medium," and I don't know where to place that. I wind up arguing with myself, with the Buddha, and everyone else who is telling me to figure out the length of the breath. So, instead of engaging in that frustrating exercise, I just pay attention to the breath until I feel settled enough to move on to the next task.

Analayo does his usual deep dive into Pali and the suttas. He addresses the question of whether we are supposed to, for instance, take a long breath or two, then allow the breath to get shorter naturally, thus fulfilling the first two steps of the tetrad. Or are we just supposed to notice whether the breath is relatively long or short? What I find most convincing (and I prefer in my own practice) is that he points out how the Buddha tried to control his breath before enlightenment (MN 36) and gave it up. I'll note, though, that in MN 20, he uses similar language or imagery with the strong man crushing the weak man to suppress thoughts. So, the Buddha is not categorically opposed to efforts of control. Analayo concludes that we shouldn't necessarily take one interpretation or another. He suggests starting with a deep breath and letting it shorten,

[9] Nhat Hanh, 2008, p. 44

but then not interfering so much. When you are settled, stepping in with intentional breathing is "coarse" he says, which sounds right. When we get completely distracted, it's helpful to return to a deep breath (which I do automatically), but otherwise, leave it alone.

He then goes on to say—similar to Bhikkhu Bodhi above—that we shouldn't be restricted by the sixteen steps. "The task is not to execute with total precision one step after another, but much rather to allow a flexible evolution of our meditation practice," while being guided by our overall understanding of what the sutta is pointing at.[10]

We can't, though, ignore the fact that all the Buddha is asking us to be aware of is the length of the breaths, not how they feel. It's quite striking, considering that I don't think I've ever heard any Buddhist meditation teacher even mention this aspect of the breath, much less teach it as the sole way of being aware of the breath. Most teachers point to the sensations of the breath, while some, like Analayo suggest you simply be aware you are breathing. I've heard Ajahn Amaro suggest you pay attention to the rhythm of the breath, which sounds very close to noticing the length.

Ajahn Pasanno and others suggest that the long and short breath refers to a progression from a more coarse or rough breath when we first sit down to meditate that then evolves into something more subtle, smooth, and drawing less air. In other words, as the mind settles, the breath settles. This is a very common experience among meditators, so it makes sense that the Buddha would be talking about this. I just wish he had been more explicit. (This isn't the first time that I've wished I could go back and ask the Buddha to explain or clarify something in the suttas.)

[10] Analayo, 2019, pp. 35-36

One more note, from Buddhadasa: He makes a helpful distinction between two different ways to be mindful of breath, what he calls "following" (or chasing) the breath versus "guarding" the breath.[11] Following the breath means being with it from the tip of the nose to navel and the navel to the tip of the nose, the whole movement and process of a breath. He suggests this as a starting practice, which makes sense. It allows a kind of natural and pretty easy way of getting in touch with the breath. He makes a strong case for the value of exploring all the subtle types of breath and the ways these "influence our awareness, our sensitivity, our mind." Here we are building our capacity to view cause and effect, a vital element of mindfulness, Right View, and the development of insight.

Guarding the breath means putting the attention in one place like the nostrils and just feeling the breath there as it goes in and out. I'll add one more way, and that is to feel the whole breath at once, nose, chest, belly, feeling the whole body breathing. This is related to step three.

Finally, in the context of working with the sixteen aspects of the *Anapanasati Sutta*, the time we spend on these first two aspects depends on the overall amount of time we are working with this practice. If we are on a longer retreat, we might spend several days just trying to stabilize our attention on the breath, and in that process we might get quite settled, quite concentrated just on the breath. If, however we are working on a shorter time frame, we might simply take a few minutes to establish mindfulness of the breath before moving on to the next steps. This, again, points to the possible varied uses of this practice.

[11] Buddhadasa, 1997, p. 48

Step 3: Breathing and Experiencing the Whole Body

"One trains: 'experiencing the whole body I shall breathe in'; one trains, 'experiencing the whole body I shall breathe out.'"

Step three moves us to another kind of mindfulness. Though we're still aware of the breath (as we are throughout the sutta), we are now opening or expanding our awareness. Here Buddhadasa's translation "mindfulness *with* breathing" becomes helpful. The simple change of prepositions from *of* to *with* tells us we aren't just being mindful of the breath, but we are being mindful of different things *while* we are mindful of the breath. Analayo points to the Satipatthana Sutta where the Buddha says that we can simply be aware that "there is a body." (MN 10). This draws on the proprioceptive quality of feeling the body in space, how it's held; it also means feeling the range of bodily sensations at a given moment. Analayo sums up what is happening: "…the first two steps are about being aware of the breath alone, the remaining steps about combining awareness of the breath with some other meditative task."[12] What becomes apparent is that the title *Anapanasati Sutta*, translated as Mindfulness of Breathing, is a misnomer. But many suttas have titles that don't capture their complete themes.

We can also conjecture that the Burmese lay meditation teacher Uba Khin's sweeping practice derives from the instruction to feel the whole body. This is the practice that S.N. Goenka uses in his famous ten-day retreats and has been hugely influential not only in the Buddhist meditation world, but in secular mindfulness as well, since it was adapted for Mindfulness-Based Stress (MBSR) reduction, the most popular secular mindfulness program. So, this simple line from the sutta has vital implications in the Buddhist meditative tradition and beyond.

[12] Analayo, 2019, p. 39

Ajahn Karunadhammo takes us even deeper by suggesting we can take a practice from the Satipatthana Sutta and apply it here: "Foulness—The Bodily Parts." He refers to this as "32 parts of the body," and says, "This contemplation is done as a recitation of the body parts, developing the visual images, and also developing a tactile sensation of those parts of the body to whatever extent we can."[13] He finds it especially helpful in walking meditation, and says that it has a strong concentrating impact as well as "the neutralizing effect on sensual craving." He suggests that his background as a nurse and consequent knowledge of the details of anatomy may give him a special proclivity toward such a practice. Many people (including myself) have been hesitant to dive into this challenging practice from the Satipatthana, but Karunadhammo's presentation makes it much more inviting. While my own "whole body" practice has been much more global, the idea of taking the parts of the body one-by-one makes a great deal of sense. Here, as I discuss below in "Using Words and Thoughts in Meditation," we can be quite verbal and directive in our practice, going through the parts of the body systematically. While some of the Buddha's "parts" may not be so familiar, we can adapt this practice to our own knowledge and experience of the body.

This is also a point where we want to start noticing the verbs associated with each step. The first two steps we were supposed to "understand" the length of the breath. Now we are to "experience" the body. This seems to be a shift from just knowing what's happening to immersing ourselves in it. Going from watching to being. From observing to connecting. Pasanno calls this "studying" our experience, which is a nice way to put it. He asks, "How do I inhabit my body?" prodding us to reflect on our relationship to our bodies, whether we are really in them. He quotes Tan Geoff (Thanissaro Bhikkhu) as translating "experiencing" as "sensitive

[13] Abhayagiri Monks, 2023

to." Pasanno: "Feeling the whole body fully, sensitive to, experiencing, present for the whole body."[14] This is a great start to working with this step. I think it gives us a really good feeling of what we're trying to get at.

Buddhadasa goes off in a direction I don't really understand, but must, I think, be noted. He says there are two bodies, the "flesh and blood" body, (what we ordinarily call our body) and the "breath body." This seems to connect with Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation (which I've also had trouble with) in which he says, "'I shall breathe out experiencing the whole body [of breath]'" (sic). Here Bodhi adds this bracketed "of breath," with no explanation on why he does that. The fact that Analayo doesn't do this, makes me even more curious. Bodhi's note (#141 in the MN notes) suggests that he changed his mind about this translation, but he also says that the commentaries (MA) say this refers to being aware of three phases of breath: beginning, middle, and end. So, again, it's talking about the whole of the breath not the "flesh and blood" body. This leaves us in a bit of a quandary. Are we paying attention to the whole body or the "whole body of breath" (which presumably means, the breath from start to finish, from nose to belly, from belly to nose)?

Buddhadasa says *kaya*, the Pali term for body, also means "group." So he uses that as a justification of his analysis. He says in step three to do two things: first, understand that there are two groups (bodies), and second, understand that one group conditions the other, that the breath conditions the body. This continues his emphasis on using mindful breathing as a health-supporting activity. He says we are working toward understanding that we will calm the "flesh body" by regulating the "breath body."[15] It's a really interesting idea and approach and does bear out in the process of this practice. (It's interesting that he doesn't talk about the process going the

[14] Pasanno, 2021, p. 13
[15] Buddhadasa, 1997, pp. 31-32

other way, how something can happen to the body, like pain or pleasure, that changes the breath.)

Analayo uses this step to discuss something that has been key to my practice for many decades: the difference between a tight, focused awareness on a single object, and a more open, spacious awareness. Focused awareness can, he says, "fuel tendencies to fixate," but its value is that you learn more about the object, absorbing "more depth of information about it." The more open awareness isn't as likely to get fixated but can be "more superficial and imprecise."[16]

He suggests a kind of blending of these, which seems right. Here, we take a particular object as our primary focus, in this case the breath. But in so doing, we don't try to block out the rest of our experience, but rather have foreground and background objects. The breath is in the foreground; the body and other objects (sounds, emotions, thoughts) are in the background. He points out something I have long noticed but never heard discussed about tight awareness: "the tunnel view that results from such exclusive focus makes it difficult to notice when a diversion is about to lead to a displacement of attention." [17] It's as though we were guarding the front door with such determination and focus, that we didn't notice someone sneaking in the back. Thanissaro Bhikkhu makes the same point: "When you're focused on one point and blot out everything else, that leaves a lot of blind spots in the mind."[18]

In my own practice I tend to use a softer focus in the opening stages of a meditation session until things settle. Others might find it more effective to start with a tight focus. I just find that if you try to force a tight concentration, it leads to more tension and struggle, as you see-saw from focused attention to being lost in thoughts, meanwhile getting frustrated and

[16] Analayo, 2019, p. 41
[17] Analayo, 2019, pp. 41-42
[18] Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 2003, p. 57

judging yourself. Such striving goes against the basic principles of Buddhist teachings, leading to dukkha in a classic way.

I want to emphasize this point, so that it doesn't get lost in this lengthy exploration of *anapanasati*. How we apply our attention, whether with intense focus or open awareness is probably the most determinative factor on whether our meditation is pleasant and productive or not. The most common mistake people make in their understanding of the goal of practice is to believe that they are supposed to stop thinking. This mistake commonly leads to overly strong effort, which results in the pattern of striving, struggle, and the resulting dukkha. The challenge, though, is to come to understand, to sense, and to adopt this open awareness. It is much easier to understand an instruction that says, "pay attention to the breath," than one that says, "let your awareness be open and spacious." Open and spacious is subtle to the point of being meaningless until you have experienced it. Thus, it usually takes beginners a fair amount of time, and even a full meditation retreat, before they can get a feeling for what this means.

Analayo uses a similar image as I do of foreground and background: "It is as if breath and whole body have exchanged places in the field of our awareness. At first the breath was right in front and the whole body in the background. Now the breath steps back as it were, and the whole body steps forward…Since the whole body is a broader object than the breath, its coming to the forefront in the field of our attention naturally encourages a broader form of awareness."[19] This last point is important. When we say to broaden or open your awareness, that instruction can be confusing. How do I do that? Here we can see that simply by trying to feel the whole body, awareness expands. The same can be said of working with sound (which I recommend

[19] Analay, 2019, p. 42

when wanting to expand awareness). Sounds come from a wide realm of space, and paying attention to sound thus means the mind must open to that space.

Analayo uses another good image to illustrate these two different perspectives. When looking at a picture, we move close to see details and back to see the whole image. He correlates this with the closeness of the first two steps, feeling the long and short breath, versus the third step of feeling the whole body.

Before moving to the fourth step of the tetrad, we need to look at Analayo's discussion of the word "training." Step three introduces this term and it applies to the rest of the fourteen remaining steps in the sutta. Analayo tells us that this refers to keeping the five hindrances "at bay": desire, aversion, sleepiness, restlessness, and doubt. This task is a central one in the practice of mindfulness. Anytime one of these qualities takes our attention or invades our consciousness, we can lose the thread of mindfulness unless we are careful. And such invasions are quite common in meditation. Therefore, if we are to progress in our meditation, we must become familiar with these qualities and learn to deal with them. The essence of this process is seeing the hindrances clearly, applying mindfulness to them once we see them—feeling them, seeing how they are affecting thoughts and mental states in the present moment—then returning to the object (breath). Besides seeing them, we want to become aware of what triggers their arising and what allows their passing. There are various other antidotes and ways of working with the hindrances worth exploring. These are discussed in many, if not most, books on Buddhist meditation, so I will forgo a long discourse on that topic. For now, I just encourage you to remember that hindrances are impermanent and not self, so encountering them does not have to cause problems beyond the immediate care we take in responding. They will pass and they do not define or cast any discredit on your meditation practice or on you personally.

Step 4 – Breathing and Calming Bodily Activity

"One trains: 'calming bodily activity I shall breathe in;' one trains, 'calming bodily activity I shall breathe out.'"

Now we're getting somewhere! Isn't this why we come to meditation, to get some relaxation? What stands out to me about this step is that now it appears we are becoming actively involved in trying to bring about a result, beyond just being aware of things as they are. This is a critical contrast with the simple activity of mindfulness (which isn't really so simple in practice). Steps one and two were to "understand," how long or short the breath was (or anything else about the experience of breathing) and step three was to "experience" the whole body. Both of those are examples of the classical idea of mindfulness: being aware in a non-interfering or reactive way. Now it seems we are going to interfere—in a positive way. We are going to try to use the breath to bring calm. This correlates to the practice of MBSR. The term "stress-reduction" is a synonym for "calming bodily activity."

But wait—I find that the experts don't see it this way. There seems to be a consensus that the simple act of mindful breathing, when sustained, will naturally calm the body.

I'm going to suggest that in this case, we can have it both ways. Yes, maintaining mindful breathing will calm us, but it doesn't hurt to encourage that with some intentional effort to let go.

Here, as I've talked about, we encounter the risk of striving. This can't be stated too often, that goal-oriented meditation goes counter to the Buddhist teachings which say that striving causes suffering. Thus, it sets us up for disappointment and confusion. Instead of getting calm, we can wind up in a tangle of frustration as we keep pushing toward our goal of peace and

keep being thrown instead into a state of irritation, anxiety, and self-judgment. In order to make step four work in the way it is described we have to develop a certain attitude of acceptance and letting go. It's almost as if we have to be calm before we can get calm—or maybe we have to be patient first.

Now let's go to Ajahn Pasanno who often has the most direct and practical approach. He introduces the factors of enlightenment, which will wind up being a key part of this whole practice. He points out that the word translated as "calming" is the same as the tranquility factor of enlightenment.

Both Pasanno and Analayo point to the term *kaya sankhara* that is translated as "bodily formation." Apparently in the suttas this refers to inhalations and exhalations, which explains why Bodhi first translated it as "body of breath." Everyone seems to agree, though, that this really means using the breath to calm the body. This goes to the simplest understanding, often expressed when people say to someone who is upset or stressed, "breathe." What I think they mean is, "take some calming breaths." (Although sometimes the upset person might be holding their breath as well.). In yoga, qigong, and other movement practices, the breath is often used in this way. Again, we've arrived at something fundamental about mindful breathing. Working with these first four steps provides a tremendous foundation for deepening meditation. We can keep returning to these steps because they are always applicable. The Buddha himself seemed to rely on this practice as his own essential meditation.

Bhikkhu Bodhi's talks on the sutta stimulated some other reflections for me. He tells us that the Pali term *pana* has the same meaning as the Sanskrit, *prana.* Many Westerners are familiar with this term through their encounters with yoga where one does *pranayama*, the practice of using the breath for energetic healing. Hearing that connection made me wonder if

what the Buddha was talking about with *anapanasati* was more than mindful breathing, but actually meant as a healing practice.

This interpretation is reinforced by the story of Girimananada. Hearing that this monk was ill, the Buddha sent Venerable Ananda to give him a teaching on ten "perceptions." (AN 10.60). These ten include the perceptions or reflections on impermanence, non-self, letting go, dispassion, and culminate in the practice of mindful breathing, in which the sutta uses the same sixteen steps of the *Anapanasati Sutta*. Upon receiving this instruction, Girimananda "recovered from that affliction." It's quite a striking story, inspiring really. It's suggesting that a combination of insight and mindful breathing is enough to heal the body.

Bhikkhu Bodhi says that in the yogic tradition, the view is that "The breath permeates the whole body. It has channels which suffuse the entire body, extending all the way from the lungs through the entire body."[20] We can see similar claims for *qi* in Chinese Tai Chi and qigong practices. Both systems view the body not as a group of constituent parts, the Cartesian understanding, but rather as a field of energy that can be influenced holistically if we understand the system and the conditioning factors, whether breath or the more subtle *qi.*

We might connect this to the way the Buddha teaches meditative absorption, saying the practitioner "suffuses, drenches, fills and irradiates" the body with piti and sukha. (DN 2.75). These two qualities, *piti* and *sukha*, or rapture and joy, are actually energetic qualities that are directly connected to prana and qi. In fact, a breath practice like kundalini yoga is meant to directly stimulate the arising of piti. We'll encounter these terms in the next tetrad where we focus particularly on feelings.

[20] Bodhi, Bhikkhu, "A Systematic Study of the Majjhima Nikaya, 2003, https://bodhimonastery.org/a-systematic-study-of-the-majjhima-nikaya.html

We find Buddhadasa taking a more explicitly active view of this step. It's aim according to him is to calm the breath, which will then result in the body becoming calm, relaxed, tranquil, and subsequently, the mind becoming calm. He calls the breath, "the body conditioner."

Here Buddhadasa emphasizes the concentration or samadhi aspect of *anapanasati*. Analayo addresses this and says that this practice isn't meant to bring us to *jhana* (absorption) but that it, nonetheless, can help us develop very strong concentration. It's quite apparent throughout the sutta that it isn't oriented toward *jhana* (not least because *jhana* is never mentioned). According to the commentaries, it's not possible to be mindful of the breath while in jhana. Ajahn Pasanno reminds us that that the suttas don't take this stance.[21] I'll take up the question of *jhanas* more extensively in the second tetrad.

An aside: Buddhadasa's book on mindfulness with breathing is very much a practice guide. He's not, like Analayo, asking questions or surveying the field. He is, rather, asserting his own approach as *the* way to practice mindfulness with breathing. The sutta itself is essentially secondary, while for Analayo everything stems from and goes back to the sutta.

Now Buddhadasa connects this step to the succeeding tetrad when he says that we need to develop *piti* and *sukha* to the point that we can feel them clearly before moving on to the second tetrad, which starts by taking these two qualities as the central elements of the first two steps.

Analayo says that what is supposed to happen in this step is that we "calm the body in general and the breathing in particular."[22] He's basically having it both ways. He agrees with Buddhadasa that calming the body will calm the breath and calming the breath will calm the body. Of course, the breath is part of the body, so they aren't really separate things.

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[21] Pasanno, *Conversation,* 2023
[22] Analayo, 2019, p. 45

Analayo says that we can't be in *jhana* with this practice because in the fourth jhana we aren't able to perceive the breath. The mind is so absorbed with equanimity that no other perception is feasible. He points to the Buddha saying that "In and out breathing is a thorn to the fourth jhana." (AN 10.72). I'm not sure, though, that this disqualifies the first three jhanas in anapanasati practice.

Like Pasanno, he is now pointing to development of the seven factors of enlightenment through this practice. He says that, rather than trying to attain *jhana* through this practice, we are trying to "lead via a cultivation of the four *satipatthanas* and the seven awakening factors to the gaining of knowledge and liberation."[23] He points to what he calls the "collaboration" of tranquility and insight (concentration and wisdom).

Analayo, too, offers practice tips for doing this step. If we have had a stressful day or event, he suggests on the inhalation briefly scanning the body for any tension and then relaxing that tension on the exhalation. My own approach to this is slightly different. I'm not really scanning the body so much as just sensing the overall tension. On exhalations, I have a sense of releasing throughout the body, with a specific sense of moving downward—the breath moves downward, the body is drawn toward the earth, and the muscles release.

Analayo points out, helpfully, that the calming effect of mindful breathing isn't limited to the fourth step of *anapanasati*. Anytime we practice mindful breathing, whether in formal meditation or in ordinary activities, it tends to bring calm to the body and mind. Here we meet the essence of this practice. It's being presented in a formal and structured way in the sutta, but it is ultimately pointing to the very simple practice of mindful breathing that is encouraged in many suttas as well as many other meditative and movement modalities.

[23] Analayo, 2019, p. 47

Analayo adds a nice piece on combining these last two steps with walking meditation. Cleverly he makes the connection between awareness of the whole body and walking. In my own practice of walking meditation, this is my orientation as well. Rather than just trying to narrowly focus on the bottom of the feet, as is sometimes suggested, I find that a more open awareness helps me stay present. Adding the calming element to that broad awareness makes for a nice result in walking. This, of course, can be applied not just in formal walking meditation, but in ordinary activities throughout our day.

Analayo's summary brings other helpful reflections. He points out that taking a long breath in the beginning helps us to establish an upright posture, and taking a short breath helps us to soften that posture, so it's not rigid, a nice balancing practice with the breath.

Earlier he said that working through these sixteen aspects seems to imply a temporary absence of the hindrances, that perhaps we are picking up where the *satipatthana* left off. While I see what he's getting at, it certainly doesn't seem that we should wait to do these steps until we're free from hindrances. Especially these first four steps really help to get through the hindrances.

CONCLUSION: FIRST TETRAD

With all the technical details and conflicting ideas, we can lose the simple thread of the first tetrad of just developing mindfulness of breath and relaxing. There are many ways to do these things, and ultimately it is up to the individual meditator to ascertain what works best for them. We should always consider what the authorities say and make sure we aren't taking the easy way out or missing something, but at the end of the day, we are responsible for our own practice.

Buddhadasa's definition of the breath as the "body-conditioner"[24] is worth reflecting on, and in fact, is a key to understanding the puzzle of the sutta. He and Thich Nhat Hanh emphasize the intentional application and health benefits of deep breathing. They both point us toward using mindful breathing throughout our day in all activities. In this way, we can derive the benefits of calming much more broadly than in formal meditation alone.

Buddhadasa, in particular, makes this into a systematic practice, and that can be useful. But if we get too caught up in a system, we can lose the personal reality of what is happening. Each time we sit down, it's a different experience, a different body, and a different mind. We need to engage in that moment with how it is right then. This practice is actually quite natural, being mindful of the breath, feeling the body, and relaxing. If we approach it like that, it will unfold easily for us.

A particular question arises around whether following the long and short breath is really the limit of qualities we should pay attention to in the breath. As someone who has focused on the sensations, the touch of air at the nostrils, just being aware of length seems limiting. And my teachers have always had this open instruction. But, if I'm going to study and try to follow the sutta, perhaps this is too casual an approach, perhaps I am missing something that can only be experienced or understood by paying attention strictly to length of breath, not the associated sensations. Another question to ponder as we move forward.

Thoughts on Practice

The key element of the first tetrad is grounding the attention on the breath. Take as much time as you need to make this connection.

[24] Buddhadasa, 1997, p. 52

The simplicity of the first tetrad belies the complexity of actually doing it. This tetrad really lays the foundation for the whole practice. You can get a great deal out of just completing this part. In fact, we discover that each of the first three tetrads implies the fourth. The fourth tetrad (spoiler alert) is about impermanence and letting go. And in the first tetrad we see our breath and body changing (impermanence) and then calm the stress or tension in the body (letting go).

The first, and most important thing about this tetrad is establishing mindfulness of the breath. The sutta has, in fact, already asserted that before we even enter the tetrads: "ever mindful breathe. in, ever mindful breathe out." You can take as much or as little time as you need to accomplish this. The first two steps are, for me, just about this. I don't worry about the length of the breaths. I know that goes against the words of the suttas, but as I've said that element of breath simply doesn't hold my attention. So, however you connect with breath, whether through length, sensations, movement, rhythm or something else, do that.

As a practical matter, how we proceed through these first four steps depends largely on our mind state when approaching them. If we are fairly settled, as in the middle of a retreat, we might easily move from one to the other and on to the next tetrad. If we are sitting down to meditate at the end of a busy day, we might just need to work with breath or breath and body for our whole sit. It's also possible to move very quickly through the whole sutta, one or two breaths on each step, just to get ourselves started, then go back to the beginning and take it slower on a second pass.

As a practical matter, once I have established mindfulness of breathing and am ready to move on to the whole body, I often say to myself, "Experiencing the whole body," before embarking on that part of the practice. With the next step as well, I will say "Calming the body."

Sometimes I use “tranquilizing” because it kind of reminds me of taking a drug, so it seems stronger. It all depends on how I’m feeling at the time.

Make this practice your own. Be creative and intuitive. Experiment. See what works for you. Enjoy your breath!

CONNECTING: The Second Tetrad

The natural unfolding of the second tetrad is turning inward from awareness of the body to awareness of the felt experience. Connecting to the inner life. This reveals the tendency of feelings to fuel thoughts, which then are calmed.

“One trains: ‘experiencing joy I shall breathe in”; one trains: ‘experiencing joy I shall breathe out.’”

“One trains: ‘experiencing happiness I shall breathe in’; On trains: ‘experiencing happiness I shall breathe out.’”

“One trains: ‘experiencing mental activity I shall breathe in’; one trains, ‘experiencing mental activity I shall breathe out.’”

“One trains: ‘calming mental activity I shall breathe in’; one trains: ‘calming mental activity I shall breathe out.’”

INTRODUCTION TO SECOND TETRAD

While the first tetrad has its share of questions, it seems pretty straightforward, practical, and understandable. The second tetrad immediately opens up an array of questions. These range from how it is that we have now just automatically arrived at joy and happiness, to the relation of these to *jhanas*, and finally to some of the translations around mental activity.

As we've seen, the authorities tell us that the *Ananpanasati Sutta* follows the structure and fulfills the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. While this tracks well at some places, at other times I feel as if I need to squint and let my eyes go out of focus to make that work. The second tetrad is one of those places. *Vedana*, the topic of the second foundation, is the first impression any sense experience makes on us, falling into the three categories of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. So, starting the tetrad with "experiencing joy," seems to be saying, "now you'll experience something pleasant." That's great, only what if you aren't feeling joy after calming your body?

Analayo says that if you bring mindfulness, "to the fore" you will have a "source of subtle pleasant feeling tones."[25] I think that "to the fore" suggests a pretty powerful state of mindfulness here. He says that this level of mindfulness will essentially protect us from grasping—which means from aversion as well. The mental state of mindfulness will dominate our experience, rather than the perception of things we are sensing. This is one of the best arguments for developing a strong mindfulness practice, that we will not be drawn so easily into thoughts or feelings that cause distress or agitation. Here we have to learn to separate mindfulness itself from the object of awareness. So, if someone is yelling at you, instead of being overwhelmed by the feelings of fear or anger that may arise, you are more aware of the mental space in which you are perceiving all of this. You feel the emotions, feel the body, see the thoughts arising, but none of these fully capture your attention. The breath, in such a situation, becomes a kind of refuge that points you back to a peaceful inner state. Of course, this describes an ideal response, one that is difficult to attain, even though we can at least realize it as a potential way of being.

[25] Analayo, 2019, p. 57

Buddhadasa says you don't move onto this tetrad until you *are* feeling joy and happiness (*piti* and *sukha*). While that makes sense in some contexts, to me it really narrows the use of this tetrad which I find much richer when being open to all three forms of *vedana*. What I mean is that bringing mindfulness to difficult feelings is incredibly valuable, and at times has been the ground of my own practice. To take that aspect of mindfulness out of the equation just seems to neglect a huge area of human experience.

Thich Nhat Hanh says with the beginning of this tetrad we "touch pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feelings." He then seems to contradict himself when he says that by completing the previous two steps, "a pleasant feeling arises."[26] I appreciate, though, that he at least acknowledges the diverse feelings that can arise, and that mindfulness of feeling (*vedana*) includes these three, not just the first.

I once arrived at a retreat after having had a painful conflict with my wife, then flying cross-country. I had been a practitioner for over two decades at that time and felt I had a pretty mature practice. As I began the retreat I was trying to sit with really difficult and tumultuous emotions. My mind wouldn't settle on the breath, and I was trying to just ride out the feelings. I went into an interview with a teacher, a relatively young Burmese nun, whose instruction when I told her about what was going on, was to just keep coming back to the breath. I pushed back saying that establishing any stability on the breath was really not possible for me right now. She nonetheless wouldn't budge from her stance and I wound up essentially yelling at her, asking if she'd ever been married. It was a painful and even humiliating moment for me; but even more, it was frustrating to be told that there was only one way to work with what I was experiencing: concentrate on the breath.

[26] Nhat Hanh, 2008, p. 23

Maybe she was right, but I still can't accept that direction. Early in my practice when I'd been having trouble settling my mind, my (Western) teachers told me I should focus on the difficult feelings behind the agitation, not struggle to hold the attention on the breath. That approach had—and has—served me well. I learned to turn my attention to the felt experience of difficult emotions, to hold them with acceptance, not to judge, avoid, or try to suppress the feelings—and not to think about them. I then bring the breath in as a partner for holding the feelings, and if I am able to stay with that pairing for a little while, things finally tend to calm down. In that process I need to remind myself that these difficult feelings will pass (anicca); that they don't define me (anatta); that I'll be okay. All of this is a process tied to *vedana*. And yet, despite the wisdom of my Western teachers, it's hard to find anything in the suttas that provides this sort of map.

The encounter with the Burmese nun was a particularly poignant example of something I've often experienced in my forty plus years of practice: the sense of failure. I know it's common for people as they begin their practice to have this sense. The instructions to pay attention to the breath are harder to follow than they sound. Many people struggle at that stage before coming to understand the more subtle aspects of practice that allow them to accept the busyness of the mind and develop insight around that. I certainly went through such a process.

However, as my practice deepened, I gained much more confidence and began to develop something that felt like my own. Maybe I wasn't doing it exactly as the Buddha instructed, but something good was happening. I was having experiences of peace and new, rich moments of presence.

Over the years, though, I would read or hear some teaching that once again made me question myself. Was there some fundamental shortcoming in my practice? While teachings that

were oriented towards Western students might console me and give a sense that I was on the right path, other more traditional or dogmatic teachings would trigger a feeling of not being good enough.

Where this issue is most problematic is in confronting depression, something I've struggled with since I was 14. Instructions like the ones that open this tetrad can be problematic, to say the least, for a depressive. The suggestion that I should automatically feel joy at this point in the process can feel a bit like hitting a wall. It is true that I've often felt joy in meditation, and, fortunately, my struggles with depression have greatly lessened in recent years. Nonetheless, there have been plenty of times—sometimes long periods of time—over these decades of meditation practice that depression has overlaid my body and mind like a heavy burden, a foggy darkness that permeates my life. The suggestion that when in such states I should be able to meditate my way into joy and happiness seems like a cruel joke. At times like this, my meditation becomes more an act of self-care and kindness—even emotional survival—than one striving for lofty experiences of insight or awakening.

This is where a critical question of the second tetrad arises for me: does this have to be about happiness? Or can it be about feeling our feelings, whatever they may be? In other words, if the topic is *vedana*, can there be progression in my practice through working with unpleasant *vedana*, not just pleasant, as the sutta describes. Certainly, *my* answer to that question is a resounding "Yes!" Such a focus of mindfulness, as I've described above, can be a hugely effective tool for working with depression and other painful states.

But, again, as I read Venerable Analayo, whom I could not respect more, what I hear is, if you are doing this "right," you will feel joy and happiness. I don't like where that leaves me. Is that really true? Could I have overcome depression long ago if I had just applied mindfulness

properly? Have I been failing at that task all these years? Was it wrong to find ways to apply mindfulness to depression? I have a hard time accepting that premise. Finally, I wonder if, like the Burmese nun I battled with, Analayo has simply never experienced the consuming and debilitating nature of depression. I don't know his life story, so I can't answer that question. I suppose that I hope that he hasn't. Not out of any great compassion on my part, but rather so I can justify my difference with him on this point.

This is all to say that, while I plan to go into the actual tetrad as it is and explore all those teachings, I will also offer some side trips, variations, and alternative takes to what we find here. I also will take a journey into the *jhanas* which keep coming up when talking about this sutta, though they are never directly addressed. In fact, it's somewhat striking that despite the myriad suttas that address the *jhanas,* the two suttas considered the most important meditation instructions in the Pali Canon, the *Satipatthana* and the *Anapanasati*, never mention them. This fact alone is curious and worthy of exploration. (Spoiler alert: Thich Nhat Hanh says it's because the Buddha didn't really want us to practice the *jhanas*.)

Again, we can look at the *Anapanasati Sutta* as having two tracks. One track is the traditional process by which happiness arises as well as the succeeding unfolding of concentration and insight. The other track is for the times when we can't access the pleasant states, and possibly the concentration states. Instead of deciding that we simply can't utilize the teachings from the sutta because we are in such a distressed state, we find a way to re-interpret the instructions so that they are applicable, and indeed, deeply relevant to those difficult times.

All this is not to say that I have never had pleasant experiences in meditation. On the contrary, as you'll see when I go more into the *jhanas*, I have had, and continue to have many delightful experiences, including encounters with *piti* and *sukha*. My concern, rather, is what to

do with the unpleasant states. I think it's clear that I've been wrestling with these ideas as I write this piece. One thought I arrive at is that maybe we shouldn't try to directly overlay the *Anapanasati Sutta* onto the *Satipatthana Sutta*. One clear difference is that the *Anapanasati* is trying to create—or at least points to—specific states like *piti* and *sukha*, while the *Satipatthana* is largely trying to observe whatever states arise and how they appear and disappear. While this is a simplistic description of the differences, I think it gets at the problem I am finding in trying to reconcile them.

Step 5: Breathing and Experiencing Joy

"One trains: 'experiencing joy I shall breathe in'; One trains: 'experiencing joy I shall breathe out.'"

When we come to this step we are attuning to vedana, a term that has no real English corollary, no parallel. It's often translated as "feeling" or more accurately "feeling tone." The Buddha says that every sense experience (including mental sense experiences) has one of three qualities: pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. It's not an idea that we have in English, so when we encounter it in Buddhist teachings, we are kind of searching to understand what it means, much less how to perceive it.

This experience, these feelings, are more subtle than the physical feelings of the first tetrad. And that is the point, or at least one element of it. We need to increase our attention and learn to feel on this more subtle level to move through these steps. And, by doing that, we naturally increase our concentration and our capacity to perceive less obvious aspects of our existence. Perhaps nirvana is the least obvious, the most subtle aspect of our existence, so we are training to become aware of that.

It's a lovely instruction, really, just experience joy (Pali: *piti*) as you breathe. Ajahn Pasanno makes it simple: "Once the body is relaxed, there's a settling, and one can start to tune into the pleasant feelings that arise."[27]

I don't know why I have to make it more complicated (or maybe I do know). The relaxed body he's talking about is, of course, a result of the fourth step in the first tetrad. He's making a clear and direct movement through the stages. Perhaps you're not feeling rapture (another translation of *piti*), but, as he says, you can just tune into whatever pleasant feeling there is.

All of the authorities seem to agree on this: If you can calm the body with the breath, pleasant feelings will arise. Buddhadasa tells us that depending on the depth of those pleasant feelings—*piti* and *sukha*—you may enter the jhanas. If they aren't deep enough to attain those states, you will still benefit from these steps. Analayo, on the other hand, thinks that the use of these terms in this context has a different meaning, that it's not related to *jhana* at all. He bases this argument on the fact that the succeeding steps indicate that one is not in the *jhanas*. While this sounds a bit technical, it really makes sense. Once we've entered the *jhanas*, they essentially capture the attention and things like the contemplations of the fourth tetrad (impermanence, etc.) simply couldn't happen. So, while he's drawing somewhat on a scholarly interpretation of the terms, he is grounding it in the realities of meditation practice.

Again, I struggle with the whole, "be mindful of the breath, and you'll feel good." I admit this struggle is largely because I tend to be so negatively focused—or at least, I have been, or was. I'm suspicious of feel-good practices, positive thinking, and anything that smacks of phony spirituality (which I associate with such thinking). So, as a persistently depressed person who was skeptical that happiness could ever be a simple proposition, I used to question the possibility

[27] Pasanno, 2021, p. 15

that simple mindfulness of breathing could lead to rapture. I assumed this could only come after long, difficult practice, as a sort of reward for the punishment of meditative sacrifice. Such thinking was likely influenced if not created by my Catholic upbringing and the sin and redemption model, not to mention the suffering of Christ as well as the guilt and shame associated with sensual pleasure. Toss that background in with a genetic proclivity toward depression and it becomes pretty tough to accept that I can feel good just by focusing on my breath. There must be a catch.

But the only catch, really, is that you have to develop some concentration. That certainly takes some time and effort, but it's not exactly a purgatorial misery. What I think is reasonable to conclude is that the level of *piti* you achieve in this step correlates with the level of concentration you achieved in the first tetrad. Fair enough. But any level of *piti* is pleasant and supportive of the path, so worth achieving and working with.

In the late eighties, I found a surprisingly simple way to arouse pleasant feelings in meditation, though at the time I didn't call them *piti*. I was introduced to a practice taught by Thich Nhat Hanh, who is renowned for his gentle and compassionate approach to mindfulness. The practice involved using *gathas*, literally "verses," along with the breath. I was given a set of five phrases to use with the breath, and I found this very helpful. At the time I wasn't meditating as much, having gone back to school full time while holding down a job and playing with a band on weekends. My concentration was very weak. I found that using a *gatha* was a quick way to settle the mind. Here is the one I used:

In, out

Deep, slow

Calm, ease

Smile, release

Present moment, wonderful moment[28]

Before that time I had used words in meditation—mainly "in, out,"—to track the breath, as well as noting thoughts and sounds with a quick word in the mind. This new practice, however, was more structured and extensive, not to mention suggestive. (Thich Nhat Hanh has many more such *gathas*, especially in his book *Present Moment, Wonderful Moment.*)

What was most striking and effective, though, about the practice was "smile." If a friend or acquaintance had suggested I smile while meditating, I might have dismissed the idea with a cynical scoff. But coming from Thich Nhat Hanh, I took the suggestion seriously. I learned the practice on a short weekend retreat and began to integrate it into my daily sitting. I was surprised to find that smiling while I meditated lifted my mood. While it was obvious that being in a good mood could make you smile, it had never occurred to me that going the other way could work as well, smiling could put me in a good mood.

On top of that, I found that this practice—which involved matching the words with the in and out breath, going through the five sets of words with five breaths, then cycling back again over and over—quickly increased my concentration. My practice started to get back on track. It was essentially like a breath-counting practice but less tedious. What is apparent now is that these *gathas* are really a distillation of some of the key steps of the *Anapanasati Sutta*.

Over the next few years I gradually got back to taking somewhat longer retreats, a week or ten days. As I continued using the *gathas*, something strange started to happen. I began to feel jolts and flows of energy as I meditated; I would feel as if I was lifting up off my cushion. All this happened when I was getting concentrated, mainly on retreats. These were striking

[28] Nhat Hanh, 1990

experiences, unlike anything I'd ever felt. Nonetheless, I'd been trained to let go, to not get attached to or excited about altered states. I'd always been told to see them as impermanent and empty, that getting too absorbed or interested in them would distract me from the path. For over five years, I regularly had these experiences, but never mentioned them to a teacher. When I finally did, on retreat in the spring of 1996, she wrote them off as "fruits of practice," not in a dismissive way, but just suggesting they were a side show. The following fall I would read something that completely changed my view of those experiences.

THE JHANAS

What is clear now about the energies I began to experience when doing Thich Nhat Hanh's *gathas*, is that they were manifestations of *piti*. The sensations match perfectly some of the classic descriptions of this remarkable experience. *Piti* can appear as jolts of energy, often appearing around the chakras, particularly the heart center, the belly, the third eye, and the crown of the head. It can also come in waves or showers of rapturous pleasure in the body. In some ways it can feel almost sexual, though for it to appear, one must be "secluded" from such forms of sensuality, as the Buddha says. Powerful forms of *piti* can actually become unpleasant, or tiresome at a certain point.

In one conversation Ajahn Passano gave some of the different definitions of *piti*: joy, delight, rapture, exhilaration, interest, and zest. He pointed to the *The Path of Purification: Visuddhimagga*, a key commentary on the early Buddhist teachings. There we find five different types of piti: minor happiness, momentary happiness, showering happiness, uplifting happiness, and pervading (rapturous) happiness."[29]Another teacher likes the term "glee."

[29] Nanamoli, 1991

As I explore the *Anapanasati Sutta*, I see that some of the descriptions of *piti* from other teachers and commentators, refer to something more subtle. So, I've come to believe that such lower intensity sensations are also manifestations of *piti* which allow you to work through the sixteen steps of the sutta.

Piti is best known, though, as the distinguishing characteristic of the first *jhana*. I learned this when reading an interview with Ayya Khema, a German Buddhist nun, in Inquiring Mind magazine in the fall of 1996.

Here is what I read:

"The first jhana is characterized by delightful sensations. One of the most common of these is a feeling of losing gravity, a feeling of almost floating. Others include a feeling of warmth in the spiritual heart area, or a very pleasant movement in the body, such as tingling from top to toe. Another is a sense of losing the limits of the body. In the first jhana there is also a feeling of joy."[30]

Reading this, I was almost shocked. I had heard of the *jhanas* and understood them to be almost mystical states beyond the capacity of the ordinary meditator, almost like something lost in the mists of time. Now I was reading something that suggested to me that for perhaps five years, I'd been at least on the edge of the first *jhana.*

It happened that I had a friend who had studied with Ayya Khema, and was in fact beginning to teach under her tutelage. Before my next retreat, I went to him for advice. When I described what had been happening to me, he was quite happy and told me that I was indeed flirting with the *jhanas* and that, very likely, with a bit of instruction, I could start to penetrate further.

[30] Khema, Fall 1996, Inquiring Mind Interview

With his step by step instructions and one of Ayya Khema's books as guide (*When the Iron Eagle Flies)*, I went off for another ten-day retreat.

Before I go any further in this tale, I need to step back and give you some perspective. First of all, it seems that the role of *jhanas* on the Buddhist path, particularly their importance in attaining enlightenment, has been debated almost since the Buddha's time. As I said before, the Buddha often—very often—situates the *jhanas* as the concentration element of his path. They appear over and over in the suttas when he describes the stages of development toward enlightenment. And, in fact, they seem to be the element of that path that pushes one over into the final stages of this process. I say this solely based on my own reading of the suttas, so don't take my word for it. Look for yourself.

Nonetheless, as I also mentioned, in the two suttas that have become the key meditation guides in the Theravada tradition, the *jhanas* are left out. Why is that? And why, since *piti* and *sukha* are the key elements of the first two *jhanas*, are the *jhanas* not mentioned in the *Anapanasati Sutta*? All of this has been and continues to be cause for debate.

The Buddha says somewhat contradictory things about the jhanas. On the one hand, we hear that his experience attaining the seventh and eighth jhanas convinced him that they weren't the path to enlightenment.(MN 26) On the other hand, when he makes his final turn toward awakening, it begins with an experience of the first jhana and then leads to him working through the first four jhanas on the night of his enlightenment. (MN 36)

Finally, bringing even more confusion to this question is that there is no one definition of *jhana*, or more precisely, no agreement about what constitutes whether one is in a *jhana. Piti* itself, is described and defined in very different terms. While Ayya Khema says that it's mostly felt in the body, and *sukha* is more emotional, Ajahn Pasanno flips that, saying *piti* "tends to be a

bit more mind-oriented, more of a mental event. *Sukha*…is a bit more of a bodily experience."[31] While Ajahn Buddhadasa translates *piti* as "contentment," he says, "*piti* is not peaceful," which sounds like he's contradicting himself.[32]

I knew none of this as I set off in the spring of 1997 to a ten-day retreat in Joshua Tree, California. All I knew was that I was excited to see if I could get a real taste of whatever the *jhanas* were. But I was about to find that I had stepped into a messy and confusing world.

It is not, I believe, unrelated to what happened, that I was very happy at this moment of my life. I had just become engaged to be married the coming summer. I had also been invited into a Buddhist teacher training to also begin in the summer. Two years out of graduate school, my employment situation had finally stabilized after some trying times. I arrived at the retreat, not only excited about meditation, but with a sense of well-being that allowed me to easily move into a comfortable place.

Typically, the first couple days of a retreat are difficult, with restlessness, sleepiness, and mental agitation dominating. This time, though, few of these challenges appeared. Quite quickly, I started experiencing the symptoms of *piti* that had become so familiar to me. With their arising, then, I began to apply the guidance that my friend and Ayya's book suggested. This involved trying to calm the particularly intense aspects of the *piti* and find a more stable happy feeling that was said to be there behind all that energy.

To describe what happened then, I need to tell you a bit more about my meditation practice. At that point I'd been involved with Buddhism for over fifteen years, and I always meditated in a cross-legged posture on a zafu, the round, hard cushion favored by the Japanese. In that posture I almost invariably started to feel pain in my knees after twenty or thirty minutes.

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[31] Pasanno, 2021, p. 15
[32] Buddhadasa, 1988, p. 69

Working with that pain was integral to my practice, and in fact, had often helped me to get concentrated. By focusing on the sensations and trying to let go of any resistance or aversion, I would often be able to get quite deeply quiet inside. This focus on sensations was also part of what seemed to bring on the *piti*. I think it's also important to note that this whole process was one of tuning into feelings. Part of this was tuning into emotional feelings (as I talked about before), part the physical feelings, and now tuning into the *jhanic* feelings. This is an important point because meditating with *jhanic* qualities requires a very close attunement with feelings. There is no thought process, and, in Ayya Khema's system, one loses the breath. The object of meditation, that to which we pay attention, becomes these subtle feelings, *piti* and *sukha* at first. Developing the mindfulness and concentration that allows us to clearly perceive and stay focused on these experiences takes a fair amount of training.

The retreat unfolded quickly. Looking back over twenty-five years I can't say whether it was the second or third morning, but one of those, before breakfast, I was sitting working with jolts and streams of *piti* as well as feeling intense sensations in my knees—one would call it pain, though it didn't really bother me. I kept inclining my mind toward the *sukha* that was presumably lurking behind the *piti*. This had to be done without grasping. So, I was doing a kind of opening and letting go, breathing and just allowing whatever was there to arise if it would.

What happened next was one of the moments that made me a believer, that made me think something special was happening. Suddenly all the pain in my knees disappeared, the *piti* receded, and I sank into a level of concentration, peace, and subtle joy I had never encountered before. What was particularly distinctive and different was that I felt enclosed in this state. While I had often experienced moments and periods of calm and concentration, especially on retreats, those states always felt a little unstable, easily overturned by a distraction or some thought or

other. This state felt much more solid. A couple times a thought arose, but the state didn't recede. The thought disappeared, and the state remained, or returned immediately, seemingly undisturbed.

Of course, time in such experiences is difficult to track, and I learned later that in these states time tended to pass more quickly—the opposite of most meditative experiences. In any case, the bell rang, which meant breakfast time. I knew that I could continue to sit quite easily, in fact, I would have liked to continue. But I didn't want to get attached. I wanted to let go because that's how I had been trained. So, I opened my eyes and let the feelings disappear.

Although at the time I knew something had happened, I wasn't sure how seriously to take it. One last experience drove home the reality of what I'd experienced. Normally when I finished a long sit like that, I had to stretch out my legs and take my time getting up. The knees would be stiff, and it would take a couple minutes for the pain to subside. This time, however, I simply unwrapped my legs and stood, pain free. What that meant was that whatever state I had been in when the pain had disappeared, was not just a mental state or an altered perception. Something about the concentration I'd experienced had allowed my body to completely override ordinary pain.

How could that happen?

The combination of experiences over that meditation session convinced me that I had been in the *jhanas* or *a jhana*. The mind state itself was unique; the physical manifestation was almost miraculous. This all tracked with the descriptions of the *jhanas* I had read. For me this was an inspiring and uplifting moment. Soon after, however, things became complicated.

As I've mentioned, the place of *jhanas* in the Buddhist tradition has long been debated. On this retreat, I got an immediate taste of that controversy. When I told one of the teachers on

the retreat about my experience he reacted negatively, first dismissing the idea that I'd actually been in the *jhanas*, and later discouraging me from following this path of practice. A second teacher (and these were both well-known, widely respected teachers) was very positive and supportive of what was happening, referring to these experiences as "the factors of enlightenment arising."

I know now that such disagreements about the *jhanas* are common in the Buddhist tradition. Over the following years, as I went deeper and deeper into this practice, I would commonly be cheered on by one teacher and have my experiences dismissed by another. I myself became confused. The things I was experiencing were powerful, intense, even other-worldly at times, and yet some of my readings suggested I was only dipping a toe in the *jhanas*.

I want to share one aspect of this work that I think can be very helpful. As I said earlier, when the Buddha introduces the jhanas in the suttas he says one "drenches, steeps, saturates, and suffuses one's body" with the various jhanic qualities, like joy, happiness, and a bright mind. (DN2). This idea of drenching and steeping was instrumental in my learning this practice. It's somewhat difficult to describe how I worked with this idea. As my concentration deepened, at a certain point I would actively make a total surrender, releasing all tension in the body, all resistance and anxiety, trusting, even welcoming or inviting, jhanic energy to come into the body. By letting this energy "suffuse" the body, you become absorbed, like a sponge you are consumed with this energy. It's worth noting that several of the metaphors the Buddha uses for these experiences are of water: dry bath soap being soaked in order to make a soap bar; a mountain lake; a lotus pond. Using these images of fluid energy saturating the body can help the mind to go to this place. One aspect of that absorption (another "liquid" term), is that it can wash away uncomfortable sensations and pain from the body. This is why the Buddha, who suffered

back pain in his later years, said that at one point the only way he could feel comfortable in his body was to enter absorption.(DN16) And we can assume that when the Buddha entered absorption it was quite deep.

After a dozen or so years of making jhana practice the primary focus of my retreats, something shifted, and I found I couldn't so easily access these states. Perhaps my skepticism was weakening my capacity to dive in; perhaps I was losing some of my capacity for concentration as I got into my sixties. In any case, my *jhana* experiences didn't lead to a breakthrough into enlightenment, so I began to wonder if working so hard on them hadn't been the best use of my practice time. Of course, I'll never know.

By now it should be clear why engaging with the second tetrad of the *Anapanasati Sutta* is somewhat fraught for me. I so closely associate *piti* and *sukha* with my *jhana* work, that it's hard to see those energies as simply ordinary, pleasant states. Nonetheless, as I delve into this sutta, I am trying to learn to do just that.

SIMPLE JOY

This brings us back to "One trains: 'experiencing joy I shall breathe in'; One trains: 'experiencing joy I shall breathe out.'" Perhaps it is a distinction without a difference, but Bhikkhu Bodhi translates this as "I shall breathe in experiencing rapture." I'm not pointing to the difference between joy and rapture, but rather to the sequence of events. In Analayo's translation the joy isn't as directly connected to the breathing—experiencing joy I breathe. I'm just experiencing it as I breathe. Bhikkhu Bodhi makes it seems as if they are more directly connected, that I am almost breathing the rapture. To me, the connection always starts with the breath. I breathe, and as I breathe a feeling arises or I become aware of the feeling. Mindfulness of the breath is triggering the arising of joy. There's a causal relationship here. I certainly don't

think that Analayo was implying that there wasn't such a relationship, I just find his choice of syntax to be less clear in this regard.

In any case, I like going back to Ajahn Pasanno here because he kind of gets me off the hook with his simple approach: "Once the body is more relaxed, there's a settling, and one can start tuning into the pleasant feelings that arise."[33] We're not in some pseudo-*jhanic* state, just relaxed; we don't have to go searching for some explosive joy, just notice if there's some pleasant feeling we can be mindful of. While there are depths we can go to with our concentration in this practice, his approach seems more welcoming, allowing us to start more simply. He says as much: "With mindfulness of breathing, it is not that one sits down and pays attention to the breath and everything becomes completely clear. This is an ongoing learning, an ongoing training."[34] These words are important ones to keep in mind as we work through these sixteen steps.

Finally, it occurs to me that there might be another, subtle parallel between the first two steps of the second tetrad and the first two of the first tetrad. Many of the commentators encourage us to think of the instructions to be aware of the long and short breaths in more general terms, to be aware of the experience of breathing, the sensations, not just the length. So, the instructions can be understood in a broader way. If we apply that same idea to the second tetrad, and we take the second tetrad to be more generally about *vedana*, then perhaps we don't have to focus so much on *piti* and *sukha*, but just on feeling, on *vedana*. That opens up this tetrad in much the same way that we can open up the first tetrad.

[33] Pasanno, 2021, p. 15
[34] Pasanno, 2021, p. 14

Step 6: Breathing and Experiencing Happiness

"One trains: 'experiencing happiness I shall breathe in'; one trains: 'experiencing happiness I shall breathe out.'"

Venerable Analayo's approach to this sutta and others, is scholarly in the sense of trying to uncover the original meaning and purpose of the teachings. Later commentarial traditions, especially the *Visuddhimagga*, as well as some contemporary Western interpretations can stray from the early Buddhist tradition.

He points repeatedly to the pleasant experience of mindfulness itself as the basis for finding *piti* and *sukha* in the second tetrad. In fact, he tells us that the first tetrad itself brings a subtle pleasant feeling.

Once again I find myself a bit torn. I understand what he's saying about the pleasant quality of mindfulness. Just to stop and be present for a moment brings a good feeling with it. But when caught in strong negative emotions, I'm not sure that the subtlety of mindfulness can break through.

DIFFICULT FEELINGS

Unfortunately, I recently had to confront this question again. Some conflicts in my life triggered painful emotions that hit at something pretty deep. Not just a passing mood, I found myself trying to breathe mindfully with difficult feelings for a couple days. Because I've been so absorbed in this sutta, it became a kind of real-life experiment. For over a month I'd been more mindful of my breath throughout the day than I can ever remember being before outside of retreat. During that time, mindfulness had been either pleasant or neutral as an experience (in my perception), and it had generally supported positive mind states. As I encountered this recent upset, I found that it was painful to breathe. As I took a deep breath, my chest and belly would

feel a strange sensation, difficult to describe, perhaps like a poison of some kind polluting the body, streaming down through these sensitive areas. This is likely the effect of cortisol, the stress hormone.

What occurred to me first was, this pain will make me averse to breathing deeply. It's like the deeper breaths open up the pain, so my breath instinctively gets shallower. It's as though there's a weight on my chest. Further, if it feels painful to breathe, I am less inclined to be mindful of the breath. So, right away, the practice is fraught with complications.

What happens when we feel pain in our breath? Emotional pain in the body? We naturally start problem solving; the mind is activated. Here we are (*I* am) jettisoned into a non-mindful, ruminative state. This is exactly what the book *The Mindful Way Through Depression* warns against. It describes a process in which our thoughts are in conflict with our felt experience, an inner tension that can't be resolved. That's because, essentially, you can't think your way out of a feeling. The thoughts actually trigger more feelings, which trigger more thoughts, and that cycle can spin out of control until one becomes consumed in the painful experience.

If you are working with the *anapanasati* practice, as I am, you need another strategy. Here, it's wise to step out of the sixteen steps into a *metta* practice of some kind, especially self-compassion. Here we can use the breath as a soother, breathing with kindness and phrases like, "May I be happy, may I be peaceful, may I be safe." As we soften the heart, we give space for the feelings, allowing them in without fear or conflict.

In this way, instead of trying to think the feelings away or even breathe them away, you bring an attitude of kindness and understanding to the feelings. Don't feed them with thoughts or

try to suppress them with concentration, but allow them to be there. They arrived for a reason, so respect that.

In this process, there's often a real-world element that has to be dealt with, whatever the initial trigger was. That can't be ignored. So we take whatever constructive steps we can to resolve the problem facing us as well.

On the meditative front, we continue to bring a gentle patience, informed by the wisdom that whatever is happening will pass. There's often a fear of such feelings, a fear that they won't go away, so this reminder of impermanence helps the mind to accept what is happening without additional agitation. A story often arises or attaches itself to the feelings, a story informed by our history and self-image. We tell ourselves we "shouldn't" have these feelings, that other people don't feel like this. Or, we might fall into the trap of thinking that because we are "spiritual" people with a Buddhist meditation practice, we're failing or phony. Often we want to blame our feelings on someone else. Again, these are just stories that the mind throws up when there is pain.

This tendency to build stories or beliefs out of feelings is an interesting mental habit to observe. In fact, this is what the next step points to. When one is happy, one tends to tell positive and optimistic stories. When sad, a whole other scenario is created in the mind. Seeing how conditioned these versions of who we are and how our life is, can help us to disidentify with any story.

Strategies for working with difficult emotions like this are not, strictly speaking, aligned with the *Anapanasati* practice. However, using the breath to merge with and soothe painful feelings as well as observe mental states is, essentially a partner practice. We aren't necessarily getting off the path of sixteen steps, but continuing on a parallel track. Whether during a single

sitting, over several days, or on a retreat, we can continue to utilize the framework of the sutta to guide our meditation.

SENSITIVE TO HAPPINESS

To return to the sixth step itself, "experiencing happiness, I breathe in," What is probably most salient about this instruction is its relationship to the previous step, experiencing joy or rapture. Bhikkhu Bodhi in his recorded classes on the suttas gives a wonderful metaphor to describe this connection. He says it's like listening to a jazz band where the saxophone is playing a solo, so you don't really notice the piano. The saxophone is the *piti*, loud, energetic, dominating the sound. When the sax solo ends, now you notice the more subtle sound of the piano, which is equivalent to the *sukha*. As in moving from long breath to short breath in the first tetrad, we are attuning to more and more subtle elements of felt experience. Again, this is a significant aspect of this process, the settling that happens as we progress through the sutta, and the increasing concentration that comes with that settling and attuning.

This subtle attunement can be carried over into our daily lives. We can start to notice beauty, joy, connection, and all sorts of less obvious things appearing before us. The touch of a breeze on our cheek; the baby in the stroller; the young person helping an elder across the street. Just walking and breathing mindfully can brighten our day. One of the advantages of this kind of subtle attunement is that we feel less need for gross pleasures. When attention is less attuned, it takes more stimulation to break through into our awareness. Not satisfied with ordinary sense encounters, we seek out pleasure by compulsively scrolling through social media, binging on junk food, or losing ourselves in reality TV.

This problem becomes most obvious in the case of intoxicants. Here pleasure is only felt when we are under the effects of a poison like alcohol, the perceptual distortions of marijuana,

the sedative effects of opioids or benzodiazepines, or the ratcheting stimulation of amphetamines. As drug use becomes habitual, we need higher and higher doses to bring the same level of pleasure, constantly increasing the stimulation.

The *Anapanasati Sutta* is a sort of antidote or even reversal of this process, asking us to attune to and appreciate less and less stimulation. We are gradually clearing away the perceptual clouds that block clear seeing, that separate us from the deepest aspects of reality.

Step 7: Breathing and Experiencing Mental Activity

"One trains: 'experiencing mental activity, I shall breathe in'; one trains: 'experiencing mental activity, I shall breathe out.'"

The path of Buddhist meditation is sometimes boiled down to the development of calm and insight, concentration and wisdom. While this might sound like a simple formula, to understand its unfolding takes time and a great deal of experience. For myself, when I first experienced calm and concentration, I felt I'd arrived. I was ten days into a three-week retreat and had been struggling with all the typical challenges of a meditation retreat, restlessness, pain, floods of thoughts, and difficult emotions. Suddenly (or so it seemed) one afternoon a pleasant stillness seemed to descend over me in the meditation hall. I thought, "This is what they've been talking about. This is real meditation." But I was wrong. This was only one aspect (though an important one) of "real meditation." The insight elements, the understanding of what was happening and how it happened were missing.

I know I'm not alone in my pursuit of calm and quiet in my meditation practice. As a meditation teacher I regularly encounter people's craving to stop thinking. Many of the questions people ask about meditation are about how to calm the mind. And there's no doubt that calming

the mind is an important part of practice—just look at the next step in the *Anapanasati Sutta*. However, the pursuit of calm as an endpoint can short circuit the ultimate purpose of practice.

When people bring up the question of how to stop thoughts, the standard answer I give is, "We aren't trying to stop our thoughts; we are trying to change our relationship to them."

What is that relationship?

Firstly, I would say that we believe our thoughts. But even more fundamentally, until we embark on some kind of inner exploration, we don't even consider the fact that we *are* thinking. They are just part of the landscape of our lives like our dog or our clothes. Once we discover that we have a relationship to them, we realize we can't control them, at least we *aren't* controlling them. And so our meditation practice begins.

The two aspects, calm and insight, can develop side by side. There needs to be a certain amount of calm in order to see clearly and develop insight. It's easy to see how the *Anapanasati* helps in this process.

In this current step we arrive at a deeper element of insight exploration. What we look at in this step is how thoughts are constructed. Specifically, the experts tell us that what the Buddha means by "mental activity" or "mental formations," is the combination of feeling (*vedana*) and perception (*sanna*). We find this definition in Majjhima Nikaya 44.

Sanna refers to the recognizing, categorizing, and naming functions of the mind—all dependent on memory. We see a flat piece of wood propped up on four vertical pieces of wood and we think, "table." That's perception. We recognize it, meaning we remember seeing things like it before; we know that it falls into a category of things with which it shares certain characteristics; and we've been taught to call it "table," if we are trained in English.

In order to see how these two factors of mind lay the groundwork for the arising of thoughts, the mind needs to be pretty quiet. Thus, the need for concentration and calm.

What we see when we look at this process is that a feeling of one of the three types—pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral—arises and is immediately categorized or named by the sanna. This process happens so fast that it's rare that we can actually see it happen in real time. Rather, we typically see its results, the arising of a thought or impulse to act, which is called *sankhara*, or a "volitional formation," the impulse to act or think.(The term *sankhara* has several meanings and holds a vital place in Buddhist psychology.[35]) If we pay attention, though, we can see that the impulse has these two factors feeding it. You hear a loud noise—unpleasant vedana—and recognize it as a car horn—perception, sanna—and you jump out of the way—sankhara--understanding that you are in danger. Or, you walk past a bakery and there is a strong smell—pleasant vedana—recognize that it is bread—perception—and think, "I need to pick up a loaf of bread for dinner," a volitional formation. All of this happens so fast that you don't ordinarily see it playing out.

In meditation, however—especially a concentrated meditation—we can begin to catch some or all of the elements of this process. But what is the point? Why do I need to do this?

What's being revealed when we have insight into the unfolding of thought is that our thoughts are constructions, built out of these different elements. Without this insight, our thoughts seem to be something like information or facts that are delivered to our consciousness, unquestioned, believed, accepted as truth. Because much of the time our thoughts are actually driven by desire and aversion, they lead, not to satisfaction or solutions, but to dukkha. It is this truth that our meditation practice is supposed to help us see and eventually reverse.

[35] Bodhi, 2016, p. 183)

When we see the constructed nature of thought, it helps us to break free of our tendency to believe everything we think. This then means that we are questioning our thoughts, looking into them to see what truth they may or may not hold. Further, we see how underneath all of this is not just a belief in individual thoughts, but a belief in "I, me, mine." This belief comes out of the illusion that's created by the streams of thoughts, memories, feelings, perceptions, and sense impressions that pass through consciousness. All these experiences seem connected to something, some abiding Central Processing Unit, to borrow a computer term. But when we can break down these experiences into their component parts, we see that they are actually discrete, though interrelated elements. There is no center, no self or "I" running the show or holding everything together, some thread or through line. It's just a constant flow—thus the insight into impermanence helps us to see that there is no solid self, which is what the Buddha states explicitly in Anguttara Nikaya 9.1: "The perception of impermanence should be developed to eradicate the conceit 'I am.' When one perceives impermanence, the perception of non-self is stabilized. One who perceives non-self eradicates the conceit 'I am,' [which is] nibbana in this very life." (Brackets in the original Bhikkhu Bodhi translation.)

Here in step seven, then, we are in the process of deconstruction, a process that is integral to the work of mindfulness. When we look at the *Anapanasati Sutta* we can see it as a process of exploring more and more subtle elements of experience until we get down to the root forces. The first tetrad engages the grossest form of our existence, our body and senses; the second tetrad moves to the more subtle realm of felt experience, vedana, which still holds a connection to the body; the third tetrad, as we'll see, addresses the mind itself, leaving the gross and even subtle elements of body and feelings behind; finally, the fourth tetrad turns toward the processes behind body, feeling, and mind.

We are, in a sense, at a crossroads, where insight becomes more prominent in the process. What is revealed in "experiencing mental activity" is key to moving forward. While the earlier steps can bring certain insights, it is easy to practice them with a sole focus of calming the body and concentrating the mind. In turning toward mental activity, we are explicitly examining the process by which suffering arises, the first step in the Buddha's quest to find freedom. In a sense we are following in his footsteps, treading through the same territory that he uncovered twenty-six hundred years ago.

One simple insight that arises when we watch our minds is that pleasant feelings tend to generate pleasant, optimistic thoughts and that unpleasant feelings do the opposite. It seems like something we should easily recognize so that we don't fall into the trap of believing our optimistic or pessimistic thoughts just because we have a pleasant or unpleasant feeling. If we could do that we would avoid a lot of mistakes in our lives, mistakes we make by acting on feelings rather than on considered reflection. As a somewhat moody person, myself, my beliefs about the future (and, indeed, the past) are strongly colored by this vedana. In the Introduction to his translation of the Anguttara Nikaya, Bhikkhu Bodhi puts it this way: "Our preconceptions about what will make us happy are often deceptive, stemming from a fixation on immediate sensation that excludes recognition of the deeper repercussions and long-term consequences of our behavior." (AN p. 31).

How many of us have made unwise choices in our lives that seemed like a good idea at the time? Making this simple connection between pleasant vedana and the unfolding of perceptions and mental proliferation—plans, beliefs, and projections—can protect us from such mistakes.

Bhikkhu Bodhi's words resonate even deeper for a recovering addict. "Fixation on immediate sensation that excludes recognition of deeper repercussions and long-term consequences" is essentially the addict's creed.

Ajahn Buddhadasa's translation of this step as "experiencing the mind-conditioner" explores this idea of how feelings affect thoughts.[36] Let's take a simple example. Say you've been looking for a job for two months after getting laid off. With a lot of dead ends, a couple interviews with no call backs, and your funds getting low, you are getting depressed. When you look at your bank account a feeling of anxiety and despair comes over you. You start imagining losing your home, living on the street, desperate to survive. "Why am I such a loser?" you think. "I've screwed up my life; why does everything always go wrong for me?" You might start reviewing choices you made in the past, berating yourself for decisions that turned out to be mistakes.

The next day you get an email with a job offer. Better pay than your last job, with all the benefits. Your mood swings 180 degrees. Now your thoughts turn to a positive future, one in which you are financially secure, professionally satisfied, and on your way to fulfilling your life's ambitions. Now you think, "What was I so worried about? Everything always works out. I'm smart and talented, and I work hard." You feel good about yourself, like a success. Your worries fade.

Was one set of thoughts wrong? Were you crazy to worry? Is everything going to be fine now? The trouble with both these scenarios is that they are predictions. Neither of them is unreasonable. Bad things can happen; good things can happen. The problem is that when we get into good or bad situations, we make predictions about an unknown future based on past

[36] Buddhadasa, 1997, p.72

experiences and how they relate to the present situation. And those predictions are heavily influenced by the pleasant or unpleasant feelings that the present situation is triggering. The wise response, then, is to see how this is unfolding and don't invest a lot of belief in either prediction. Just continue to follow your path, or as they say in Twelve Steps groups, "Do the next right thing."

In our meditation practice we can examine this process more closely, paying attention to the feelings that are present and watching what thoughts are arising as a result.

It occurs to me that what makes identifying the *vedana* in any experience difficult is that the feelings are always entwined in another aspect of experience, either a physical sensation or a mental/emotional event. Or perhaps both. In fact, vedana is the link between body and mind.

The Buddha makes this clear when he says that vedana depends upon, is contingent upon contact—that is, your senses (including the mind which he considers the sixth sense) must encounter an "object" for any feeling/*vedana* to arise. This can seem like the simplest most obvious idea, but it's part of building toward an insight that helps us to let go of the causes of suffering.

Let's say you're taking a walk and see a lovely flower in bloom. That certainly creates a pleasant feeling, but your interest in the beauty before you is what tends to capture your attention, rather than the raw pleasantness of the sight. Rather than thinking, "I am experiencing pleasant vedana," you are thinking, "That is a pretty flower." So, our tendency is to focus more on the object than the vedana accompanying the visual experience. The sight of the object may then arouse the thought, "What kind of flower is that?" or, "I should plant a garden," or, "I wonder if they would mind if I picked that flower." Now you're off again in "volitional

formations." The desire to know what flower it is or to grow the flower is a craving that just pushes you forward into more doing, more chasing an unachievable fulfillment. These thoughts have their own vedana, perhaps pleasant ("I'm going to plant a beautiful garden!"), perhaps unpleasant ("Everything I plant dies."). And so it goes, the mind running off, never seeing the root experiences (no pun intended) of vedana and tanha (craving, becoming).

The same is true, then, for every sense. We hear our neighbors fighting, and instead of considering the unpleasant vedana, we focus on our wish for them to stop. We taste a delicious soup, and rather than focusing on the simple pleasantness of it, we savor the complexities of the flavor—then maybe we ask for the recipe. This is true for every sense and the mind. Now, consider that all six senses are experiencing vedana all the time—six pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral things happening in every moment of consciousness. It can get confusing. Bhikkhu Analayo, drawing from the Chinese version of the suttas, called "agamas," shows the Buddha working his way up to 108 different vedanas. (I'll spare you the math.)[37]

And so, as practitioners we have to remind ourselves to shift our attention from the object and all that it inspires in the mind, to the vedana that the contact with an object arouses. This is where the possibility of letting go exists. And this brings us, then, to Dependent Origination, or at least some of the elements of that famous list. I am not qualified, nor would it make sense in the context of this book, to do a full analysis of Dependent Origination, but there are certain points that can be helpful here.

Firstly, in this twelve-step process, which starts with ignorance and leads us to suffering, the Buddha tells us there are very few doorways out. One of them is between the arising of vedana and the arising of tanha. Once tanha, craving, has taken hold, it's difficult to step out of

[37] Analayo, 2021, p. 40

the unfolding process before it completes itself; there's simply too much momentum by that point. However, if we can be attentive to the simple pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral quality of an experience—of the contact with a sense object—then we can kind of put on the brakes, just breathe and acknowledge the vedana and let things settle or fall away in that moment.

It may be relatively easy to describe this process, but in real time things are happening so fast and they are so intertwined that it's not as clinical a process as it sounds. Instead we tend to find ourselves wrapped up in some thought or emotion with feelings, perceptions, and intentions swirling through us. In a given moment if we catch ourselves and essentially say, "This all started with something pleasant (or unpleasant)," it can kind of snap us back to reality, to mindfulness and out of the proliferations of Dependent Origination. In practical terms, what we do is turn our attention to the feeling, sit with and breathe with that. It's not so much that we've isolated the vedana and ceased to be aware of or affected by the contact and the perceptions, thoughts, and feelings that arose from the contact, but rather that we are putting it all in a different perspective. The process is still unfolding, but instead of being swept away in delusion, we see it for what it is, a process. We see that the extent to which we are captured by, subjugated by this path to suffering, is dependent upon our willingness to engage in it or not: We have a choice. Mindfulness is what gives us the capacity to make that choice.

In meditation we can develop clarity and understanding about how this all plays out. This understanding can then be applied in our daily lives, reminding ourselves when we find ourselves caught up in dukkha, to look at what vedana set us off. We can return to the breath, the felt experience, stepping out of the drama in our hearts and minds. Here again we find a moment of freedom on the Buddha's path.

I want to talk about one more aspect of vedana: its conditioned nature. Our minds tend to think that things that are pleasant are inherently good, those unpleasant, inherently bad. So, we say, "This tastes good!" or, "That music is terrible!" Yet, we all know that someone else won't like the flavor and someone must love that music (look how many people are streaming it). But, in our minds, we just think, "They are wrong. I am right." When it comes to music or food this might not be that important, but it can have much broader implications. Take, for example, standards of beauty. Here a teenage girl who doesn't fit the cultural norm can be ostracized and experience serious stress and even trauma. All because a community has agreed on what is pleasant vedana and what is unpleasant. This then leads inexorably to the issue of racism, which, although it has much broader roots and implications, supports a view that there is meaning behind the color of someone's skin. This kind of conditioned viewpoint is so deeply ingrained, that even communities of color sometimes hold lighter skin as more attractive than darker. Clearly there is nothing inherently more attractive, much less good, in any color, and yet such attitudes grow up and take hold in ways that are often unquestioned.

It's incumbent upon us as Buddhist practitioners to see how our feelings and perceptions, vedana and sanna, condition how we respond to all kinds of sense experiences. Naturally we will have our own preferences, likes and dislikes, but we are challenged by the Buddha to see the relative nature of these preferences. In the famous words of the Third Zen Patriarch: "The Great Way is not difficult for those who have no preferences," and thus, it *is* difficult for the rest of us.[38] While most of us won't be able to simply abandon these likes and dislikes, we can learn to hold them lightly, to question them, and to look for the underlying causes that sustain them.

[38] Kornfield, 1996, p. 143

This reflection on conditionality can, however, be carried too far. Here we encounter the concept of relative truth versus absolute or ultimate truth. For instance, while we might say that human organs are ultimately not attractive or unattractive, the Buddha uses the relative unattractiveness of them to undercut lust. The idea is that if you are a celibate monk and see an attractive person, you remind yourself that they have lungs, hearts, spleen, liver, etc, and your lust is quelled.

A more practical example of the absolute versus relative could be going to the airport and being asked to identify yourself. The TSA representative would not respond well if you said, "There is no self, so I can't identify myself," so instead you pull out your ID.

Understanding when to reference which truth is an aspect of what I'd call "spiritual maturity." When first encountering this duality, you might get overenthusiastic about the empty nature of self and wind up doing, saying, or thinking things that don't actually make sense in the real world. This, then is "spiritual immaturity," if you will.

FIVE AGGREGATES

People familiar with the Buddhist teachings have already noticed that as I've discussed the process of reflection on this sutta, I am following the teaching on the Five Aggregates: form, feeling, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness. These are the things that create the false sense of a separate self. When they come together, it feels as if there's a self inside or made up of them. We talk about "my body," "my feelings," or "my thoughts." The effect of self is created because everything happens so fast and at the same time: sense impressions, feelings, thoughts, intentions, and the consciousness that is aware of it all. This makes it feel as if they are all part of one thing, a self. There are memories, recognizable body parts, possessions, relationships, all seemingly connected to some central figure—I. With

mindfulness, we deconstruct this formulation into its constituent parts and see that there is no central figure. There's nothing holding these things together; self is an illusion. When we take the table apart, nothing is left but pieces of wood and metal.

In fact, deconstruction is a fundamental aspect of mindfulness. Not only are we interested in seeing the pieces that make up objects and selves, but maybe more important, we want to see the process by which these parts come together and fall apart. Thus we uncover causality. How is suffering created? How is the illusion of self created? This leads us, then, to see how to uncreate suffering and the illusion of self. The foundational Buddhist teaching on the Four Noble Truths is designed to approach this very task. Suffering, what causes it, what ends it, and how to make that happen is what these Truths are about.

When the Buddha first explains this process he concludes his description of suffering—the first Noble Truth--by saying, "in brief, the five aggregates subject to clinging are suffering." (SN.56.11)

Form, our body, is the first aggregate. When we have a body and senses, we have feelings associated with them, the second aggregate. Those feelings are interpreted through our past conditioning, which is perception, the third. When we feel something and perceive it as something, we respond and act on those feelings and perceptions, the fourth aggregate, volitional formations. Finally, all of this is experienced through consciousness which finalizes the sense of a self because all of this seems to be happening in a specific reality that seems connected to one thing. Studying and examining the aggregates is a way of seeing through this illusion, seeing that there isn't one thing, but in this case, five; that there is no reference point, no center from which this all emanates, but rather this group of things, aggregates, interacting and generating the illusion. We hold on to the idea that these elements of experience belong to us, are ours--

"subject to clinging." This sense of ownership is bound to be disappointing because we can't control any of these things—they aren't really ours—and thus suffering arises when we cling to them.

Bhikkhu Bodhi explains that the aggregates are suffering, "not because they are actually painful and stressful, but because they are stamped with the mark of transience and thus cannot provide stable happiness and security."[39]

You can see that this step in the *Anapanasati Sutta*, is focused on two of the aggregates, feeling and perception. This is why identifying mental activity is right in line with the work of abandoning suffering. It is this very mental activity, manifesting as craving, that is the cause of suffering. Step seven is meant to help us see into the origins of craving so that we can (in step eight) begin to let it go.

MEMORY, FEELING, AND THOUGHT

Here it's also useful to explore the relationship between memory, feeling, and thought. Human memory evolved so that present moment experiences would trigger recollections of similar past events so that we could use past experience to aid our decision making in the present. So, we might step outside, see dark clouds and feel a humidity that we've felt before when it rained. We go back in the house and grab an umbrella before heading off. In this simple way, memory works to protect and aid us.

However, in more complex situations, this can be counterproductive. Because our minds tend to remember things that are similar to the present moment, when our mood goes bleak, we remember other times of feeling bleak, and pretty soon we think, "Things are always so bleak," because we only remember those nasty times. That sense that "things are always like this,"

[39] Bodhi, 2016, p.186

triggers more painful feelings, confirming our unhelpful mind state. When this feedback spiral takes over, we can go from a bad mood into a legitimate depression as we become consumed by our sadness. It no longer just seems like a bad mood or bad day, but an all-encompassing state that defines us. We feel bad now, we felt bad in the past, so we're going to continue to feel bad forever. What's the point in living?

We can see how mindfulness-based cognitive therapy is designed to defuse just such a scenario. By asking the client to apply mindfulness to their thoughts and see how they are constructed, the therapist helps the client to detach from the "mental proliferation" that can send them spiraling into depression. Asking the client to question the validity of the beliefs inherent to the thoughts adds another layer of deconstruction, helping them to see the fiction that underlies their negative thinking.

In our meditation practice we can use this insight to reveal the roots of the thoughts that are arising. It can be quite striking to realize that some simple sense impression--a sound, a smell, a sensation--can trigger a memory that then sets off a chain of thoughts and feelings that take us far away from the present moment. Suddenly we realize that we've spun out a story that has no reality, and we've lost our mindfulness entirely.

If we connect this directly with the aggregates in our meditation it can look something like this:

- Kaya and Vedana (body and feeling tone): "It's like this." Raw data about experience coming through the senses and the felt experience.
- Sanna (perception): "It means this." That data is interpreted through memory and conditioning to have an intrinsic meaning.

- Sankhara (volitional formation): "Therefore I must do this." Whether through action or thought, we run with the meaning we have placed on the raw data. Now we are either thinking about and trying to mentally solve some issue we have identified, or we are speaking or acting to deal with it.

The problem with this lies, to a great extent, with the sanna, perception, where we've interpreted our experience in a particular way that biases us toward a certain kind of response. If we can go back to the original sense impression—the raw data—we can give ourselves more space to consider that situation or event. We see that the perception is only one way of viewing the experience, and allow ourselves to consider different interpretations; we remind ourselves of the big picture, that everything is impermanent, unsatisfactory, and not self, which changes how we understand our experience. Through this kind of contemplative practice we can free ourselves from the habitual reactive tendencies and live with more wisdom and peace.

BREATHING INTO FEELINGS

In the process of *anapanasati,* "experiencing mental activity" or "mental formations" continues the process of deepening the observational aspect of the meditative state. As we shall see, Venerable Analayo highlights this aspect in the next tetrad. For now, let's see if we can formulate a direct way of practicing this step. Analayo says, "The simplicity of feeling tone, compared to the complexity of other aspects of mental activities, makes it easier to observe without getting carried away."[40]

In the early days of my Buddhist meditation practice, when I found myself unable to concentrate, my teachers intuited that the blockage was emotional. They encouraged me to turn my attention to my felt experience: "Your practice is to feel," said one of them. I took this to

[40] Analayo, 2019, p.66

heart. Soon I discovered that what I now call "breathing into my feelings" allowed me to avoid the trap of discursive self-analysis and judgment, and settle into comfortable periods of meditation.

So, what does "breathing into my feelings" mean? Essentially you are focusing primarily on the feeling tone, with the breath in the background or periphery of awareness. You are trying to avoid going into discursive thoughts by staying with the breath and the feelings. You try to hold back or resist the tendency of the mind to make something out of the feeling, to name it, categorize it. The feeling tone, which is simply the pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral aspect of an emotion is often found in the chest or stomach area, though it can manifest in other parts of the body, notably the face, the back, or throat. Wherever we find it, we try to stay on the somatic level, just feeling, letting the breath naturally soften the experience. Since thoughts so often spring out of feelings, this approach interrupts that process, so that thoughts never gain a foothold in our mind because the unconscious process that feeds them has been brought into consciousness.

The breath and the broader experience of the body as an energy system keeps us grounded in the present moment.

The biggest challenge of this practice is what another of my teachers told me: "Don't be afraid to feel." Many of us are—*I* am. Turning toward feelings is scary. I'd rather just get concentrated on the breath. But, in fact, such an effort comes out of aversion, one of the five hindrances, and pushes us toward more discomfort, more *dukkha* rather than solving anything. It might seem like just focusing on the breath and ignoring everything else would be a good meditative strategy, but it's one of the principles of mindfulness that we need to give attention to the aspect of experience that is calling out loudest. To try to suppress feelings with concentration

is simply to create more conflict in the mind which inevitably leads to more thoughts, more stress and agitation.

This means that we often have to breathe into fear even before we breathe into other feelings. Again, we take the fear as our primary object with the breath holding the broader experience. We use the body-calming step from the first tetrad to manage the energy that comes with the fear, then ease into holding the more subtle *vedana* that's present. This takes care and practice, and an attitude of kindness. We might say that there are layers operating in consciousness through this process. The first layer points the attention to the felt experience; the second layer is the breath that holds the physical aspect of the feeling; the third layer is kindness, patience, compassion, and forgiveness; and the fourth layer is holding the entire experience in a larger mental space or understanding—the impersonal view. Again, only with time and repeated practice do we get a handle on this process. However, once we start to master it, we can sense that we have become meditators, full-fledged practitioners, able to manage our practice.

NEITHER PLEASANT NOR UNPLEASANT

It's easy to to overlook the third kind of vedana, usually called "neutral," although the Buddha refers to it as "neither pleasant nor unpleasant." Because of its nature, we are rarely aware of this type of vedana.

While the typical explanation of the effects of vedana say pleasant leads to craving (as above in Dependent Origination), unpleasant to aversion, and neutral to delusion or ignoring, Bhikkhu Analayo suggests the neutral will have a different effect: "craving for entertainment as an escape from the blandness of experience…"[41] When I read this I was thrown back into memories of being on retreat and wondering why my relatively settled mind would drift off into

[41] Analayo, 2021, p.15

fantasies of vacation after the retreat or start writing songs in my head. What Analayo is pointing out is that our tendency when encountering neutral experiences is to go looking for distraction. We view the neutral as "boring." This makes me think of the way many of us use our smart phones, as "anti-boredom devices." With such a piece of technology in your hand you never have to be bored again. A miracle in human development!

Or is it?

It's worth considering that the fact that the Buddha taught mindfulness of breathing as a key meditative technique was exactly because of its "boring" nature. It is a neutral experience, and thus, if you are concentrated on the breath you are neither developing craving (it's not pleasant) or aversion (it's not unpleasant). Now, we can certainly say that sometimes the breath is pleasant or unpleasant, but ordinarily it is neither.

What is the advantage of that?

When the mind can become absorbed in a neutral experience, it inclines toward equanimity. That's because an essential aspect of that experience is that one isn't moving toward or away from any object—the lack of desire or aversion. And equanimity is the highest ordinary state that we can achieve. In the Buddhist teachings it is the seventh of the Seven Factors of Awakening, the fourth of the four Brahmaviharas, the tenth of the Ten Perfections, and the fourth of the four jhanas. Thus it is, in a sense, the end point of each of these ladders, the fulfillment of them.

In ordinary thinking, boredom is distasteful. Neutral experiences are useless. However, in Buddhist meditation we can see how focusing on the neutral can actually be a doorway to great spiritual opening. And this kind of focus doesn't just have to be on the breath, although that's a good place to start. It's particularly useful to focus on neutral sounds or neutral bodily

sensations. Taking up the neutral as your meditative and daily focus offers a powerful way to ground your mindfulness and concentration.

Bhikkhu Bodhi suggests that this seventh step in the Anapanasati might be meant to incline us toward the neutral: "Since sukha was covered by the previous step, this step may refer to neutral feeling (equanimous feeling, adukkhamasukha) or perhaps to feeling in general, without specification."[42] His final comment "or perhaps to feeling in general…" certainly aligns with my own practice.

Now I will venture into conjecture about human society as it relates to the "neutral."

One of the perennial questions that's asked—or at least thought—about the world is "Why do countries keep entering into wars?" The history of the United States shows that essentially every generation there is a war, whether something relatively limited, like the Mexican-American war of the 1840s or a vast conflagration like World War II. Certainly any historian can give you a list of reasons: economic, geographic, political, and others. But perhaps one reason for war is that people get bored.

I know this is a terrible—and probably simplistic—view, but in some underlying way, I think it contains a kernel of truth. Young men have always been drawn to the drama and heroism of war. Politicians often use international conflict to distract from their personal political problems. Peace may be the stated goal of every country, but perhaps that quiet, that "neutral" feeling, triggers a desire for something stimulating.

The Buddha's teachings can often be seen to have both personal and societal manifestations. Whether it's impermanence, craving, aversion, or suffering, these core concepts

[42] Bodhi, 2023, Unpublished notes

all have internal and external expressions. If neutral vedana triggers the search for personal stimulation, is it a stretch to say that the same happens on the societal level? Everyone pays lip service to peace, but how do we actually live? What happens to our minds or our societies when we actually experience that kind of stillness?

Step 8: Breathing and Calming Mental Activity

"One trains: 'Calming mental activity I shall breathe in'; one trains: 'calming mental activity I shall breathe out.'"

Once again an active effort is implied in this step, as in step four. However, in some sense, if we have thoroughly completed or gone through the previous steps, by now the mental activity will essentially become calm by itself. Just seeing it clearly with mindfulness allows it to quiet down.

If we think that we have to force this calming to happen there is a risk that our practice will be too aggressive, trying to control our experience, rather than letting it unfold naturally. This points to the importance of faith in practice. Underlying all of our effort there needs to be an inherent trust in the reliability of this process. This trust is primarily built on experience, having seen already that the practice works. It also stems from a trust in the Buddha himself as the Great Teacher. We've seen the enormous power and wisdom behind his doctrine and become willing to follow his guidance even when we don't quite understand where or how it is leading us.

The alternative to this faith is a belief that it is only through our own will that we will progress on the path. We imagine that we must forcefully hold the attention on the breath; that the body and mind are only calmed by our determined suppression; and that we must somehow drag joy and happiness out of our own mind. This sort of belief, whether conscious, or more likely, unconscious, completely undermines the project of *anapanasati*. And yet, it's not surprising that those inculcated with the individualistic and aggressive values of Western culture

would strive in this way. We can see, though, that such attitudes must be abandoned if we are to find our way on the path. This becomes just one more supplementary step to the work of awakening.

The masters, the authorities, approach this step in a variety of ways. For Thich Nhat Hanh, Ajahn Pasanno, and to some extent, Venerable Analayo, the simple application of mindfulness to mental activity, as done in step seven, does a fair amount of the work of "calming mental activity." Anyone who has done much meditation has had the experience of seeing how, often enough, as soon as you notice a thought in the mind, it falls away. Mindfulness itself, when practiced with an understanding of the dharma, will often accomplish this. The simplest explanation for this phenomenon is that when we meditate we are trying to let go of thinking, so as soon as we recognize a thought arising, we let it go.

But why are we trying to let go of thinking? This is where our understanding of the dharma comes in. The Four Noble Truths show us how our thoughts of craving and aversion create *dukkha*, suffering or unsatisfactoriness. If we watch our own mental processes in meditation, we'll see these truths for ourselves so that we will develop a natural habit of letting go of thoughts as soon as we become aware of them. Venerable Analayo points to "the diminishing of attachment, which enables letting go of both the thinking process and our personal stake in being mentally active."[43] When we realize that thoughts never deliver on their promise of satisfaction, we become less interested in them, even becoming "disenchanted," as the Buddha says. In this way, step eight of the *Anapanasati Sutta* can unfold spontaneously.

Any calming also depends upon developing *sila*. Bhikkhu Bodhi, in his classic *The Noble Eightfold Path* refers to sila as "mental purification." That definition seems particularly apt at

[43] Analayo, 2019, p.69

this point in the sutta. In order for mental activity to be calmed, it helps a lot if it's not messy, unwholesome activity. If we are being driven by and acting on selfish, lustful, and/or hateful impulses, our mind will inevitably be agitated, any calm disrupted. Bodhi calls sila, "the foundation for the entire path."[44]

When it comes to more applied methods of calming, Analayo reminds us of a famous simile in the sutta, *The Removal of Distracting Thoughts* (MN 20). The Buddha describes someone gradually slowing down from walking fast to walking slowly to standing still to sitting to lying down. He calls this method "stilling the thought-formation," the same process we are engaged in here. In my own practice, I simply imagine that, as I exhale, all the agitated energy in my body and mind is draining out of me, down into the earth. Thich Nhat Hanh uses the image of a pebble dropped into the ocean that sinks to the bottom. Analayo adds his own image of coffee grounds settling (although I'm not sure I want the thought of a caffeinated beverage in my mind at this point). All of these methods closely resemble the fourth step of the sutta, calming the body. We are seeing again the close link between mental and physical states.

Ajahn Buddhadasa suggests two distinct approaches to "calming the mind-conditioner" as he calls this step. First is using concentration.[45] Here he is essentially looking at the *jhanas*, how *piti* is calmed as we move past the first *jhana*, particularly into the third and fourth *jhanas*, ones associated with contentment and equanimity. However, he admits that, since most people can't access the *jhanas*, the use of this approach is limited. Instead, he suggests that our task here is to abandon *piti*, but that *sukha* can continue to be useful in the *anapana* process. In any case, it is self-evident that deepening concentration will tend to calm mental activity just as calming

[44] Bodhi, 1994, p. 44-45
[45] Buddhadasa, 1997, p.74

mental activity will deepen concentration. Perhaps they are simply synonyms, or at least two qualities that co-arise.

The other approach he offers is called "The Wisdom Method."[46] As with the approach of applying the Four Noble Truths I discussed above, this involves seeing the conditioned, unsatisfactory, and transient nature of *piti*. We realize that its pleasant, compelling qualities have a flipside, a kind of excitement that is the opposite of calm. This is called a "Wisdom Method" because it relies on our understanding of the shortcomings of *piti* works. Key to all Buddhist insight and transformation is the idea that if we see deeply into the truth of things, our relationship to them will change.

If we see and truly understand how something is impermanent, we won't stay attached to it because it's so clear that the thing is going to change and disappear. If we see and truly understand how unsatisfactory any object, feeling, or experience is, then clinging won't make sense to us. If we see and truly understand the empty nature of things, that there is no core self or being within anyone or anything, then what are we going to cling to? If we develop these insights to their logical and ultimate conclusion, they transform our relationship to ourselves and everyone and everything around us. Even short of that, just having a strong and clear understanding and acceptance of these truths--the truths of impermanence, suffering, and not-self—alters how we approach our lives and how we understand the unfolding events and experiences of our lives.

It bears noting that the third and fourth steps of the second tetrad parallel the same steps in the first tetrad: we bring awareness to something, then we try to calm it. This points to the progressive nature of the sutta. We begin with awareness of the body, then calming the body. We

[46] Buddhadasa, 1997, p.75

follow this with awareness of the more subtle experience of feeling, then calm the feeling. We are also alternating between simple mindfulness, "experiencing," and the effort to bring about calming. Essentially, we are moving from a passive observational stance to a more active, goal-oriented one.

This calming is a manifestation of Buddhadasa's "body-conditioner" and "mind-conditioner" concept. The breath conditions the body; when we breathe deeply, calmly, and intentionally, the body settles. The feelings condition the mind; when we breathe with the feelings, the mind becomes calm.

Thich Nhat Hanh always brings a different flavor to his reflections on the sutta. As a Mahayana Zen Master, he naturally thinks differently. This can open up other avenues of reflection. In an early edition of his book on the sutta, *Breathe! You Are Alive*, (the title in the later addition moves the exclamation point to the end) he says this:

> "The seventh method refers to the activity of the mind, that is the arising of a feeling, its duration and its ceasing in order to become something else. The eighth method aims at the transformation of the energy of feelings, By observing the true nature of any feeling we can transform its energy into the energy of peace and joy."[47]

This is a wonderful way of describing the process. Feelings are energy. Observing them, rather than reacting to them, transforms them.

Bhikkhu Analayo says we aren't trying to stop all mental activity here, which is a bit of a relief. In fact, he says that continuing the practice depends upon there being feelings and perceptions, since we need to feel the breath throughout the process. Otherwise there would be

[47] Nhat Hanh, 1988, p.54

no experiences to work with. Instead, he says we just have to be calm enough to be able to "experience the mind itself," which is the starting point of the next tetrad.[48] This guidance gives us a fair amount of leeway to practice. "Experiencing the mind," as we'll see, can happen on various levels. As we work with anapanasati, it's up to us to determine if we have attained enough calm to benefit from making this shift of focus.

Thoughts on Practice

The key element of the second tetrad is connecting with the inner, felt experience. No matter what is there, we need to allow it in without resistance or clinging.

While I've tried to cover the main elements of the second tetrad, when it comes to applying them, I find myself substituting my own method that doesn't map exactly onto the sutta. Much of this depends, as well, on the depth of my concentration and my mind/body states at the time of practice.

The first thing I determine, after going through the first tetrad, is whether I'm in a pleasant state, and further whether that state contains any elements of *piti*, tingling, brightness, energy in the body, or any other symptom of this unusual experience. If so, great, I focus on that, while continuing to follow the breath. I might drop in the words, "Experiencing piti" just to point the attention to that experience. If, however, no pleasant piti has arisen, I simply focus on whatever feeling *is* there, pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. If the feeling is unpleasant, that requires avoiding aversion. This is done by not judging or fighting with the feeling, just trying to stay on the raw feeling level.

The point here, whether focusing on piti or otherwise, is to let the mind absorb into whatever feeling is there. It's quite a sensual experience, actually. As I've described, the Buddha

[48] Analayo, 2019, p.6**8**

tells us that one “drenches, steeps, saturates, and suffuses one’s body” with the feeling. (DN 2) This is what makes it sensual: we’re feeling *piti* or other emotions in the body. This keeps us out of our head, the thought realm.

As to whether *sukha*—the second step in this tetrad—arises, again, we’re not in control. We look for it, but if it’s not there, we stay with feeling. If it’s there, we again drench, steep, saturate and suffuse the body with that feeling.

For the third step, Bhikkhu Bodhi’s suggestion to attune to neutral feeling or feeling in general is more helpful—vedana-- than going around searching for the sanna (perception) that follows it. The trouble with looking for perception is that it tends to throw you back into the verbal realm, so I prefer to stay on the felt level. This may not follow the Buddha’s instruction exactly, but I think it serves the purpose for moving through the sutta.

Now I cue my mind with the instruction: “calming the mental formation,” just dropping those words in and seeing what happens. It often seems to settle me more, so I sit with that settled feeling.

As practitioners, we try to balance the specifics of the sutta with the unfolding in our own experience. Keep in mind the bigger picture: the second tetrad is about *vedana*. Don’t worry too much about getting it exactly right. Sit with feeling, breathe, and watch how things unfold. As I’ve said, there’s a natural process happening here, and our job is mostly to point our minds down the path, then trust how it all plays out. Remarkably, even when it seems like you’re lost or failing, things tend to progress in striking ways.

OPENING: The Third Tetrad

The natural unfolding of the third tetrad is seeing that experiencing body and feelings happens in the mind. This awareness deepens into stillness, opening to the space of mind.

“One trains: ‘Experiencing the mind I shall breathe in’; one trains: ‘experiencing the mind, I shall breathe out.’

One trains: ‘gladdening the mind I shall breathe in’; one trains: gladdening the mind I shall breathe out.’

One trains: ‘concentrating the mind I shall breathe in’; one trains: concentrating the mind I shall breathe out.’

One trains: ‘liberating the mind I shall breathe in’; one trains: liberating the mind I shall breathe out.’”

Step 9: Breathing and Experiencing the Mind

“One trains: ‘Experiencing the mind I shall breathe in’; one trains: ‘experiencing the mind, I shall breathe out.’”

This tetrad parallels the third Foundation of Mindfulness, sometimes referred to as “mindfulness of mind states,” rather than simply mind. Turning this phrase around it becomes “states of mind.” So, we might say, “experiencing the current state of mind, I breathe in.”

The Satipatthana Sutta enumerates several of these states and suggests we should notice if they are present or not: lust, delusion, contractedness, distraction, exaltation, concentration, and liberation. The Anapanasati, as usual, focuses on the positive: gladness, concentration, and liberation.

Depending upon the level of our concentration, we might approach this step in two different ways. With strong concentration, one can sense an organic experience of being, a feeling of open, spaciousness of mind that can arise when you’re quite settled and turn your attention away from objects of meditation toward the container or the space of mind. Lacking

that concentration, we will at least begin this tetrad by bringing mindfulness to the distracted or agitated state of mind.

My first experience of a spacious mind happened on an early retreat. I had been using the noting practice for several weeks, putting a name on each experience—hearing, thinking, sensing, and breathing—which had helped me to stay mindful. However, on this longer retreat, the noting started to feel somewhat intrusive and forced. I was striving, trying to catch and record every movement of mind and body. One day I became frustrated and just stopped. Instead of this resulting in regression into a lack of mindfulness, I "fell into" an open spacious experience of mind. This was a huge relief and that experience transformed my practice forever. I might still use noting at various times, but this more natural state of simply being is my inclination and where I tend to aim my practice. Looking back, I see that what happened in that moment was I essentially entered the third tetrad, I began to "experience the mind."

Thich Nhat Hanh distinguishes step seven, mindfulness of mental formations, from step nine by defining step seven as mindfulness of feelings and step nine as mindfulness of psychological phenomena. Unfortunately, he also uses the term "mental formations" for step nine which is the usual translation for step seven. You (and I) can easily get confused here. Again, I think we have to fall back on the direct experience to understand what's being suggested in this step. If we just look at the words without the practice, it becomes a hodge-podge.

The very idea of "experiencing the mind" is so interesting. I know what it means to experience the breath, the sensations of breathing; I can experience emotions, feel them; I can experience all kinds of sense impressions, sounds, tastes, sights and the like. I can even be aware of, if not exactly experience, thoughts *in* the mind. But to experience the mind itself is something else.

The term for mind here is *citta*, a broadly defined term that finds its way into many areas of Buddhist thought. *Bodhicitta*, or enlightened mind is often referred to in Tibetan and Mahayana texts as an ideal to strive for or to live from. Analayo says that "in the early discourses, *citta* stands predominantly for our subjective mental state."[49] I take that to mean it's how we personally define or understand our mind state in a given moment. It's not *objective*, that is, we aren't claiming that it's somehow provable that our mind is in this state, but that's how it seems to us at the moment. This is so important because how we understand what's going on in our mind has a huge influence over how we respond, and thus, how we behave. For instance, it's not uncommon for anger to arise from fear. However, if the fear is unrecognized, we simply respond to the anger and act on that. If we understand that our anger is driven by fear, we are much more likely to bring some introspection to the fear instead of lashing out. In this way, the subjective interpretation of the mental experience determines how we relate to what is arising no matter the objective nature of the experience.

I had a striking moment of seeing this one day when driving to Spirit Rock Meditation Center to teach a class. A few miles from the center I started to have a sad or depressed feeling. In that moment I realized I often felt that on my way to teach. This time, though, my curiosity was aroused: Why should I feel sad on the way to teach? In fact, I wasn't sad about teaching at all. So I asked myself what a "normal" feeling might be in that circumstance, and I realized it would be anxiety. When you're going to make a public appearance, you naturally feel a little (or a lot) of stage fright. Realizing this, I wondered why instead of fear or anxiety I felt sadness? On reflection it occurred to me that sadness and depression are somewhat default feelings for me, so

[49] Analayo, 2019, p.76

I think that what was happening was that when an uncomfortable feeling arose, I immediately interpreted it as sadness. A purely subjective interpretation of my feeling.

In that moment I was "mindful of mind," and by reflection on what I was experiencing, the edifice of sadness collapsed. I suspect many of us have such default emotional patterns.

Ajahn Pasanno in our conversation first pointed out that citta means both the mind itself and the contents of mind. So, he sees the term as having broad meaning. He pointed back at the *Satipatthana Sutta* and suggested that we "define ourselves" by the contents of our minds. This is such a wise insight. It goes again to how we create self, and specifically how we judge that self by what are really just passing phenomena. He says, "The same way that the breath goes in and out, moods go in and out of the mind, content goes in and out of the mind. The sun comes in, the sun goes out. The forces of nature."[50] He's asking us to see the mind like the breath, just a natural process unfolding, not personal, not I. Knowing how subjective the contents of our mind are, we can not only see through the general idea of self, but the specific things that form that idea, the way sadness does that for me. So, for this step in the *anapana* process, initially we just want to see this process. As we work with the step, we can then take it into deeper areas of insight.

Famously, the Chinese character for the term *citta* is "heart," so many teachers talk about "heart-mind." This softens the term, but also, I think tends to muddy our understanding. It points to something other than words and images passing through consciousness, and suggests a felt experience. It also, once again, points to cultural differences in interpreting the human mental experience. The nature of this experience, being entirely internal, is notoriously hard to define. In ancient times, thoughts were sometimes interpreted as messages or guidance from the gods. We

[50] Pasanno, 2022

even see such ideas playing out in the suttas, for example when the god Brahmasampati begs the Buddha to teach after his enlightenment.(MN26**)** Today someone with such ideas might be diagnosed as schizophrenic. Nonetheless, the idea of getting messages from god or acting out "god's will" are accepted ideas in certain religious and spiritual circles.

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu starts his commentary on this section with an important reminder. Always start at the beginning. Whenever you begin a meditation period on *anapanasati*, start with the breath—the first tetrad—and work your way forward. Don't try to drop in where you left off last time or where you feel like it. Always goes through the building process. You always need the stability provided by the progressive steps; they build upon each other. If you get stuck it's because you need to work on that particular step. Just because you got to a certain point last time you meditated doesn't mean your mind is ready to go there this time. On the other hand, if you are pretty focused, you may be able to go through some of the steps fairly quickly.[51]

I would be remiss if I didn't offer the counter suggestion of Ajahn Pasanno, who says that we shouldn't think of this process as linear. "You can pick up the sixteen steps at any point you want or need…It's a mix and match."[52] What we infer, though, from some of his other teaching is that anytime we find ourselves lost or unfocused, we should return to the opening steps, just focusing on mindful breathing until we can establish enough concentration to proceed.

THREE POISONS

The way we work with this step depends upon the progression of our meditation. If we have thoroughly calmed the body (first tetrad) and mental activity (second tetrad), at this point our practice might open up to an expansive experience that I'll describe below. However, if we

[51] Buddhadasa, 1997, p.79
[52] Pasanno, 2021, p.17

haven't been able to stabilize things that much, we will need to approach this section more in the way of the *Satipatthana*. Here, as Buddhadasa suggests, we bring mindfulness to the nature of the contents of mind, particularly to the three poisons of greed, hatred, and delusion. These three qualities tend to dog our meditation practice when we are not settled. Developing a friendly (though, not welcoming) relationship to them is a central element of mindfulness meditation. As with step seven, mindfulness of mental activity, we can use this step as another opportunity to bring awareness to how these qualities are appearing in the mind.

Greed refers to a wanting quality. It can take many forms. It might be sexual. It might be materialistic. It might be emotional. It might be mental. Probably sexual desire and material desire are familiar to you. Emotional desire is the craving to feel a certain way. We might pull out our phone to play a game; call a friend to cheer us up; or pour a drink to relax. There's nothing inherently wrong with such actions (unless you're an alcoholic or gaming addict), but as we tune into the mind state of greed, we feel the intrinsic sense of dissatisfaction it holds. It's not the action that is the problem, but the energy behind it. That energy is saying: "You just need to do this, then you'll be okay." Only you won't be okay—not in the way this implies. That grasping is a desire for stability, for a solution to the underlying agitation that follows us—dukkha. And there is no experience, feeling, person, place, or thing that can provide that solution. All solutions are impermanent.

Mental craving, the desire to know something, is surprisingly pervasive and problematic. While, on the one hand it is the energy that has driven much of science and human progress, it has also motivated people to make up delusional myths about reality: Everything from the belief that the world was created in seven days to the use of bleeding people as a cure for disease arose out of a discomfort with not having answers. Instead of being at peace with not knowing, people

make up answers and build entire religious and scientific systems on these fantasies. In less dramatic ways, each of us tries to resolve issues in our lives that we either can't know or don't have to know. Bringing mindfulness to this tendency is another valuable tool for letting go of craving and the resulting suffering.

The second poison, hatred or aversion, is most simply understood as the flipside of greed. Most every form of desire has a related element of aversion: wanting to feel one way means we *don't* want to feel another way; wanting to do something, means that we *don't* want to do something else. Probably the biggest difference between greed and hatred is that greed carries a pleasant feeling of anticipation that can make it seem like it's not a real problem, whereas hatred is inherently unpleasant. Aversion takes many forms, judgment being one of the most insidious. Here we view others through our own conditioned preferences and build a narrative about what is wrong with them. Judgment alienates us from others and leaves us alone on our superior pedestal, lacking compassion, with a narrow view of how people should think and act.

Delusion is perhaps more nuanced than either greed or hatred. For one, it is the belief that greed and hatred are the solution to something, that they will bring satisfaction—it's a delusion, a misunderstanding of reality and how the world and mind work. It can also manifest as confusion, indecision, and misunderstanding. It's inherently difficult to identify delusion within ourselves because of its foggy nature. Where am I? What am I doing? What's going on? With this kind of confusion, mindfulness is already at bay. We are in a state that makes us doubtful of our own perceptions.

A simpler version of delusion is the state that most of us are probably in most of the time: un-mindful. When we aren't paying attention, lost in thought or acting on automatic pilot, delusion is at play.

The characteristic challenges of each of these is summed up by the Buddha: “Lust, friends, is slightly blameworthy but slow to fade away; hatred is very blameworthy but quick to fade away; delusion is very blameworthy and slow to fade away.” (AN 3.68)

These three primal qualities are a good framework to use when bringing mindfulness to mind—to an unsettled mind. Breathing with these experiences brings us back to the present, to the body, to the open, spacious potential inherent to mindfulness of mind.

SPACIOUS MIND

That potential opens up an avenue of exploration that is rich and fulfilling in its own right, going no further in the tetrad. It brings to mind several teachings from different traditions, ranging from the Thai Forest Tradition, to Tibetan Dzogchen practice, and Zen “Big Mind.”

Ajahn Amaro, a Thai Forest monk who was a student of Ajahn Chah made some of these connections in his 2003 book *Small Boat, Great Mountain.* In a chapter called “The View from the Forest” he draws parallels between his own tradition and that of the Tibetan Dzogchen practice which focuses on cultivating rigpa, or “the view.” Here we are making awareness itself the object of meditation. Instead of focusing on sense objects like breath, sounds, emotions, or thoughts, we tune into the more subtle experience of knowing. This is a shift in attention that typically requires a good degree of concentration, and yet there is something quite simple about it.

We find a practical approach to this focus in Joseph Goldstein’s “Big Mind” practice, something he adapted from certain Tibetan teachings. It also borrows its name from a Zen teaching. So we can see that this kind of approach is more typically associated with Mahayana teachings than Theravada. Fortunately we live in a time when these traditions are in more contact with each other and have friendly relations, not the former competitiveness or judgmental

attitudes that caused Mahayana practitioners to call the Theravada, “Hinayana,” an insult that meant “the lesser way.”

Perhaps the most helpful aspect of Joseph’s approach is focusing on sound. This can give us a glimpse of the sense of “spaciousness” that helps us to be aware of mind as an object. Here’s how I approach this: notice when meditating that everything you perceive can be viewed as happening in a “place.” Apart from the content itself, notice how the breath is felt in front of you; the body is felt near you, with different parts being located in space, above, below, front, back, and one side or the other. Thoughts, too, seem to pass through a particular place, in the head. When it comes to sounds, they can be located nearby, like the body, but also at a much further remove, as when you hear a distant car horn or church bell. One way to relate to this experience is to think of listening to music with stereo headphones. Here a recording engineer actually “places” sounds in specific areas of the sonic spectrum ranging from completely to the right, arcing over to completely left. This creates a sense of the instruments and voices coming from particular places. If you have a panning option on your listening device you can experiment with hearing how this works by turning it from side to side

Now, when we are meditating with our eyes closed, we can sense everything as on a kind of mental stereo spectrum, everything happening in different “spaces of mind.” With sound, because it can come from such a distance, it can create the sense or illusion of great space in the mind. While the breath feels very close, sounds can come from far away. If we let the mind rest in a receptive listening state, we start to sense the mind as extending far beyond the body, thus “Big Mind.”

Joseph's instructions have us visualizing sensations in the body like "stars in the nighttime sky." Continuing with images of space and openness, he deconstructs our experience until all that's left is a spacious mind.[53] It "contains all things but is not composed of them."

As we begin this third tetrad, we can experiment with this kind of practice, emptying the mind until there is nothing left but the awareness itself. At the same time (or probably at a different time), we can apply the *Satipatthana* approach to this step by observing what our mind state is. The difference here is not that the mind is doing different things at different times, but rather that we are focusing on different aspects. In the first case we are trying to strip away the contents of mind or look beyond them, and in the second case, we are observing those contents. Neither way is right or wrong. We must use our own discernment to choose where to place our attention during a given period of meditation. Is my mind busy and agitated? I might need to acknowledge and give space for the contents. Am I getting more settled? Maybe I can try to open to the spaciousness of mind.

Having these different strategies means that we can use the *Anapanasati* practice under different conditions. We don't have to be on retreat or especially concentrated to find value in it.

One more note on language: the term "state" is problematic because it implies something that doesn't change as in "static." "Mind states" are constantly changing. They are certainly not static. At some point we might benefit from finding a better term than this, something that captures the dynamic flows of mind.

[53] Goldstein, 2016

Step 10: Breathing and Gladdening the Mind

"One trains: 'gladdening the mind I shall breathe in'; one trains: 'gladdening the mind I shall breathe out.'"

Step ten provides us with perhaps the most striking contrast among the different teachers' approaches, ranging from one of asserting control over the mind to simply letting gladness unfold out of the process of mindfulness. And Bhikkhu Bodhi throws a real curve ball.

Ajahn Buddhadasa as we've seen him asserting before, tells us that "From the beginning, we have been training in various ways of controlling the mind." We have? After the work we have done, he says, "We do not have to endure a sorrowful mind because we can control it."[54] What a statement! Personally, I find it difficult to hear this because in my decades of practice I have often had a "sorrowful mind." The implication that there was something lacking in my practice, that I could or should have been able to control actually tends to make me more sorrowful. What an unfortunate place to arrive.

How can I take this in a more constructive direction? Well, it's certainly true that I have a different relationship to my thoughts and feelings than I once had. I'm not nearly so reactive, so ruled by what appears in my mind. With mindfulness, I often do catch negative thoughts and feelings and either let them go or recast them, as I described above. Things don't stay stuck in my mind for so long or swamp me with overwhelmingly negative beliefs.

Okay, I feel better. I think I see what he's saying; I just don't buy the kind of absolute statement, the idea that I'm in complete control.

Thich Nhat Hanh takes a more moderate, though still quite positive, tack. He suggests that we should reflect on our positive qualities, "faith, goodwill, compassion, understanding,

[54] Buddhadasa, 1997, p.83

tolerance, and equanimity." These aren't the only qualities we might notice, but it's a nice list. The idea, then, is that "Our mind becomes joyful every time we recognize these mental formations."[55] This is more in line with a positive inventory, remembering our goodness. I'm sure this is effective for many people. The risk, to me, is that comparing mind rears its head and for every positive quality, we remember a negative one or a shortcoming. It seems to me that it's always a risk trying to make ourselves feel good about our goodness. It's like trying to earn love or tally up points.

Analayo takes a much more neutral approach, simply saying, "Once the mind rests in itself [step 9], this naturally leads to the arising of gladness."[56] This feels a lot less pressure-packed; we don't have to do or think something special or exert some psychic power to have gladness. Simply following the *anapanasati* process will lead us there.

Naturally the question arises now, what is the difference between the joy and happiness of steps five and six and the gladness of this step? Analayo suggests that it's a question of degree, that step ten's gladness is a subtler, deeper, stiller kind of happiness. This makes perfect sense in terms of the progression of the sutta and the practice, one of moving deeper and deeper into concentration and quiet.

We can also see that calming and brightening go hand in hand in the sutta. As I talked about before, there is a kind of back and forth of these two qualities. Calming the body brightened the feelings; now, calming the mental activity brightens the mind. The two qualities, as we see over and over, are intimately tied together.

Clearly, though, there is a difference between the pleasant feelings of the second tetrad, and the gladness here. The most obvious contrast is that the feelings of the second tetrad still

[55] Nhat Hanh, 2008, p.75
[56] Analayo, 2019, p.81

contain a physical element, whereas the gladness of the third tetrad is completely mental. Although it might, in a sense, spread to the body, its source is the mind. One arrives at a state of awareness that has little physical orientation. The mood, that state of mind, and any thoughts themselves that arise, are all bright and positive. As the *anapanasati* path progresses, it becomes more and more refined, from body, to feelings, to this elevated mental state. It calls to mind the realms of existence in Buddhist cosmology which range from hell realms to animal, to human, then into lofty heaven realms. In the highest of these, there is no body, only mind. The higher realms have corollaries in the formless jhanas, which are said to detach one's perception entirely from the body, so that no sense impressions are experienced, only a pure state of concentration.

When considering where the *Anapanasati* is trying to take us, it's probably not helpful to think that we are trying to get away from our body, or that we are pursuing these refined states. Rather, it's more of a map of a natural progression that plays out if we stay with mindfulness of breathing and continue allowing the mind to settle, as I described in the "A Natural Unfolding" section above. These sixteen steps are like signposts along the way, things to look for to keep us on track. As awareness of breath grows strong, we then look to the whole body. When that awareness coalesces, we see if we can let the body settle. Once we're calm in the body, we notice if there is a pleasant feeling. Once this is clear, we tune into the subtle happiness. Now we see what mental activity is still occurring, then let that settle. At this point, we turn fully toward mind, and with step ten, open to a bright joy that might arise.

The Buddha tells us that we need happiness on the path in order to progress. To develop concentration, joy is a precondition. While I've talked about my own experience with developing concentration with painful feelings, it's nonetheless clear that those circumstances make it more

difficult to arouse concentration and harder to sustain that state. However, if it can be developed, concentration eventually wipes out the painful feelings. Concentration—samadhi—is inherently pleasant.

If that is the case, why does the Buddha even need to talk about gladdening here? Again this step seems to be related to his project of offering an uplifting path of mindful breathing. If the story of the suicidal monks is true, it makes perfect sense that the Buddha would keep pointing practitioners toward the positive potential of mindfulness and concentration. If he saw any risk that people would misinterpret his teachings as nihilistic, he would naturally make every effort to put them on a constructive path and show them how to enjoy their meditation.

Now let me explore Bhikkhu Bodhi's turn with this step. He begins by talking about the root term for "gladdening": *pamojja*. In Majjhima Nikaya 7 the Buddha says, essentially, that pamojja leads to piti—gladness leads to rapture. This being so, Bodhi concludes that we shouldn't think of the *Anapanasati Sutta* as sequential, since piti appeared in step five and *pamojja* is appearing later, in step ten. Rather, he says, the second and third tetrads (feeling and mind) refer to the same process from two different angles. In the second tetrad, *piti* arises in the contemplation of *vedana*; in the third tetrad, *pamojja* arises in the contemplation of mind.[57]

The consequence of this explanation is to somewhat blow up the idea of the sutta as a progressive process. Instead these two tetrads, are showing what happens to feeling as we practice mindfulness of breathing and what happens to mind as we practice mindfulness of breathing. This is an intriguing proposition. In an email exchange with me he clarified these ideas somewhat. "In the final analysis, I don't think we should insist on one single absolutely

[57] Bodhi, 2003-2007

correct interpretation of the entire series. It may have been left deliberately open to various interpretations, implemented by teachers in accordance with their own understanding and style of practice. The important point is to develop sufficient concentration through the first three tetrads to move into the fourth tetrad where one is developing insights into impermanence and thence into all three marks of phenomena."

This analysis gives a direct, succinct description of the purpose of the four tetrads. I don't think this removes the first and fourth tetrads from a more sequential or developmental understanding of the sutta. The first tetrad is the foundation of the process, the place where we develop the basis of calm and clarity from which piti and pamojja, and eventually insight itself develops. The fourth tetrad certainly depends upon the groundwork laid down in the first three tetrads. However, two and three can be seen in the way Bhikkhu Bodhi suggests, and I think that makes sense. In our meditation, I think the felt experience and the mental state can be seen as changing in tandem more than in order.

Instead of thinking of the steps in these two tetrads as things we follow in order, we can consider them as different elements of our experience that we choose to focus on. Sometimes we are focused on the felt experience and other times on the mind state. One doesn't precede, depend upon, or build on the other. While piti clearly builds on the concentration that arises through mindful breathing and calming the body, pamojja doesn't build on piti, and in fact as in MN 7, the opposite is the case.

It's also important to see that in MN 7 all this pamojja and piti actually starts with faith in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, the Three Jewels or Refuges. Often overlooked in Western approaches to Buddhism, faith or confidence is actually one of the core "spiritual powers" or "faculties." Western religions tend to emphasize this, and I think many Westerners who come to

Buddhism have been disillusioned with faith because of their experience of Christianity. Perhaps in reaction to this, Western Buddhist teachers underemphasize the importance of faith to avoid the risk of alienating their skeptical students. Nonetheless, it's worth exploring the sense of joy that such trust can arouse. When you realize that you've found this reliable way to live and understand the world, it's a great relief, something that uplifts you immensely. If we are going to pursue such a deep and challenging path as Buddhism and specifically the *anapanasati* practice, trust in this work is essential. You will invariably encounter great challenges along the way, and without such faith, it can be very difficult to carry on. When I ask myself what the difference is in my engagement with this path and that of the esteemed monks who I look up to, it is, fundamentally, faith. The willingness to do whatever the Buddha taught and whatever the demands of the monastic discipline impose requires great faith. And to fully embrace the seemingly unprovable aspects of the teachings, like that of rebirth, one must place full trust in the teacher. Bottom line: these devoted followers have more faith than I do. And I believe that such faith is irreplaceable as a spiritual power.

I need to circle back, now, to one of my earlier suppositions. When looking at the patterns of the first and second tetrads, to me they seemed similar: establish attention on one of the foundations of mindfulness (body in the first, feeling in the second); observe that foundation in a broad way (the whole body and the mental formations); and calm that foundation of mindfulness (body and mental formations). This idea was something I developed before encountering Bhikkhu Bodhi's ideas about the connections between the second and third tetrads. While his ideas certainly carry more weight and authority than mine, I nonetheless am not ready to withdraw my earlier ideas. In fact, I might be so bold as to suggest that each of the first three tetrads follows a similar

pattern. While Bodhi is focusing more on the piti/pamojja connection, this broader pattern of awareness and calming also fits as an overlay of the structure of these tetrads.

Step 11: Breathing and Concentrating the Mind

"One trains: 'concentrating the mind I shall breathe in'; one trains: 'concentrating the mind I shall breathe out.'"

As we'll soon see, the fourth tetrad is the only one that doesn't have elements focused on concentration. "Calming the body," "calming the mental formations," and now simply "concentrating the mind" all explicitly point us toward more and more calm and focus. This isn't to suggest that the first three tetrads don't also develop insight. In fact, they are designed to cultivate both.

Perhaps a good starting point in investigating this step is to simply ask what is meant by "concentration" in the context of this sutta and the Buddha's teachings in general. If it's not too tedious, I'll once again point out that the word concentration is not a good translation of the word "samadhi." Richard Shankman, in *The Experience of Samadhi*, says, "The term *samadhi* basically means 'undistractedness.'" He elaborates that it combines two Pali fragments, "sam" or "together," and "dha," or "to put or place."[58] So, it seems to mean, "put together." This fits with one of the meanings usually given of "unification of mind." I will return to explore these more academic and traditional interpretations of samadhi, but for now I want to explore some other questions.

My sense of samadhi is that it has more of a physical element than is generally acknowledged or understood. Whenever I approach a state I would call concentration, there's a

[58] Shankman, 2008, p.3

feeling in the body, often one of weight or density, as well as a sense that the usual edginess or energy in the body is falling away. So, I don't necessarily sense it as a mental experience, at least at first.

I think that the common understanding of meditative concentration is that thoughts stop. For me, and many people I've talked to about this, that's not the reality. Yes, the thinking may slow, but what's more important about thoughts is that they become less intrusive, less disturbing. So, it's not so much that you stop thinking, but rather you're not bothered by your thoughts. This is a key concept. As Analayo says, "meditation does not invariably require a thought-free mind…we can learn to be aware while thought activity continues. Once this has become a matter of personal experience, our meditation practice becomes relieved from the burden of trying to force the mind to be still so that we can finally become real meditators."[59]

As I talked about in step seven, when people ask about stopping thoughts I often tell them that what we're doing is changing our relationship to our thoughts, not stopping them. This is what I mean by not being disturbed or bothered by the thoughts. In fact, the realization that we actually *have* a relationship with our thoughts is an important insight in and of itself. The ordinary relationship with thoughts is one of ownership or belief—they belong to us and they are giving us information. This relationship is the essence of delusion. As long as we see thoughts in this way, and in fact, any time we see any thought in this way, we are trapped in self and caught in craving and aversion.

Here we see the connection between insight and concentration. We need a certain amount of calm in order to see thoughts in an objective way. At the same time, when we see thoughts

[59] Analayo, 2019, p. 68

objectively, we are less disturbed by them, and that helps us to develop more calm. A positive feedback loop.

At this stage of the sutta, we are meant to understand that the calm, clarity, and focus—the unity of mind—is becoming so profound that deeper levels of insight become available. The surface noise of ego is falling away, and we are touching something primal within ourselves, a deep place of stillness, but also potentially another level of disruption. This disruption is referred to in the commentaries as an existential fear that can well up and sweep us away.

What is happening in that moment?

Here, I will risk some conjecture, and you should take it as something to investigate, both within yourself and with other teachers.

First of all, we need to understand that our ordinary perception of reality is conditioned. How we interpret and understand what we see and experience in the world is something we've been taught from infancy. Bhante Buddharakkhita tells a story of carrying his alms bowl through Heathrow airport where someone came up and started pounding on it, asking what kind of drum it was. Here was a large African man in a robe with a round object, so he must be a musician and the bowl must be a drum: that is perception—or in this case, mis-perception. More profoundly, we are conditioned to see what is not actually self as self; to see what is impermanent as permanent; to see what causes suffering as a way to happiness. In other words, we don't see the truth of the Three Characteristics of Existence: dukkha, anicca, and anatta.

This state of conditioned delusion serves a function. These ideas help us navigate the world. Self is a useful construction; if we always saw things from the perspective of how impermanent and empty they were, we'd barely be able to move; and our survival and that of our

species depend to some degree on us seeking comfort and pleasure through behaviors that are ultimately unsatisfying, on acting on craving.

Here is my theory: What allows us to maintain these fictions is a repressive mechanism that operates on the subconscious. This deep area of the mind or brain has more direct, unconditioned contact with reality—thus it is the bridge to nibbana. As the surface noise gets quieter and the clarity and focus get sharper, this repressive mechanism shuts down. The fear that the commentaries refer to—sometimes called the stage of "rolling up the mat," that is, putting away your meditation mat because you can't handle it anymore—springs up for some practitioners at this point. This may occur because the lid comes off the subconscious too quickly or because the meditator has not been adequately prepared for this experience. This area of the mind, besides being a doorway to nibbana, also holds the archetypes and dream visions which when unlocked can lead to bliss or horror. (There is also an obvious connection here to plant medicine insights and bad trips.)

For whatever reason this might occur, one must find a way to hang in and ride out this panic in order to get to the other side. There the unconditioned is revealed, and panic disappears. Now the clarity of enlightenment brings everything into focus.

Another key point about samadhi that distinguishes it from ordinary concentration is that the *object* of concentration isn't the point; the mind state is. Ordinarily we concentrate *on* something. A student concentrates on a test; a driver concentrates on the road; an athlete concentrates on the ball. In meditation, although we have an object—in the case of *anapanasati*, the breath—that object isn't the point. We can use the body, a mantra, sounds, anything that's convenient for our focus. But we aren't really trying to concentrate on the breath the way a student concentrates on a test. We are trying, by focusing on the object, to create a particular

mind state. This mind state then allows us to see past or through the object to a deeper reality. In some sense, then, we are trying to wipe out the object, if you will. Another way to put this is that we are interested in the *subject*—the mind state—rather than the object.

It's equally important to realize that the mind state itself, the samadhi, is also not the goal or point of this exercise. Here, again, we risk falling into attachment to the pleasure of meditation. It's such a relief to let go of stress, anxiety, distraction, and agitation, that arriving at that realm of peace can feel like the end of the road. It can seem as if there's really nothing else we could want. Joy, peace, clarity, all the pleasure of insight, how could we want more? Only if we are extremely attentive will we see the dukkha that still resides in the mind at this point.

The most obvious manifestation of that dukkha is the impermanence of concentration. While we can through our efforts cultivate and arrive at this state, once the causes and conditions pass, the state will pass as well. Once the bell rings, we're back to our ordinary, though perhaps enhanced, state of consciousness. No permanent solution has been achieved.

But even while remaining in the concentrated state, we may be able to detect dukkha. One way to see this is to ask ourselves, when absorbed in concentration, "What am I still clinging to right now?" The answer is revealed in the subtle movements of mind and the subtle feelings that arise. The mind that is free does not seek after anything. The unliberated mind still craves something, no matter how subtle. Subtle feelings in the body reveal these underlying tendencies. If we look carefully we will pick up these cues.

ENERGY

It's worth pointing out that the positioning of concentration after gladdening echoes the second tetrad, whereby piti leads to sukha which leads to "calming the mental formations." As I've discussed, there is a vital relationship between energy and calm in Buddhist practice, the

balancing we see in the Five Spiritual Faculties. Again, in this third tetrad, there is the suggestion of a rising energy, gladdening, that precedes the calming of concentration. This relationship is often overlooked in the presentation of this practice. While sleepiness and restlessness are often discussed as two of the Five Hindrances, it's rarely pointed out that energy and concentration are, not so much antidotes, but the positive manifestations of the same forces.

When we see this, then, we don't take these hindrances to be simply negative states. Rather we can see them as imbalances of important energies. I like to point out to people that if they are falling asleep when meditating, it means that they are getting calm, *which is a good thing!* Yes, that occurrence may not be helpful in the moment, but it is actually giving you useful and encouraging information: your concentration is growing. Now you need to find a way to cultivate the countervailing uplifting energy that will allow you to stay awake in that state of calm.

This doesn't necessarily mean that you need to push against the sleepiness or find some way to make it go away immediately. Such an approach tends to come out of aversion and just creates more conflict in the mind. It also suggests a mechanistic view of this process that misses the subtle flow involved. Yes, there are so-called "antidotes" to sloth and torpor, and they can be useful to call upon: open the eyes; straighten the posture; take deep breaths; stand up; do walking meditation. You can also use reflective practices to stimulate the mind, focusing on the preciousness of human birth and the rare opportunity to encounter the dharma or cultivating gratitude and joy.

However, my experience is that the most effective antidote to sleepiness is time: just keep sitting. If, indeed, the sleepiness is coming as a result of concentration arising, then it's better to build on that than try to push the sleepiness away. Mindfulness has an energetically balancing

quality—it tends to calm you when stressed and arouse you when drained. If you stay mindful through the sloth and torpor, the energy will eventually come into balance. Remember, everything is impermanent, including sleepiness. When we are able to sit through such energetic slumps, we often find that on the other side is a clear, focused concentration.

The problem is, like all mental states, fatigue feels like it won't go away unless we do something about it. We think, "I better take a nap." But if the cause of that fatigue isn't actually a lack of sleep but rather a deepening calm that needs energetic balancing, taking a nap will actually just exacerbate the problem, making us more drowsy and lethargic. It will also condition us to give up more easily when faced with sloth and torpor. We'll get in the habit of slipping off the cushion whenever we get tired. Mindfulness is about learning to be with what is, and taking a nap is trying to escape what is. It may seem counter-intuitive to say, "be mindful of your sleepiness," since sleepiness is essentially shutting down mindfulness, but it works.

In the context of Buddhist teachings, what we are doing in that moment is applying investigation. This is the second of the Seven Factors of Enlightenment and is the quality of looking closely at our experience, watching how it arises and passes, the karmic play of cause and effect. It is this quality that leads to wisdom. Without it our meditation is just an exercise in getting quiet—pleasant, perhaps, but not leading anywhere of ultimate value. The investigation factor is stimulating. It comes out of an inherent interest in what we are looking at. When we are interested in something, we immediately become stimulated. Boredom puts us to sleep.

If it's true that, "Boredom is the lack of attention," a quote attributed to Fritz Perls, founder of Gestalt Therapy, then everything is inherently interesting if we just pay attention. That captures some essence of mindfulness. Even breathing can be interesting if we pay attention.

The things that typically interest us are very conditioned: food, sex, and entertainment for example. Each of us has certain things that we love, whether its music or art; our family and friends; our work or service. Whatever it is, those things will tend to give us energy. What we are learning in Buddhist meditation is that we don't have to be so concerned about the object, but that with training we can find stimulating interest in the subtle workings of mind and body. By developing the quality of mindfulness and then directing it to investigation we can create our own energy, not be dependent upon having an object that triggers us.

SILENCE, STILLNESS, AND TIME

I've often asked myself what allowed concentration to flower? Was it determination and will power? Was it some special meditation technique? Was it the ability to relentlessly zero in on a single thing with laser-like focus? Was it some personal talent? I had found that every time I went on retreat I managed to get to a place of calm that felt pretty concentrated, and yet I couldn't point to one thing that made that happen.

Will power or strenuous effort just seemed to tie me up in knots. I would keep struggling and falling off the object. No calm or concentration seemed to evolve.

I tried various meditation techniques, but none performed magic.

I seemed to have a messy mind that didn't particularly want to concentrate. My efforts seemed to be subverted by my negative tendencies, whether it was self-hatred, the tendency to drift into fantasies, or underlying depressive moods.

I would start a retreat wrapped up in all these battles, and yet, at some point, they would all subside, and I would seem to arrive at the place I'd been seeking.

How did that happen? It seemed mysterious, even magical. My logical mind drove me to unpack the process. If every result has a cause, what were the causes behind the arising of concentration for me?

Eventually I arrived at a simple formula which involved three of the elements of retreats: silence, stillness, and time. Of these three, as I told you earlier, I believe time may be the most important. But let me talk about the other two first.

When I say silence, I'm not so much talking about the environment, although a quiet space is conducive to developing concentration. More necessary, though, is our own silence, not speaking. Talking generates a lot of energy, and that energy agitates and stimulates the mind (see above). Talking is the outward expression of thinking; it demands thinking on our part in order to put together our words. It also stimulates more thinking simply because of the cause and effect relationship going on: thoughts generate spoken words, spoken words generate more thoughts, and a feedback loop is generated. The clearest example of this on a retreat is when we meet with a teacher. We may have been developing our concentration in silence over a few days, then when we sit down to talk, thinking gets charged up. We leave the meeting stimulated and often find our concentration broken as we review the conversation, think about what we should have said or what the teacher suggested. It often takes several hours just to let the energy of that encounter settle down.

In meditation, sitting still is one of the instructions. Different teachers emphasize this to different degrees, and my impression is that there is less of a focus on this these days than there was when I began to practice all those years ago. Famously, some Zen teachers are quite strict about stillness. If we pay attention closely we will see that when we move the body, the mind tends to move as well. Restlessness in the body is tied up with restlessness in the mind.

An easy way to see this is to notice what happens at the end of a period of meditation when you break your posture. Right away, whether you start thinking or not, the felt sense, the calmness in the body, slips away.

When we sustain silence and stillness for extended periods, whether in a single sitting session or an extended retreat, we see how they build samadhi.

I'm making an argument here that is not the mainstream understanding of how concentration develops. Most teachers emphasize the importance of returning to the object of meditation, the breath or other focal point. Their argument is that concentration develops through the repeated returning, that eventually the mind stops slipping away from the object and just settles on it. I am skeptical of this argument, simply because that's never happened for me.

Specifically, the first time I found my mind settling on a three-week retreat, I thought it worked like that. I thought that I would gradually wear away the drifting mind and finally be able to stay on the breath. Instead I spent probably the first half of the retreat frustrated, returning over and over to the breath without being able to develop any degree of stillness. Then, one afternoon in the midst of the same kind of agitation, the mind busy as ever, I just dropped in. Suddenly everything felt differently. My body felt calm, my mind spacious, and I knew that a significant shift had happened. But it did not seem to have happened as a result of my trying to make my mind stay on the breath. In fact, it didn't even seem particularly related to the breath.

I was confused, and over the coming years on retreat after retreat, I would experience something similar. I started experimenting with effort. Sometimes I would strive really strongly, and other times I would just show up and kind of hang out, not making any special effort to hold on to or return to the breath. And yet, whatever the form of effort, whatever the object of concentration, I got the same results. If I sat still, remained silent, and sustained my practice,

everything would settle in a couple days. Eventually I became skeptical of the standard formula for attaining concentration that had been given to me.

This is not to say that having an object of concentration, be it the breath, a mantra, the body, sounds, or anything else, isn't important in meditation. Just sitting there doing nothing isn't very conducive to samadhi. It's helpful to have some focus, but I think we give too much attention and credit to the object and the process of returning than it actually deserves.

So, the silence and stillness seem essential to this process. But it is the time which I think is the most irreplaceable factor. And, in our lives, it is perhaps the most precious. In a society that is based so much on speed (need I elaborate?), time is perhaps our most valuable commodity. And impatience is its emotional partner. Concentration, however, doesn't respond to impatience nor can it be accelerated through any technological advancement. We're stuck with the same process that the Buddha went through, and that every meditator throughout history has gone through, the sacred or spiritual time I talked about earlier. You can't speed it up. You just have to put in the time. It is time that moves continents, builds mountains, and evolves life forms. Time is powerful. In meditation, we combine its power with stillness and silence and remarkable things happen.

Underlying this process are three things: faith, impermanence, and equanimity. On a recent retreat I saw this unfold. As with virtually every other time I've sat a retreat, there was a great deal of "sloth and torpor" in the early days. I had traveled back three time zones and the morning bell was earlier than I was used to. As unpleasant as I found the early morning meditations, and indeed many other sleepy sits, I trusted (faith) from experience that it would pass (impermanence) and just stuck to the schedule, usually sitting with my eyes open and often bringing my head back up from nodding. I wasn't particularly disturbed (equanimity), though of

course I didn't enjoy it. In a larger sense, we could call this taking Refuge in Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Sure enough, after some time, the drowsiness subsided, and clarity and tranquility started to take its place. Then, typically, my back started to hurt, and I had to implement the whole process all over again.

THE AUTHORITIES

As we get deeper into the sutta, I want to make sure I continue to discuss the writings of teachers more expert than I. The sense that I may be getting this all wrong creeps in (the Hindrance of Doubt) from time to time when I read them. At the same time, I can't deny my own experience. If it doesn't match what these masters say, what am I to do? Assume I'm a failure? Assume they are wrong? Neither of those seems like a good option.

Where I arrive is that maybe I'm not a great student of the dharma, but maybe that means I can speak for the great unwashed fellow not-great students. I mean, how many times have you read a Buddhist text and thought, "That's beautiful. But I can't possibly live up to that"? As I've said before, I can't accept that as the end of the road. Instead, I want to see if there is a way to adapt what the Buddha, and others, teach to my own limitations. It's kind of like in golf where players of different abilities are given a handicap so that they can compete together on a level playing field. Or maybe it's not like that.

In any case, let's look some more at the authorities.

The first thing that strikes me is the difference between tranquility (passaddhi) and concentration (samadhi). Perhaps this is where I've gone wrong. In the Seven Factors of Enlightenment (which I'll discuss below) tranquility follows joy and precedes concentration. I have a difficult time distinguishing tranquility from concentration. I mean, I know I've experienced both and I can see that there are qualitative differences, but as to when tranquility

crosses over into concentration, I'd have a hard time telling you. Perhaps I can figure it out in this study.

Analayo sees this process as happening through the previous two tetrads. The first tetrad results in calming the body, the second calming the mental formations. That then prepares for the "unification of mind" that happens in the third tetrad which "can result in profound concentration indeed."[60] We should stop here (take a breath?) and consider that for Analayo to say something will bring profound concentration is different from someone else (me, for instance). On retreats where I have sat with him, I've seen him sit still for three hours at a time, a feat I've never seen before. I have to infer that he is able to achieve very deep samadhi, so if he's impressed by what can arise from the *Anapanasati*, then I am too.

But let's step back and consider a couple other ideas about concentration. First of all, the Buddha makes clear that when he says "Right Concentration," the factor of the Noble Eightfold Path, he means the Four Jhanas. As I've already talked about, this opens up many other questions, and Analayo himself says that at this point in the sutta one can take two different routes, one into the jhanas, the other continuing into insight in the fourth tetrad. Which route we choose may vary at times and will depend on a number of factors, including our personal inclinations, the training we have received, and our intuitive sense of what would be most helpful in a given moment. If we have no access to the jhanas, of course, the decision is already made for us.

I also want to talk about another word found in the suttas (though not in this one) in regard to concentration. The term *ekaggata* is usually translated as "one-pointedness." When combined with citta, as *citta ekaggata*, we have "one-pointedness of mind." To me this is more

[60] Analayo, 2019, p.85

like the definition of concentration in English. The mind purely focused on a single thing. As I said earlier in this chapter, this isn't how I've usually experienced samadhi, but it is a place one can arrive at. Analayo gives good advice about this when he says that the development of concentration, rather than deriving out of a willful effort should "involve a lessening of control" and that we need to "steer clear of any attempt to force concentration."[61] Ajahn Sumedho says that *ekaggata* is a one-pointedness that "includes, rather than excludes."[62] This suggests another of the translations of *ekaggata* as "unification of mind." Rather than trying to zero in on a single thing, we are bringing everything together.

One obvious challenge with one-pointedness is that even though your attention might feel very stable and focused, no matter what, change is happening. Whether you're following the breath or some other object, the object and the mind are always changing in at least subtle ways. So, I think there's always a risk in that orientation to get caught in a struggle to stop everything, to stop the object and mind from changing, to hold on to the apparent stillness.

I've tried before to characterize the different teachers' approaches to talking about the sutta, and I'll try again. Venerable Analayo is a scholar monk. While he is certainly a profoundly deep meditator, he is also wrapped up in the language and history of the text, trying to get at exactly what the Buddha meant. We might call him an "originalist." Ajahn Buddhadasa and Thich Nhat Hanh are certainly both informed by and grounded in the sutta itself. But they also bring something I can only call "personal," though that's not the right word. They're not so much trying to mine the sutta for precise instruction as continue a tradition of commentary.

The thing is, I'm looking at them from my Western perspective, so they seem a little quirky, brushing up against magical or mystical even. Analayo has a much more, "Just the fact,

[61] Analayo, 2019, pp.85-86
[62] Dharmaseed, 2001, Description of dharma talk

ma'am," attitude that seems more rational to me. So, in a way, I'm biased in thinking that Analayo is more "real," but being aware of that bias, I don't trust it. I think that the Asian teachers sometimes get closer to the truth simply because they aren't bound so much by rational thinking, but allow themselves to be more creative and intuitive in their approach.

So, let me talk a bit about what they say about this step.

Buddhadasa says that concentration shouldn't be difficult in this step because we've already been developing concentration in steps four and eight. He says we can use concentration to "drive away any unwanted feelings."[63] This sounds much like what we often hear from Thich Nhat Hanh about being happy in meditation. What is perhaps more interesting and informative is that Buddhadasa says that the happiness and concentration of steps ten and eleven make the mind "highly capable of performing its functions."[64] This becomes his theme of these steps, putting to use the concentration we have developed. He tells us that the concentrated mind knows "all things as they really are," and is "able to solve the questions of life."[65] He's making the point that concentration is not an end in itself, but the tool for developing insight, wisdom, and awakening.

I think we all need to be reminded of this because concentration is hard to achieve and very pleasant when it arises. Once we are there, it's easy to want to sit back and just enjoy it, to feel we've arrived at something worth hanging on to. I know I've fallen into that trap. I think this particularly held back my early practice. When you are struggling with difficult emotions and you discover the joy of concentration, it's natural to feel that that's enough. You just want to be free from the immediate suffering, and when you find a way to do that, you're happy. One can easily try to use meditation like a drug, an anti-depressant or anti-anxiety medication. In fact,

[63] Buddhadasa, 1997, p.84
[64] Buddhadasa, 1997, p.85
[65] Buddhadasa, 1997, p.86

that's probably one of the things that the secular mindfulness movement is selling. So, Buddhadasa's reminder is an important one. We might also simply see that concentration is only the eleventh of sixteen steps to realize there is quite a bit more to this process.

Another interesting teaching from Buddhadasa, which I have not seen elsewhere says that samadhi contains three qualities: stability, purity and activeness. Stability is what we've been talking about. By activeness he seems to mean investigation and engaged exploration of the dharma, what I've already described as the important functions of samadhi. In conversation with Ajahn Pasanno he pointed me to Digha Nikaya 2: "With his mind thus concentrated, purified, and bright, unblemished, free from defects, pliant, malleable, steady, and attained to imperturbability, he directs and inclines it to knowledge and vision...." This, he says, is what Buddhadasa is referring to.

In regards to "purity," I'd like to bring in Bhikkhu Bodhi, who, in his book, *The Noble Eightfold Path*, tells us that the purpose of sila beyond creating good karma in our lives is "mental purification."[66] He tells us that in the larger context of the Buddha's teaching, skillful actions are an essential aspect of human development, but in the Eightfold Path, whose purpose is specifically enlightenment, sila plays a vital role of "preventing the defilements" from triggering unskillful behavior. The defilements—greed, hatred, and delusion and their various forms—are mental. Thus, practicing sila externally, tends to purify the mind internally.

One only needs to meditate after some unskillful act of anger, abuse, deceit, or intoxication to see how fundamental to inner peace sila is.

As long as I am drawing on Bhikkhu Bodhi's wisdom, let me bring in some of his thoughts on concentration. One critical point he makes is that samadhi is a particular kind of

[66] Bodhi, 1994, p.43

concentration, that one could be very concentrated in an unskillful act, gorging on food, preparing to attack someone, stealthily robbing a house, and that these are not samadhi. Samadhi, he says, is "exclusively wholesome one-pointedness."[67] This is another reason why the words concentration and samadhi aren't interchangeable. In English, concentration has no ethical connotation, and in Buddhist meditation practice, concentration can't exist outside the context of ethics and morality. The way I understand it is that concentration needs to be guided by Right Intention in order to be wholesome.

One more observation from Bhikkhu Bodhi's audio recordings of a class on the Majjhima Nikaya: Up to this point the sutta was more about placing mindfulness on the breath, but now we are becoming *immersed* in the breath, what he calls "*Anapanasati* concentration." This, I think captures the difference well. Feeling the breath, watching it go in and out, even with a steady mind is a certain kind of experience. Immersion is something else, something more encompassing. It also suggests that, as Analayo says, we are on the cusp of the jhanas, for which the Buddha says one "drenches, steeps, saturates, and suffuses one's body" with the various jhanic qualities, like joy, happiness, and a bright mind. (DN2) So, I think Bhikkhu Bodhi is talking about the same kind of absorption with the breath that occurs in the jhanic absorption of these states. You can see how it would be just a short step over from absorption in the breath to absorption in these other states. And, of course, all these states have already been touched on in the development of the anapanasati practice, so we are intimately familiar with them. We just have to push them over from ordinary states to the altered state of jhana ("just").

Before I move on, let me step back from this lofty realm to consider Thich Nhat Hanh's thoughts on this step. First of all, he seems to align more with the Satipatthana Sutta when he

[67] Bodhi, 1994, p.94

says that we concentrate on "the mental formation that is present." The third foundation of mindfulness asks us to bring awareness to "mind states," whatever they might be, in contrast to the Anapanasati's third tetrad which is focusing on particular mind states (gladness, concentration, and liberation). Nhat Hanh goes on to mention, first, positive states like joy and faith, but he also says that if there is a negative state, we can put all our "mental energy," (read: concentration) on that as well. "We embrace it and look deeply at it," and that will start to transform the state.[68] By now you know why I picked out this short passage: because it supports my project of opening up the sutta's practices to difficult as well as pleasant states. Nonetheless, I have to acknowledge that it is he and he alone who suggests that at this advanced stage of the anapanasati practice one might even *have* a negative mind state. All the other masters tell us that by now we're pretty much over anything painful in the mind.

This brings us back to my suggestion that the anapanasati practice can take at least two different forms, one that follows and manifests the step by step instructions, and one that uses the instructions to deal with less desirable mind states as well. Again, I ask, must the person lacking in present moment joy or happiness be excluded from utilizing the rich guidance of the sutta?

Perhaps I am just off base and should simply use the Satipatthana to work with difficult mind states, forgoing the specifics of the Anapanasati. Nonetheless, I feel a stubborn connection to this sutta and want to keep finding ways to practice these sixteen steps, no matter the context of my current mental state.

[68] Nhat Hanh, p.78, 2008

Step 12: Breathing and Liberating the Mind

"One trains: 'liberating the mind I shall breathe in'; one trains: liberating the mind I shall breathe out.'"

I've always been somewhat taken aback by the instruction to liberate the mind. First, it just sounds so remarkable and final. For that reason, it surprises me that it's not the last step in the Anapanasati Sutta. Something like concentrating the mind seems like an ordinary, if well-developed stage of meditation, whereas liberating the mind seems like a huge step. It also sounds more like something in a New Age catalog, marketing for a workshop that promises the end of all your problems. It doesn't seem to fit the usually staid language of the Pali Canon.

Let me go back now to where I began to seriously approach this sutta: Ajahn Pasanno's book *Nourishing the Roots*, which has a single chapter devoted to the Anapanasati. It's the most concise, direct, and welcoming writing on the topic. It makes you (or at least, me) feel that you can work with the sutta. Here's what he says about liberating the mind:

> "This doesn't necessarily mean complete and final liberation, release. It's being willing to release just a little bit. The willingness to release our habits, our attachments, identity, and identification with things offers another avenue that's pleasurable. It's very satisfying."[69]

I love the way he says it's pleasurable. It makes it sound like a nice, casual activity, like taking a walk in the woods or reading a good book. More important, notice how he makes it about being *willing*. It's not that you have to achieve all these things, releasing everything you cling to, but rather that you are willing to give it a try. Again, it helps you to feel like this is possible, that you can approach this step in the sutta without being a master or on the verge of enlightenment.

[69] Pasanno, 2021, p.17

I suspect that anyone who has done serious Buddhist practice--by which I mean, multiple retreats, including perhaps one or more of at least a month in length—has had moments where they felt all these things falling away or significantly quieted, our attachments and identification with things. In those deep, quiet places, all these things lose their power. We don't necessarily make a specific effort to let go. As we become more mindful and more concentrated, we engage so much with the present moment that our conditioned reactions naturally recede into the background. It's not that they aren't there at all, but they just don't have any force, any juice in the way they do in our ordinary lives, our ordinary minds.

I believe that this state of naturally letting go is how Ajahn Pasanno is defining this step. The word "necessarily" lets us know that he doesn't mean to limit the possibilities of liberating the mind. It could mean a lot more; you can go very deep at this point. But he doesn't want to make it so inaccessible that you will see yourself excluded from the value and purpose of this step. So, sure, let's liberate our minds.

As I hear those words in my head, I think of Bob Marley's, "Redemption Song": "Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery/None but ourselves can free our minds," lyrics he adapated from Marcus Garvey. These are simple, direct dharma teachings. And they call to mind a remarkable essay from Bhikkhu Bodhi from his book *Dhamma Reflections* entitled "The Taste of Freedom." Here he distinguishes two kinds of freedom: "freedom as license and freedom as spiritual autonomy."[70]

Freedom as license is external freedom, the ability to do things, control things, enjoy pleasures; freedom as spiritual autonomy is being freed from "mental slavery," the three poisons of greed, hatred, and delusion. Freedom as license is always limited because no matter how much

[70] Bodhi, 2016, p.3

power or money we have, our minds can torment us. Only when we free our minds do we experience true freedom. And again, spiritual freedom is something we can experience momentarily or in a more complete and thorough way through transformative insight.

Now let's go back to the other authorities. Bhikkhu Analayo tells us that the idea of liberating the mind can mean that you are free from the hindrances and that it relates to developing calm in our meditation, entering "absorption."[71] It can also refer to what the Buddha called "boundless," the quality cultivated with the Brahmaviharas. Even if we are not in an absorption state, when we get deeply focused on lovingkindness, for example, there's a sense of vastness of mind that arises, the boundaries of consciousness expanding to a limitless degree. This is a deeply rewarding state, one that brings great joy and lightness. The mind certainly feels liberated when you go there.

The first time I experienced such a state was at the end of my first retreat where the teacher led us in a lovingkindness meditation. This ended, as it often does, with guidance to imagine your metta radiating outward further and further until it encompassed the whole universe. Once the practice finished, I was somewhat taken aback by what I had experienced. It was almost like leaving my body, looking down on the earth and out to space, just a vastness I'd never experienced before.

This experience, then made me feel connected to all beings in a way I never had. Losing the sense of separation and boundaries made me realize that I was no different from and really not separate from anyone else. The ordinary sense of individuality appeared to be a constructed idea not based in reality. This insight, which has been experienced by spiritual seekers

[71] Analayo, 2019, p.86

throughout history, began a transformation of my entire worldview. It makes sense to call it a "liberation of the mind."

Analayo goes on to say that "liberation by wisdom" refers to the "irreversible" enlightenment described in the suttas. This involves four progressive stages that are said to eliminate ten fetters. The culmination of that process makes one an "arahant," a fully enlightened one. I suppose when I hear the Anapanasati instructions, that's what comes to mind first.

All of this, then, gives us ways to work with the instructions on multiple levels. For the ordinary meditator trying to utilize the sutta as a guide to their practice, you might at this point look at whether you are (temporarily) free from the hindrances, not manifesting greed, hatred, or delusion. This looking itself can be multi-layered as the subtler and more concentrated the attention, the more you can pick up subtle qualities of grasping or aversion.

There is a bit of a disconnect, though, if we are to take it that at the most advanced stage of practice this step is the culmination of enlightenment. If that were the case, why would the Buddha have included another tetrad of teachings in the sutta? Perhaps a question for another day.

I will note that Analayo, once introducing this step, focuses a great deal of his writing on absorption (a term he often uses instead of jhana). As I've said before—especially in relation to the second tetrad, it seemed to me that jhana (or absorption) was being pointed at both explicitly and implicitly throughout the sutta. I appreciate that Analayo, nonetheless, gives us the option, presumably based on our tendencies and capacities, to work toward jhana or not with the sutta.

Bhikkhu Bodhi, in his lectures on the sutta, also makes explicit connections to the jhanas. In that process, he agrees with the commentaries that say as the attention gets more and more subtle, we are able to let go of "defilements" simply by seeing them. This calls to mind the

famous description of the Buddha encountering Mara the Temptor. When Mara attempts to undermine the Buddha or lure him into unskillful thoughts or actions, the Buddha simply tells him, “I see you Mara,” and Mara slinks away. This evil power depends upon being concealed, and once clearly seen has no ability to continue to do harm.

In this way, one lets go of the hindrances through clear seeing and is able to move into the jhanas. In order to move deeper into these states, the attention must continue to become more and more subtle, which then involves letting go further. As I observed in the sixth step, breathing with happiness, Bhikkhu Bodhi describes these energies like the saxophone and piano in a jazz band. At first the stimulating piti of the first jhana dominates our attention like a saxophone, but when the solo ends one notices the subtler sound of the piano, sukha, the distinctive quality of the second jhana. And so, to progress from one jhana to the next, one must let go of the “louder” quality of one jhana and look for the softer tone of the next one. Thus, one “liberates the mind” from each quality successively. The silence of the fourth jhana must mean the band took a break.

He goes on to compare this to another process: The Progress of Insight. This similarly requires a continuing refinement of attention and abandonment of distractions called the “corruptions of insight.” Once again, letting go is the essence of this work, the liberation.

Bhikkhus Analayo and Bodhi present this step as a highly refined one that requires deep concentration and commitment. This certainly seems to be how the Buddha views the culmination of this meditative process before it moves toward the insights of the fourth tetrad. I think it’s also fair to say that, as Ajahn Pasanno says, this step can be engaged on a less advanced level and have value in our meditation. I look to Thich Nhat Hanh and Buddhdasa Bhikkhu to give us something of a Middle Way through which to view liberating the mind.

Like their monastic brothers, Buddhadasa and Thich Nhat Hanh address the importance of concentration as the foundation for liberation, just as the sutta implies. Buddhadasa defines liberating the mind as "not letting the mind become attached to anything."[72] That seems as concise a definition of the step as we will find. As I've noted before, this non-attachment can be temporary (as in most cases) or permanent (in the case of an arahant). The way he drops this phrase in might suggest it's not all that difficult. Not quite.

I appreciate that he points out that what we call attachment is a mental phenomenon, even though we use a word that sounds more physical. This brings me to another issue I've reflected on, the words "letting go." Here, too, the language suggests some mechanical process, your hand opening to release some object you are holding. But, as we know, we're talking about the mind, so the mechanics are more subtle and abstract. In the case of a thought, what we mean by letting go is stopping the thought, which typically involves moving the attention to something else. In the *Vitakkasanthana Sutta*, The Removal of Distracting Thoughts (MN 20), the Buddha lays out five strategies for letting go: replacing one thought with a more skillful one; seeing the danger in the thoughts; ignoring or turning away from the thoughts; gradually calming the thoughts; and actively suppressing the thoughts. These strategies are accompanied by graphic similes that aid in memorizing the methods. Bhikkhu Bodhi tells us that these five strategies are actually fallback positions taken when standard methods like mindfully noticing thoughts and returning to the breath fail. Shaila Catherine's book, *Beyond Distraction: Five Practical Ways to Focus the Mind* elaborates in detail how to utilize these methods. Ultimately, though, each of us must feel our way to letting go. In our own meditation, in our own minds we must explore what it means, how it feels, what it involves, to let go. This is a key element of meditation that we must discover for

[72] Buddhadasa, 1997, p.86

ourselves. No one can go into our mind and pry things loose. No one can do it for us. As Anagarika Munindra, a legendary twentieth century Buddhist teacher was fond of saying something like, "The Buddha's enlightenment solved his problem. You must solve your own."

Buddhadasa tells us that "The most direct way to practice step twelve" is to explore our suffering, particularly how it arises "when we cling to something as 'I' or 'mine.'" My own practice is simpler: when I realize I'm suffering for whatever reason, I try to let go. I suspect that if I looked more closely, I'd see that all my suffering is associated with I and mine.

This takes me back to another basic question in meditation practice, and indeed in life: Why should I let go? For a Buddhist practitioner, because we answered or intuited our understanding of this question long ago, it can take you somewhat aback to address it. But as a meditation teacher, I do hear this question from time to time. The answer, as far as I'm concerned, is that clinging causes suffering and letting go brings happiness and freedom. However, the only way to know that, to truly understand that truth, is to experience it. And meditation is the most direct way to that experience. Merely reading about or hearing about letting go will never have the same impact as simply sitting down and watching your own mind.

Buddhadasa defines four types of attachment: material and sensual attachment; attachment to views and opinions; attachments to rituals and customs; and attachment to I, me, mine.[73] These are, in fact, four of the ten fetters that enlightenment eliminates. He also reminds us of the role of the five hindrances in disturbing the mind and the necessity of letting them go.

Now a couple observations from Thich Nhat Hanh. First, just to note that in his earlier book on the Anapanasati Sutta, *Breath! You Are Alive*, he says that because the two most important meditation suttas in the Pali Canon, the Satipatthana and the Anapansati, don't

[73] Buddhadasa, 1997, p.88

mention jhana, he believes that the Buddha didn't really want us to or perhaps believe we needed to practice jhana. He says that from this omission "we can infer that [the jhanas] were instituted after the death of the Buddha, probably due to the influence of the Vedic and other Yogic meditation schools…"[74] He thinks the jhanas, therefore, are "dispensable." This doesn't seem like an unreasonable stance to take, though I'm sure others might dispute it.

More to the point on the third tetrad, we see Thich Nhat Hanh's persistent focus on his teaching theme: compassion. In the later book, *Breath, You Are Alive!* (again, the difference in the titles is just the placement of the exclamation point, but they are completely different books), he tells us that in this step '"mind' refers to any mental formation that makes us anxious, makes us suffer, or pushes us in the wrong direction."[75] Putting aside the fact that he's bringing in mental formations, which I thought we left behind in the previous tetrad, you can see that he's aiming at his usual goal, ending suffering, bringing happiness. He kind of circles around to get there, first talking about the transformative power of concentration and how we can use it to investigate various topics, finally landing on love and compassion. And then we're off and running. We seem to have left behind the words of the sutta, instead developing further his theme of cultivating compassion. What he seems to mean is that deepening compassion liberates the mind. Though such a statement is not found anywhere in the sutta, it's inarguable.

This is what makes Thich Nhat Hanh such a powerful teacher. His eye is always on the key insight into how compassion frees us from suffering. One can only think that having seen and experienced so much suffering in his own country over the years of war, that this message came to override any other potential approach to the dharma. In fact, in this tetrad we see him bringing each of these steps back to this central theme. He doesn't seem to view the sutta as so

[74] Nhat Hanh, 1988, p.20
[75] Nhat Hanh, 2008, p.80

much a progressive teaching or a practice that develops and builds step by step, but just takes each one as a discrete teaching that can be used as a singular focus. He seems to see each step as an opportunity take a different perspective on the same topic of compassion, to come at it from a different direction. Each time, though, we arrive back at the same place.

So, what we are seeing is that while for Venerable Analayo the text leads us and is given primacy, for Thay the insight into suffering and compassion leads us, and the text is used to simply elucidate, illustrate, and evoke that insight.

Where does this leave us as practitioners trying to use the sutta as our own guide? I see it as further support for the idea that the sutta can be used in many ways. We can take a textual approach or adapt it to our own practice and viewpoint. No doubt there will be some who will challenge this stance. There is always a risk in saying, "Just do it your own way." If "the Great Way is not difficult for those who have no preferences," then this approach is opening up the possibility of just practicing in a way that you prefer. Dharma practice is certainly not about being comfortable—just the opposite in many cases. So if we are using the sutta to create a nice, easy practice that doesn't challenge us, we won't grow much through it. But that's not what I'm suggesting, and certainly not what Thich Nhat Hanh is doing with the sutta. He isn't adapting it to his preferences, but rather to the powerful and challenging insights that inspire and guide him. Viewing the sutta through the lens of compassion merely tilts its focus without diluting it in the least.

My own approach isn't far from Thich Nhat Hanh. My tilt is toward holding feelings. Similar to Thay, that means suffering and ending suffering are my guides, more so than impermanence. Liberating the mind fits right into this approach. The mind gets trapped by feelings and mindfulness of breathing offers a way to break free of those painful experiences.

An aside: I love studying, practicing, and writing about the dharma. I sit here today in my sedate office in my sedate home feeling far away from the peace of which I write. Over two years into a pandemic that has killed five million people and completely disrupted human social contact; in a time when the seemingly secure foundations of American democracy are under existential threat; while the largest land war in Europe since World War II rages; and Americans kill each other with military grade weapons on a massive scale; all this goes on while humans rush toward environmental destruction like a blind race driver. Through all of this, I must remind myself that the Dharma is my Refuge. I feel very little peace today. I am not happy today. I feel anger stuck in my body with no outlet. Sorrow I am afraid to let loose. I write words about concentration and letting go and long for those experiences. I do know that they are only days away if I can find and take the time to sit. And I will. And I do. But as Ajahn Sumedho famously says: "Right now it's like this."

Another aside: A year after writing the above paragraph, I am editing this work. I sit in the same sedate office and home in a completely different mind state—of course. I fear that my asides might give an impression of a helpless meditator, floundering about. Recently a week of silent practice reinvigorated my practice and I was, as usual (and as predicted above) able to return to peaceful, pleasant, and inspiring experiences of formal meditation and daily life. Everything is impermanent, especially mind states.

CONTROL

As Analayo takes us through these ideas, he hits on one point that I think bears increased focus: the need to let go of control in meditation. This is directly related to the challenge of Right Effort.

Perhaps the most common question people ask when first getting meditation instructions is, “How can I stop my thoughts?” This is based on the misapprehension that eliminating thoughts is the goal, or at least a necessity in meditation. Certainly for meditation to bear fruit, some quieting needs to happen, and indeed, the absorption that Analayo talks about requires stilling the mind. In fact, the problem with the question isn’t the “stop” part, but the “I,” and “my” parts. As soon as the idea that I myself am going to stop these thoughts, I have entered into the area of control, and control, or the grasping effort to control, obstructs progress in meditation.

This is such a difficult idea for people to fully take in because it goes against everything we think we know about success at any task. “Of course,” we think, “I have to control [whatever activity we are trying to do.]” That’s how we’ve been given to understand how things are accomplished. While I think I could make the argument that this is a fallacy for many activities, I’ll limit my argument here to meditation.

The heart of meditation is letting go. We all understand that, but somehow when it comes to practice we still think we have to control our thoughts. Instead, what I would suggest is that we need to set up the circumstances for thoughts to quiet on their own, as I described above in the “Silence, Stillness, and Time” section. So, it’s not that we’re doing nothing, but rather that we’re realizing that there isn’t a direct switch for turning off thoughts. It’s more subtle than that. It’s more like combining several ingredients to activate a chemical (or in this case, karmic) reaction, then sitting back and letting it play out.

The word “surrender” comes to mind. Another spiritual principle, surrender is about giving up control. No one wants to do this (unless they are lazy). In the Twelve Step world, one of the first ideas people object to is that they are “powerless,” as Step One says. Over and over people struggle to prove that they can control their addiction only to relapse again and again.

Finally they discover that they need to surrender, which in recovery has several implications. For a meditator, you might find the same challenge, trying over and over to stop your thoughts, to force the mind to concentrate, only to find it persistently spinning out with its tales and torments, judgments and rabbit holes. Finally, we surrender, just showing up on the cushion and following the instructions, not expecting or forcing any particular results. Giving up control. Often it is at this very moment that our practice blossoms.

The Zen master Suzuki Roshi in his classic, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* tells us that to bring calm in your meditation, "you should not be bothered," by the thoughts. "Let them come and let them go. Then they will be under control…It sounds easy, but it requires some special effort. How to make this kind of effort is the secret of practice." He doesn't explain this secret. But he does go on, in his enigmatic way, to say, "Zen practice is to open up our small mind. So concentrating is just an aid to help you realize 'big mind,' or the mind that is everything."[76]

What he's trying to do with these words is shift our meditation practice from a mechanical process to an intuitive one. I suppose this tension is a lot of what this book is about. It seems like the *Anapanasati Sutta* is giving us clear, systematic tools for meditating; but then, as you go deeper into the process, this system can become more opaque. We (or I) can find ourselves struggling to do it right, to understand exactly what we're supposed to do and what's supposed to happen, to make sense of the whole thing.

Suzuki Roshi then can help us to go back to a more organic practice, one where we are feeling our way along, not trying to check boxes on the road to success.

Even this sutta which seems so transparent may hold its own secrets.

[76] Suzuki, 1970, pp.32-33

Thoughts on Practice

The key element of the third tetrad is opening to awareness itself, the mind.

Despite the fact that I've depicted this tetrad as somewhat complicated and perhaps confusing, in my own practice, it's one of my favorites. (Maybe it's silly to have a favorite tetrad. Buddhists are weird.)

When I arrive at "experiencing the mind as I breathe," I do two things: first I notice how my mind contains both body and feelings, the foci of the previous two tetrads. Second, I shift focus so that I experience the space in which these things are happening, so I look beyond body and feelings to awareness itself.

That second step is a key element of any meditation. Part of the natural unfolding of mindfulness is to move from content to context, from object to subject, from activities of mind to the space of mind.

My own process for this includes a slight physical shift, whereby I lift my head slightly, as though looking upward. Oddly enough, this shift tends to put my focus clearly on the awareness and away from the objects. Now I am "experiencing mind."

Gladdening mind tends to happen naturally as we sit with mind. I don't do anything in particular here.

Then I cue myself with the words, "concentrating the mind," which helps to incline the mind to a more settled, stable state. This is one of the places in the process where I tend to linger. It's very pleasant and essentially neutral.

Finally, I'll drop in "liberating the mind," checking that there are no hindrances lurking. At this point I've reached the limits of my ability to concentrate in that moment. That can vary a great deal depending upon circumstances, as I described above. I'm now at the doorway to insight, the final tetrad.

REALIZING: The Fourth Tetrad

The natural unfolding of the fourth tetrad sees the processes behind body, feeling, and mind. We realize impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self. This revelation leads to a profound release.

"One trains: contemplating impermanence I shall breathe in'; one trains: 'contemplating impermanence I shall breathe out.'

One trains: contemplating dispassion I shall breathe in'; one trains: 'contemplating dispassion I shall breathe out.'

One trains: contemplating cessation I shall breathe in'; one trains: 'contemplating cessation I shall breathe out.'

One trains: contemplating letting go I shall breathe in'; one trains: 'contemplating letting go I shall breathe out.'"

What immediately stands out about the fourth tetrad is a new verb to describe the actions we are to take along with mindful breathing: contemplating. This is another difficult term to work with in studying and practicing Buddhism. Perhaps this is my own misunderstanding, but what comes to mind when I hear this word is "thinking about." Analayo, who translates the word "anupassati" as "contemplation," says that it literally means "to closely observe." This threw me into confusion and doubt, a trip to the dictionary (Merriam Webster's Third Edition), and the realization that now, on top of having problems understanding Pali, I also, apparently, didn't understand English. While contemplation can, apparently refer to something more like reflective thought, it is better understood to mean looking carefully at something. Putting aside my own

linguistic failings, this helps to explain how we are supposed to work with this tetrad: by closely observing impermanence in our meditation.

Thich Nhat Hanh puts this beautifully: "'Breathing in, I am looking deeply at some object. Breathing out, I observe the impermanent nature of that object.'"[77]

Let's step back a little to consider this fourth tetrad in context. We've been through body, feelings, and mind, now moving into insight or dhammas. In terms of correlating with the *Satipatthana Sutta*, there's a bit of a disjunction here. In that sutta, we are encouraged to view the "arising and ceasing" of each of the first three foundations. So, it's already addressing impermanence throughout. Many of the authorities say the same thing about the *Anapanasati*, that, since the breath is obviously changing all the time, we are already seeing impermanence from the start. But there's no denying that the fourth tetrad is the first time impermanence is mentioned in the sutta.

In the *Satipatthana*, the fourth foundation focuses on several of the key lists in Buddhism: the Four Noble Truths, the Five Aggregates, the Seven Factors of Awakening, and the Five Hindrances, to name the most well-known ones. It would seem that we are meant to "closely observe" these things in our meditation. The *Anapanasati*, on the other hand, doesn't address any of these lists, at least not overtly or directly, but rather focuses entirely on impermanence in the first three steps of this tetrad and letting go in the fourth.

My understanding of this is that, once again, the Buddha is trying to be more explicit about what we are supposed to do in our meditation. The *Satipatthana* gives these wide-ranging teachings on how to meditate, but perhaps after the suicide of his monks, the Buddha realized

[77] Nhat Hanh, 2008, p.84

that he wasn't being specific enough. "Here's what I meant," is what he seems to be saying. The last step couldn't be more directive: "Let go."

The fourth tetrad, more than anywhere else in the sutta, evokes a wide array of responses from the wise teachers I have been studying. Many different doors are opened in their teachings. I will explore these and try to uncover the richness, depth, and breadth that these final four instructions evoke from these masters. Then I will share my own experience plumbing their depths.

Step 13: Breathing and Contemplating Impermanence

"One trains: 'contemplating impermanence I shall breathe in'; one trains: 'contemplating impermanence I shall breathe out.'"

In the *Anapanasati Sutta*, impermanence lands in a key moment as the embodiment of insight, the doorway to enlightenment. While I will try to bring out the meaning and importance of this insight, I will also talk about some of the other ways that impermanence figures into the Buddha's teachings.

What is it about impermanence that makes its contemplation transformative? Here again we encounter the brilliant logic of the Buddha's teaching and the Four Noble Truths. Our suffering is caused by clinging, whether to people, things, ideas, feelings, or anything else. When we look closely, we see that every one of these is unstable. None of them are solid things that we can actually hold on to. The attempt at clinging must end in frustration. Therefore, the only reasonable response to that truth is to let go. It's not complicated. It's just that our habit of clinging is so stubborn, that such a response is not easily prompted. All our conditioning rebels at letting go.

We're told that Ajahn Chah referred to anicca as "uncertainty," "mai nae" in the Thai language.[78] Things are changing so much that everything is uncertain: we can't know what will happen next, so we better pay attention. This brings to mind Korean Zen Master Seungsahn (better known as Soen Sunim) whose central teaching was "don't know" or "don't know mind." Similar to Ajahn Chah, he encourages us not to project into the future or assume we know things that we really don't. Living with this attitude helps us to stay more present.

We sleepwalk through much of life because it all seems so familiar and predictable that it's boring, so we'd rather hang out in our mental world. Getting up, going to work, coming home—one day might seem indistinguishable from the next. But if we understand that everything is always new, that each moment is unique, that what we assume is predictable is actually completely uncertain, we wake up to life. This means that we are both present for the simple joys and prepared for the sudden disruptions. That cup of tea, hot shower, or scent of spring when we step outside, each of these becomes an experience of fullness, of beauty and rich joy. And when things fall apart—the job, the relationship, the world around us—it's not a shock. We have, in a sense, prepared for this, knowing that everything we take for granted is contingent, always just one breath away from disappearing. Everything is uncertain, impermanent.

Out of this attitude grows acceptance and equanimity, balanced mental states that take life's changes in stride. The Buddha's teaching on the eight worldly conditions (AN 8.6) tells us that everyone—the wise and the unwise—is subject to the winds of change: gain and loss, fame and ill-repute, praise and blame, and pleasure and pain. Those who don't understand the dharma become agitated at these swings, caught up in craving for the pleasant and aversion to the unpleasant. The mind of a wise person who encounters these conditions is not disturbed and

[78] Pasanno, 2021, p.18

remains at peace. They understand that all things are impermanent, that gain, fame, praise and pleasure can only exist if their opposites do as well.

Insight into impermanence is at the heart of liberation, according to the Buddha. Many times in the suttas we see someone becoming enlightened on hearing the words, "What is of the nature to arise, that also has the nature to cease." Variations on this idea pervade the teachings. When one's mind is ripe, even such a short teaching can tip you into awakening.

One common observation about mindfulness of impermanence is that it makes you appreciate life more. It reminds you to take in each moment fully, to enjoy things, not miss these fleeting experiences. Venerable Analayo puts a damper on this thought, saying that such an approach really isn't supported by his reading of the early texts. For him, contemplation of impermanence is all about letting go of attachment, not embracing the moment. For myself, as a lay person prone to depression, I'm a bit put off by this suggestion. The emotional impact of reflecting on impermanence is hard to sit with; being able to intentionally turn toward enjoyment of the present moment—in a non-harming way—seems like an innocent enough way of living in this uncertain world without demanding that one only focus on letting go. Here again, we—or I—are faced with finding a way to wholeheartedly practice the dharma without becoming either too self-indulgent or too rigid. The recurring challenge.

Let's talk, now, about impermanence as a meditative experience. Buddhadasa Bhikkhu tells us that when we arrive at this point in the practice, we should go back to the beginning and review how each element of anapanasati practice is impermanent: breath, body, feelings, mind,

concentration, all of it. This reinforces the insight of *anicca*, laying the groundwork for further contemplation.[79]

If we've developed our *anapanasati* practice deeply through mindful breathing and the twelve preceding steps, our concentration has reached a profound level. According to Bhikkhu Analayo, we have either entered absorption or at least developed enough concentration to penetrate the deepest levels of insight.[80] Thus, in turning our attention to impermanence we are not simply noticing that things are changing on a mundane level. Rather, our perceptions of body, feelings, and mind are so subtle as to be microscopic, or even, seemingly, cellular. People report things like experiencing the body dissolving or turning into a field of energy; of sensing the mind as vast space; of a sensitivity to feelings that picks up the slightest quality of pleasant or unpleasant *vedana*. It's as though your perceptual antennae were picking up the faint signals of a distant star.

Wes Nisker describes this experience in his book *Being Nature*. While studying with the late Indian Buddhist master, S.N. Goenka in the early nineteen seventies, he learned the body scan technique where students "were told to close our eyes and move our mindful attention up and down our bodies from head to toe in a regular pattern, noticing any and all of the sensations we could feel." After weeks of doing this practice he would "feel no solidity at all, only a mass of minute, tingling sensations." This practice was meant to arouse an acute awareness of impermanence and its implications. Nisker tells us that after working at body scan practice for a few months, "I found that I was noticing the effervescent quality of sights, sounds, and thoughts as well."[81]

[79] Buddhadasa, 1997, p.92
[80] Analayo, 2019, p.96
[81] Nisker, 2022, p.97

Some meditation masters report that such a practice can lead to what's called "The Breakthrough," an encounter with nibbana. This momentary experience can permanently alter our understanding and relationship to reality. The world is no longer seen as stable or predictable. The frail and conditioned quality of body and mind is so obvious that it can no longer be ignored. The impossibility of holding on to anything becomes irrefutable. All of this and more can be experienced and known in a flash, a flash that follows perhaps years of cultivation and preparation. And while this realization itself might last just a moment, its impact can change the direction of our life.

Becoming more and more subtly attuned to impermanence is one path for reaching this breakthrough. We start to see the vibratory nature of all things. The Thai Forest monk, Ajahn Sumedho finds this nature in a practice he calls, "the sound of silence." In his early years practicing with Ajahn Chah, he found himself less drawn to the breath as a meditation object, instead exploring this inner sound. Like Nisker's "mass of minute, tingling sensations," the sound of silence is a stream of constant, minute "sounds," although, as Sumedho points out, we can close our ears and still hear it, so strictly speaking it's not sound.

What the body scan and sound of silence are both pointing to is the energetic quality of life, that our mind and body are part of a field of energy, constantly changing, flowing, moving. By tuning into them—and the movement of breath—we feel ourselves as this non-static field. As Sumedho points out: "When you're just with the cosmic sound alone, there is pure attention, no sense of a person or personality, of me and mine. This points to anatta."[82]

In Anguttara Nikaya 9.1, *Enlightenment*, the Buddha says: "The perception of impermanence should be developed to eradicate the conceit 'I am.'" If we see how everything is

[82] Sumedho, 2007, p.164

in constant flux, we can't hold on to an idea of a solid self. Nothing is solid. This is the logical connection between impermanence and not-self, but logic is not really the point. Insight is more than intellectual understanding.

Thich Nhat Hanh expands on impermanence in important ways. First, he distinguishes between "the notion of impermanence and the insight of impermanence." As in AN 9.1, he says, "When you are able to see the nature of impermanence, you'll begin to see the nature of nonself." [83] Just accepting that everything changes doesn't necessarily alter your perception or relationship to reality. The insight into impermanence isn't just an idea. It is a lived reality. It appears in many ways.

The first way, he says, is that, "we can see that change is happening every instant." (The field of energy.) Then we see the "cyclic" nature of change: birth and death and birth again. I'd call this the "Turn, Turn, Turn," nature of reality: "To everything there is a season." Further, he says that impermanence is neither good nor bad; it is simply reality. Without it there would be no evolution, no life, no growth. And as an exponent of Engaged Buddhism, which applies the principles of dharma in the social and political realms, he asks "Without impermanence, how can we hope that a tyrannical regime might become democratic?"[84]

Finally, he highlights the idea that "Impermanence also means interdependence," one of the central themes of his teaching. A flower, he reminds us, depends upon rain, earth, and sunshine to transform from seed to blossom. That change is only possible because of the connection—the interdependence—between those different elements. They are not separate from each other, and they are in constant transformation through their interactions.

[83] Nhat Hanh, 2008, p.89
[84] Nhat Hanh, 2008, p.85

It's striking how Thich Nhat Hanh takes this simple idea of impermanence and weaves it into a broad reaching set of insights that help us to see the world, ourselves, and those around us in fresh and inspiring ways.

We see now how the meditative focus on change leads to these universal insights. Impermanence becomes a guiding principle, a lens through which we view our life and our world.

The Theravada Buddhist chant that is recited to remind and teach us about impermanence comes to a surprising conclusion:

Anicca vata sankhara

Uppada vaya dhammino

Uppajjituva nirujjhanti

Tesam vupasamo sukho

All conditioned things are impermanent
Their nature is to arise and pass away.
To live in harmony with this truth
Brings the highest happiness.

The Problem of Impermanence

For many years I have ended my morning meditation with a reflection the Buddha encourages known as "The Five Daily Contemplations." (AN 5.57). The first four of these are about impermanence: "I am of the nature to age, to sicken, and to die. I must be separated from everyone and everything I hold dear." (This is my version, not an exact translation—but you get the idea.). The fifth contemplation says that I am "the heir of my karma."

When I reflect on my inevitable deterioration and death, it doesn't always cheer me up. My feelings in that moment are, in fact, a good reflection of my mind state. Sometimes I have a feeling of acceptance and letting go, opening to something larger than myself; at other times I feel sad or anxious. I don't want to face my coming demise. It is this fear that causes people to ignore or deny death and loss. Western—or perhaps I should say American—culture uses everything from diet and exercise to makeup and surgery to hold off and cover up what must come. Finally, when all else fails, we warehouse the old so that we—the non-old—don't have to see them—to see our own future. Of death, we know little. Bodies are swept away and either cremated or boxed up. If seen, it is only after they've been painted and dressed to look as if simply sleeping.

I understand these tendencies. Even as someone who repeats the Buddha's reflections every day, I don't feel great about them. It's hard to face our own aging; harder still to face death. Sometimes the whole topic just depresses me. It seems like it would be easier to be in denial. But I'm determined to be honest with myself, to look at life directly, clearly.

In Majjhima Nikaya 87, "Born from Those Who Are Dear," a man comes to the Buddha despairing over the death of his child. It's a heartbreaking scene. He can't eat or work. "He kept going to the charnel ground [the place where bodies are left to decay] and crying: 'My only son, where are you? My only son, where are you?'" Any parent—and I'm sure many others—can imagine this man's grief. There's perhaps no greater loss in life than that of one's child.

And yet the Buddha doesn't offer any conventional consolation. He tells the man that his "faculties are deranged," and insists he face the truth of impermanence. He tells him that suffering comes from attachment to "those who are dear." Not surprisingly the man walks away disappointed. Frankly, I can't say that I agree with the Buddha's approach in this story. Certainly

I'm impressed with the power of the insight, but I just don't know if his timing is right. Nonetheless, later in the sutta, the king and queen of Kosala hear this story and come to see the wisdom in the Buddha's words.

The question always arises whether the Buddha is saying that we should have no attachments in life or whether we should simply acknowledge that there will be a price to pay if we do, and thereby develop equanimity around loss. I've always preferred the latter approach, but I think a strict reading of the teachings favors the former. If we take monastic life as the model for Buddhism, such folks are separated from family, celibate, and detached from ordinary social life. While inevitably strong connections form among them, monastics are supposed to live and view their lives as emotionally unattached individuals, their preferences subsumed in the greater needs of the community. Any material attachments are discouraged as well.

My point here is that the Buddha's standards are very high. And it can be difficult to live up to them, as I learn each time I make my morning contemplations.

The profound realization of impermanence that can happen through meditation, can have a similar shattering of the psyche that the loss of a child has on a parent. When the Buddha says that "The perception of impermanence should be developed" (AN 9.1), he is talking about how we see, understand, and perhaps most important, experience the world. Perception is founded in memory: I was taught as a child to see a table as a table, and so every time I see a flat surface propped on four legs, I remember that it's called a table and that it has certain functions. Perception is so deeply conditioned that only a radical psychic upheaval can change it. That upheaval doesn't always go so well. When we suddenly realize that nothing is solid, that the reality we have always taken for granted is in fact a fiction, just one version of perceptual reality, it can either lead to a profound letting go and sense of freedom, or an existential panic.

Such a psychic disruption can happen on psychedelics, in a psychotic break, or even in deep meditation. All three of these create altered states from which reality is experienced differently. Each of them—even deep meditation—holds certain risks, but meditation, when guided and supported by a skilled teacher is certainly the safest, and more important, the most productive. The developmental process involved in entering deep meditation states and experiencing transformative insights provides a psychic foundation that, along with community and a wise teacher, allow for an integration of this upheaval into ordinary consciousness. There seem to be cases in which people integrated the other two entryways skillfully, however, there are far more cases where the results were not so beneficial. Obviously, in the case of a psychotic break, integration is extremely difficult. (From his writing, it seems that Eckhart Tolle accomplished this.) With psychedelics, a fair number of people seem to have used a transformative experience as the jumping off point for spiritual exploration. However, plenty of folks have simply used it as a reason to take more drugs, or worse, descend into psychosis.

This isn't to say that disruptive meditation experiences always have a beneficial result themselves. In fact, the work of Brown University researcher Willoughby Britton focuses on this phenomenon, which she claims is far more widespread than most people know. I can't speak to that, but I certainly know that anytime we dive into the human psyche we run risks. With serious meditation, we should always work with a broadly skilled and compassionate teacher. Any teacher who doesn't understand or denies such risks is either naïve or exploitative.

All of this points to the complexities of living with impermanence. While Buddhists might want us to take it all in stride, merrily letting go of our grief and fear, for most of us, it's not so simple. We certainly need to be clear-headed about the truth that everything and everyone

is constantly changing, and that our very lives are headed for an inevitable end, but holding all this skillfully in ways that support us, even bring happiness, that is the challenge.

Breathing and Contemplating Suffering

As I mentioned above, my own practice has been more informed by working with dukkha--suffering or unsatisfactoriness—than impermanence. This evolved naturally out of my own struggles, and eventually has taken form as a full-blown meditative process that brings insight into the Four Noble Truths.

In my early days of practice, I found consolation in the teaching on the Five Hindrances. Seeing that the challenges I kept running into were viewed as common impediments to practice helped me not to take them personally. I was taught to bring mindfulness to these difficult experiences. If I simply paid attention without resistance, much of their bothersome nature was defused. Yes, they were still unpleasant, but the agitation that comes with struggling to change things fell away. Eventually this acceptance turned into calm and serenity, and I was on my way to a satisfying meditation practice. When I became a meditation teacher, I started to analyze the process I had gone through so that I could pass it on, not just in practice, but in theory.

The initial stage in this process is seeing the hindrance, seeing the dukkha. In the Four Noble Truths, this is called *understanding* suffering, the action we are supposed to take in relation to the first Noble Truth. We're aware of what's happening, that it's unpleasant and unsatisfying. Then we see that this dukkha is coming about by some kind of clinging—the second Noble Truth. The first two hindrances directly address this: desire and aversion. I put the second Noble Truth like this: Wanting things to be different from the way they are. That sums up both desire and aversion: we want to get something, or we want to get rid of something. With the next two hindrances, sleepiness and restlessness, their unpleasant nature triggers more aversion.

The fifth hindrance, doubt, leaves us with a feeling of inadequacy, so more desire, the wish to know or understand more or have more confidence in our practice.

The suggested action for the second Noble Truth is *abandoning*, letting go of the hindrance, of the desire.

Now we've arrived at the third Noble Truth, the Truth of the End of Suffering. When we abandon the hindrance, the cause of suffering, we feel relief. We can experience this in real time in our meditation. It's important to do that, to bring awareness to this shift from the tension and stress of dukkha, to the pleasant release that happens when we let go of a thought and come back to the breath. This action is called *realizing* the end of suffering. We're present for the experience.

The fourth Noble Truth is the Way to the End of Suffering, The Noble Eightfold Path, and it is to be *developed*. We can see that if we've gone through this whole process with the Four Noble Truths, we have been developing the Way: Right View helped us understand what was happening; Right Intention put us on track; Right Effort gave us energy to stick with the process; Right Mindfulness is what allowed us to see clearly each stage of the process; Right Concentration sustained our attention and brought increasing calm. The other three elements of the Eightfold Path, Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood act as support for the process, though they aren't directly involved in the meditation itself.

Let me now sum up how this process gives us direct insight into the Four Noble Truths:

1. As we meditate we feel the hindrances and dukkha (first Truth).
2. We can see that these hindrances are caused by clinging (second Truth).
3. Naturally enough, in realizing this we let go and feel relieved (third Truth).

4. It becomes apparent that this whole process represents the unfolding of the Eightfold Path (fourth Truth).

In this way, we have what Joseph Goldstein calls "the experience of insight." This phrase, which was the title of his first book, is an odd one in English. In our language, insight usually points to an idea, a wise thought. It's not something we "experience." It's something we think. But in Pali, the term "vipassana," which we translate as insight or "to see clearly," refers to something else, an intuitive wisdom that arises out of paying close attention, attention guided by Right View and Right Intention. When we practice meditation in the way I am describing, we have this experience. It's not that we are thinking about the Four Noble Truths or checking on each step in the process as we go through it. Rather we are seeing the connection between our suffering and our clinging; we are feeling that as we meditate. Then we are seeing how that suffering falls away when we stop clinging. It's purely experiential, but an experience that is closely observed and thus reveals something vital to us. We don't have to be convinced about the logic of the Four Noble Truths; we don't even have to memorize them or remind ourselves what they are. We develop an intuitive habit of letting go when we feel ourselves suffering. It's really a retraining of our habitual patterns of behavior.

The literature of AA says that after someone works the Twelve Steps they will "recoil" from alcohol "as from a hot flame."[85] It's this kind of response that we can develop in our meditation as the hindrances arise, only now we are recoiling from all grasping, not just from the craving for a drink.

[85] Anonymous, 2001, p.84

Step 14: Breathing and Contemplating Fading Away

"One trains: 'contemplating fading away I shall breathe in'; one trains: 'contemplating fading away I shall breathe out.'"

In my early readings of the Anapanasasti Sutta I thought the next two steps were just reiterations of impermanence. It seems obvious that if things are impermanent, they will fade away (step 14) and cease (step 15). Observing closely the specific elements of anicca in this way would seem to reinforce our insight, helping us to completely absorb the truth that you can't hold on to anything. Bhikkhu Bodhi does give some credence to this reading, saying that one way to understand these steps is that they give "insight into the impermanence of formations."[86] Another reading, he says, is about "realising Nibbana" through the "fading away of lust and the cessation of suffering." It is this reading that is favored by all our other expert guides.

Thich Nhat Hanh translates this step, "Breathing in [and out], I observe the disappearance of desire."[87] Buddhadasa tells us that it "dissolves attachment."[88] Ajahn Passano says, "I shall breathe in contemplating the fading away of passions."[89] Bhikkhu Analayo translates the step as "contemplating dispassion."[90] Observing passion fading away.

This understanding of fading away means we aren't just paying attention to the impermanence of various things—sensations, feelings, thoughts—but rather of a very specific mental quality: desire, greed, lust.

The fact that this instruction is so specific fits with the rest of the sutta, which, as I've said before, refines the instructions from the Satipatthana Sutta, making them both more specific

[86] Nanamoli, 2015, p.1331, note 1121
[87] Nhat Hanh, 2008, p.83
[88] Buddhadasa, 1997, p.94
[89] Pasanno, 2021, p.18
[90] Analayo, 2019, p.100

and more positive. That sutta tells us to observe arising and ceasing of each of the satipatthanas (foundations of mindfulness): body, feelings, mind states, and dhammas.

What begins to emerge now is a way of seeing these two suttas, not so much contrasting, but rather as part of a larger system. All the authorities point to the idea that although the first three tetrads don't mention impermanence, the constant arising and ceasing of breath correlates with the Satipatthana contemplations. What's happening in step fourteen is that persistently tracking impermanence begins to bear fruit. Now the weakening of desire spurred by mindfulness of anicca manifests, and we are told to bring awareness to that fading.

The idea that deep insight into impermanence would dissolve attachment is something we've been saying in different ways all along, but here it's explicit. This occurs "because we realize the pain and suffering of that attachment." When we see how everything we invest in emotionally, intellectually, and even financially changes and fades away, we become "weary, bored, and disenchanted."[91] It's all so pointless. (Watch out! This insight can cause trouble.)

Disenchantment is a term that appears in the suttas suggesting that our ordinary consciousness is like a spell or state of hypnosis. We wake up from this spell, like the prince or princess of a fairy tale, when we are "kissed" by wisdom and insight. In my description of "Breathing with Suffering" above, this is the moment of encountering the third Noble Truth. In classical terms this is "The Truth of the End of Suffering." It is the moment when we let go because we see the unsatisfactory nature of craving. For an addict, this is the moment of hitting bottom where they realize that what they thought was helping them—the substance or behavior they were addicted to—was actually destroying them. This may be more dramatic than what the insight into fading away suggests, but it's a good analogy.

[91] Buddhadasa, 1997, p.94

As with each of the steps in the Anapanasati Sutta there comes the challenge of right effort: Am I supposed to *make* myself dispassionate or does it happen automatically by following the steps? This is a perennial question. One can't expect to wake up or develop insight by sitting around waiting for it to happen. However, charging at the target to grab hold of wisdom disrupts the very peace on which insight builds. While there is training involved, it's not like training for a race whereby you just try to push your physical endurance to the limit. It's not so straightforward. The Buddha's rejection of extreme forms of asceticism reinforces this. In fact, we have to approach this work somewhat obliquely.

First, we train in concentration. This too is somewhat indirect. In order to build concentration we must first establish sila, a moral, ethical way of life. Then we embark on the meditative training. That training takes two qualities: one is the determination to persist at sitting and returning to the object; the other is letting go of grasping at any results. These two must be balanced: too much determination turns into grasping; too much letting go turns into passivity. There is a physical element to this, just putting ourselves in the meditation posture over and over, as I described above in "Silence, Stillness, and Time." And there is a wisdom or mental element that tracks the balancing of effort and letting go. Because this step is about watching desire fade away, it brings this challenging equation into perhaps its sharpest relief. Here we are not only watching desire fade, but watching our desire to *make it fade.*

In spiritual circles, you often see people trying to force themselves to let go of desire. This can be the result of confusing desire and pleasure. Some people think that if they deprive themselves of any pleasure, they will become more holy. For lay people this can lead to a kind of anorexic spirituality, trying to imitate some model of purity and perfection. It may involve actions that can be quite wholesome when undertaken with the right intention: changing your

diet, limiting entertainment, intentional celibacy, not pursuing wealth, and other forms of voluntary simplicity. When these actions come out of a spontaneous letting go, they can be quite freeing. When they are done as attempts to be "good" or "spiritual," they can have the opposite effect, repressing joyful aspects of life.

Here it might be wise to reflect on the monastic form as opposed to lay life. While Buddhist monks take on all sorts of rules and precepts, they do so in a specific, supportive context and community. They are celibate, limit food intake, don't pursue entertainment, don't spend money, or accumulate goods. They separate from their families, live under the guidance of an elder monastic, and have limited personal choices, following, rather, the guidance and needs of the community. And it is that community itself that makes all this possible. On the one hand, they are part of a group of peers who give them tremendous emotional and spiritual support; and on the other hand, their material needs are offered by the lay community that also depends on the monastic teachings. All of this is underpinned with the wisdom teachings of the Buddha which act as internal supports and guides.

When a lay person tries to imitate a monastic lifestyle of asceticism without the structure of the actual monastic form, they are essentially taking the most difficult aspects of that lifestyle without the essential supports. This, too, comes from a misunderstanding of the purpose of asceticism. Western Judeo-Christian ideas about asceticism are tied to a penance model of spiritual practice. The thinking goes that if we punish ourselves for our sins we will somehow gain redemption. There are similar delusions tied up in Hindu practices that attempt to "purify karma" through self-punishment. Christians get this mixed up with Jesus suffering on the cross, perhaps believing that if he suffered and died for our sins, we too should suffer for our sins.

From a Buddhist view, this misses the point of asceticism. Here it has nothing to do with causing ourselves suffering, but rather is about waking up and letting go. For Buddhism, when we take on some practice limiting our pleasure or challenging ourselves with difficult feelings, it is so that we can develop greater equanimity, be more mindful, and strengthen our capacity to let go.

Let me explain.

If, for instance, one chooses not to eat after noon, as is the Theravada monastic practice, one will likely get hungry later in the day. At that point you will, first of all, feel a strong sensation which, if responded to skillfully, will remind you to breathe, to be mindful of the sensation. Strong sensations tend to get our attention, so they can help us to wake up. In that moment, the sensation is likely unpleasant *vedana*, the focus of the second Foundation of Mindfulness. If you recall, pleasant vedana when unseen, triggers craving; unpleasant vedana, when unseen, triggers aversion. When *seen*, however, we have the opportunity to let go, to accept the pleasant or unpleasant without being triggered. So, at this moment of unpleasant vedana, our hungry nun or monk is reminded of their commitment to let go of craving and aversion, to stop thinking about food and to breathe with the sensation.

What is being developed in that moment is the tendency to let go when faced with strong vedana. Letting go (which we'll be looking at in the final step of the Anapanasati Sutta) is the goal of all this work. In Ajahn Chah's famous formulation: "If you let go a little you will have a little peace. If you let go a lot, you will have a lot of peace. If you let go completely you will have complete peace."[92] Game, set, match.

[92] Chah, p. 116

This approach to working with unpleasant experiences is integral to mindfulness meditation. Here we sit making an effort to follow the breath. At some point we realize that the mind has wandered. Since we are trying to quiet the mind, this realization can be unpleasant: I don't want all these thoughts. How do I respond? I might get frustrated or angry with myself. That would be allowing the unpleasant vedana to trigger aversion. The alternative is to accept the wandering mind with kindness and gently return to the breath. That way I'm letting go of two things, the thought and the aversion—or potential aversion. What I am doing in that moment is training my mind to let go. I am building the habit of not reacting to unpleasant vedana, but instead using that moment to wake up. This process is at the heart of the mindfulness project.

In a sense, then, our meditation practice is itself a form of asceticism, mental asceticism.

I must note that many of the monastic precepts like eating one meal a day are also there in order to create a simpler life, one that leaves plenty of time for practice and study. This is the practical reasoning behind the monastic lifestyle.

I want to bring these thoughts on impermanence back to the more personal, and I suppose I'd say, more realistic or practical for someone like me—and I assume, other lay readers. This teaching on the fading away of desire or on the development of dispassion is, to say the least, quite advanced. It's not as though one is going to read the sutta and go, "Oh, okay. I got it. My desire is fading now." But that doesn't mean the teaching is irrelevant for us or that it doesn't hold some helpful guidance.

First of all, if you take on this practice in an intensive way, on a silent retreat, you can get a strong taste of the fading away of passion. Sustained practice—and here I'm talking about a minimum of ten days, but more likely a month or more—cools craving and passion. This is one

of the direct effects of deepening concentration. You can feel it. You get more and more peaceful; you feel fewer impulses of any kind; forms of discomfort that would ordinarily have you reacting come to be held in spacious, calm awareness; moments of desire arise and pass without any movement—mental or physical—on your part. It's not that all your desires are gone, it's just that there's much more space around them and they are much less persistent. They come and go, whereas in daily life they tend to come and stay until you act on them.

It's important to have such an experience as a Buddhist meditator. Until you do, many of the teachings remain theoretical. When we sit longer retreats, those teachings come alive and take on real meaning in our lives. Our view of reality changes: this is the transformative insight we have talked about.

Nonetheless, this teaching can also be experienced in daily life, outside the confines of a strict silent meditation retreat. This takes us back, again, to "Breathing with Suffering." And again, I'll use the analogy of an addict (although for some this is reality, not analogy). For an addict to come into recovery, suffering, rather than impermanence, tends to be the wake-up call. Seeing how acting on our addictive craving causes suffering (over and over) can defuse the craving. The spell is broken because we see the relationship between the craving and the suffering. Our delusional belief was that we had to act on the craving to be happy or at least free from pain. Our clarity reveals that it's the opposite: the craving is painful and acting on it never brings satisfaction. Here, it's not concentration that cools our passion, but wisdom, insight. We see through the delusion, and the craving fades.

We can apply this insight to anything that causes us suffering. By the logic of the second and third Noble Truths, if we are suffering, we are clinging to something; if we let go, we'll be free of that suffering. Keep looking at how suffering arises in your life. If you are honest with

yourself and apply mindfulness persistently, you will find the objects of desire. Can you continue to hold on to those objects in light of this insight?

Perhaps this brings us back to Bhikkhu Bodhi's two versions of this step, the one about insight, the other about the actual dissolution of craving. In the full, meditative culmination of the sutta this step represents the actual end of craving. Barring that, a powerful understanding of the second and third Noble Truths can help us to let go of the most troublesome aspects of craving in our lives. We may not have reached the pinnacle when we adopt that understanding, but we have certainly benefited from the wisdom it reveals.

Fading away can have an even more personal meaning as we age. Recently I had surgery to remove skin cancer from my forehead. The procedure damaged some nerves so that areas of my forehead are numb. In addition, they took out some lymph nodes and that area of my face is also numb. Around the same time I received dental implants to replace my lower front teeth. These, of course, have no feeling. As I reflect on all of this, I think of how I am quite literally "fading away," as areas of my body cease to have feeling.

That is just one type of fading. When I get up in the morning my body hurts. My legs and knees and back are stiff as I slowly move toward the bathroom.

My muscle tone dissolves and my skin wrinkles and shrivels.

Long ago much of the hair on my head disappeared.

My hearing and eyesight are fading away.

My physical endurance continues to shrink.

My memory grows weaker.

I am fading away.

How should I respond to all this?

Society and the medical establishment will tell me to fight the fading. And, certainly it's reasonable to get glasses and hearing aids; to exercise and eat well; to utilize and engage the mind. But inside, here is where letting go is needed.

Bhikkhu Analayo calls aging, "dying slowly," and that's what I see happening. The way I am fading away is not unrelated to my coming death. What I think I need to do is makes friends with my fading away and with my death. Typically I think we view death as something outside the regular unfolding of life. If I see it as a natural event in the course of things, it changes how I respond to it. The writer/director Preston Sturges had a working title for his memoir: *The Events Leading Up to My Death*. That's one way of seeing our life. It was all always leading to this.

Step 15: Breathing and Contemplating Cessation

"One trains: 'contemplating cessation I shall breathe in'; one trains: 'contemplating cessation I shall breathe out.'"

With step fifteen, we are now deep in an area of complicated and challenging questions. This challenge starts with the critical term *nirodha*, translated here as cessation.

If I list just *some* of the ways the word is used in the early texts, you'll get an idea of the problem. These come from Leigh Brasington's book *Right Concentration*[93]:

- A deep concentration state, sometimes called the ninth jhana. (More below.)
- Nirvana itself, which is called the "cessation" of greed, hatred, and delusion.
- The third Noble Truth, which is "the Truth of the Cessation of Suffering."

[93] Brasington, 2015, p.140

- In Dependent Origination, the cessation of each of the twelve links.
- Cessation as the instruction in step fifteen of the Anapanasati Sutta.

So, our encounter with nirodha in the Anapanasati Sutta is specific to the sutta. I can't help asking, though, how or if it relates to any of the other meanings? Let me just say a little about the other uses to see what we discover.

The idea of a "ninth jhana," is that your meditation is so deep that all perception is cut off. Since I've never experienced that, I rely on some of the commentators and our experts to describe it. It would seem to be something whereby all thinking and sense experiences cease. Since you aren't asleep, there would still be awareness, but presumably just awareness of awareness, not any felt experience. While the Anapanasati guides us into a deep concentration state, the fact that we are guided to "contemplate" cessation means it can't be so cut off, since contemplation requires more active perception. As Ajahn Pasanno says, "Nirodha as a meditative state is 'cessation of perception and feeling.' It is not possible to contemplate this, although we can experience it."[94] So, I think we can put that meaning aside.

Nirvana and the third Noble Truth seem like the same thing. Suffering ceases because there's no more greed, hatred, and delusion, so I feel confident in grouping them together. Does this step in the sutta imply nirvana? That becomes a difficult question, because the previous step was supposed to be the fading away of desire, so this step would seem to be the cessation or end of desire, which would be nirvana. However, there comes another step, sixteen, which is "letting go" or "relinquishment." How can there be a step after nirvana? That would suggest that cessation here refers to something either temporary or incomplete. If I put it in the context of the

[94] Pasanno, Notes 2023

previous steps, it could be part of the progression of impermanence and dispassion, not cessation as a final event, but part of a gradual calming of craving that reaches a profound level here.

Cessation in the description of Dependent Origination refers to breaking the chain of twelve links that lead from ignorance to suffering. Each of these links is seen as a precondition or cause for the arising of the next link. In his introduction to a series of suttas in the Samyutta Nikaya on this subject, Bhikkhu Bodhi says: "The ultimate purpose of the teaching on dependent origination is to expose the conditions that sustain the round of rebirths, samsara, so as to show what must be done to gain release from the round." Simply put, he says that Dependent Origination means, "'When this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises. When this does not exist, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases.'"[95] So, here we see how cessation applies to Dependent Origination. When the cause of something stops, the thing stops. Specifically, when the causes that lead to suffering stop, suffering stops. This is essentially, an elaboration of the Four Noble Truths, suffering, its cause, its end, and the way to its end—its cessation. (To learn more about Dependent Origination, see Buddhadasa's book *Under the Bodhi Tree.*)

One final, perhaps simpler, way to look at cessation is that as we watch the impermanence of some object, it fades and then ceases. So, cessation can just refer to the ending of any given thing. Since each breath fades and ceases, this can be seen moment by moment. With mindfulness, we watch that happening.

So many definitions for this one term.

Analayo starts on a different track entirely (though he does arrive back at nibbana). In a quite brilliant way, he connects the first three steps of the fourth tetrad with the three

[95] Bodhi, 2000, p.517

characteristics. The first is obvious, impermanence (anicca). Then he says dispassion connects to ending suffering (dukkha) and cessation with realizing not-self (anatta) or emptiness. For this last he says, "All conditioned phenomena will certainly cease sooner or later. This in turn brings out their empty nature."[96] In putting forth this idea of these steps paralleling the three characteristics, he makes explicit the idea that the fourth tetrad focuses on insight.

What seems somewhat contradictory about his analysis is that he's brought out the element of desire in step fourteen—dispassion—but then asks us to consider cessation in a more general way—conditioned phenomena ceasing in fifteen. In those terms, this step is simply one of closely observing things ending. If that were the case, then the previous step should have just been closely observing things fading away. But he—and others—are quite clear in defining the fading away as referencing craving with the term "dispassion."

For my purposes, this could be helpful. Without saying it in so many words, Analayo might be reinforcing my idea that the sutta can be practiced on multiple levels. We can see this step as contemplating phenomena ceasing, which is quite reasonable and accessible for the ordinary meditator, or, if we are highly advanced, we can see the end of craving, nirvana at this point.

Between these two approaches, Analayo talks about this step as a potential contemplation of death. Every breath must cease, and we never know what will be our last breath. At the end of any breath we can reflect on this truth. This prepares us for the sixteenth contemplation: letting go.

Early in my practice many of the teachings I was exposed to encouraged reflections on death. Many teachers quoted Carlos Castaneda's famous admonition to keep death as an

[96] Analayo, 2019, p.107

"advisor," always reminding yourself of its imminence. Stephen Levine's book *Who Dies?* explored this topic extensively. It was accepted as a given that the Buddha's encouragement to let go pointed to the final letting go. My sense is that today's dharma teachers address this topic less often. As Buddhism has become mainstream, and mindfulness even more so, I suspect there is a tendency to smooth over the teachings and make them more palatable to a general audience. Some teachers will tend to avoid some of the harder topics. Analayo is not among them. He brings us back to this topic repeatedly in his writing.

Reflecting on the inevitable yet unknown moment of death can motivate us to make the most of this life, and for Buddhists, that means make the most of our pursuit of awakening. This reflection can wake us up to the present moment, to its preciousness. Reflecting on death can reveal how attached we are to life, giving us inspiration to work at letting go.

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu says that step fifteen "is the study and contemplation of the quenching of attachment. We observe the cessation of attachment…while breathing in and breathing out."[97] This sounds doable. Anytime you are meditating you are likely going to have moments of letting go, which is essentially a moment of non-attachment.

I don't want to suggest that Buddhadasa is over-simplifying this step, because he goes on to enumerate four kinds of attachment we need to let go of:

- Fear of birth, aging, illness, and death.
- The symptoms of dukkha (e.g. pain, sorrow, sadness, and despair).
- Desire for pleasant and aversion to unpleasant things.
- The view of the Five Aggregates as "self."[98]

[97] Buddhadasa, 1997, p.95
[98] Buddhadasa, 1997, p.96

Obviously ending attachment on all these levels is a huge project. What makes Buddhadasa's approach appealing (and we see this in some of his other writing), is the suggestion that we can get a taste of this kind of letting go, this *nirodha*, in moments. While these moments won't solve the problem of dukkha or bring complete enlightenment, they will help us to understand the ultimate goal and motivate us to do the work to attain it. They give us insight into the Four Noble Truths and moments of relief that can be healing and inspiring.

Thich Nhat Hanh tells us that *nirodha* here means, "cessation of all erroneous ideas, of all notions that keep us from directly experiencing the ultimate reality, and of all suffering born of ignorance."[99] Where Analayo wants us to contemplate death, Thay wants us to go further, to see beyond ideas of birth and death. He tells us that these aren't ultimate realities. Our bodies are made up of elements that are always in flux, things that exist before our birth and after our death. This is quite a stretch as a teaching. As he puts it, "birth and death, coming and going, being and nonbeing, permanence and annihilation all arise from the same essence."[100] (p 100)

Now it feels as if we've reached the outer limits of dharma, the realm of emptiness and non-duality. I don't know what to do with that. I suppose just let go.

I find myself drawn back to the teacher who initiated this exploration for me, Ajahn Pasanno. He begins by saying that cessation in this context "can be a synonym for *nibbana*," an idea I've already mentioned. But he quickly pivots to what he clearly thinks is a more helpful way to view this step: as "non-arising." He makes the connection (as does Brasington) with dependent origination. If we can interrupt the causes that trigger this chain of events, we can end suffering. He suggests that we can notice when these causes are not arising—cessation. He says, "we get obsessed with stamping out our greed, hatred, and delusion…Attuning to non-arising is

[99] Nhat Hanh, 2008, p.99
[100] Nhat Hanh, 2008, p.100

very settling. There's a sense of peace in the non-arising of *dukkha*."[101] So, instead of focusing on fighting off the negative energies that arise in the mind, we turn our attention to stillness, "non-arising." Perhaps you can see why I was initially attracted to his approach. It's simple and practical. It doesn't require us to go into a lengthy or intellectually challenging reflection on emptiness or death. Just sit with the non-arising of grasping or ignorance. It has a positive spin without being lightweight. It reminds us that what we choose to pay attention to has a big effect on our mind state. Typically in meditation I think we tend to get caught in struggling with the hindrances or trying to get our thoughts to quiet down. The suggestion here is that you might just let those things be there, but look for something more subtle, an underlying peace, what is not arising. That might sound tricky or even paradoxical, but in practice, we find that there is always this non-arising lurking. Awareness itself is still, a spacious knowing. Everything in the mind arises out of that, but the awareness isn't moving in the same way. So, it's a little like gazing through a filmy curtain (the hindrances) to see the light behind it. Let the busyness of the mind just flow past you as you fix the attention on what is not busy, not moving.

One thing that struck me when reviewing all these master teachers' writing on step fifteen of the *Anapanasati Sutta* is that in each of these books, this was the shortest section. Thich Nhat Hanh devotes a single paragraph to cessation; Buddhadasa about a page; and even the scholar Analayo writes only about two pages on the subject. The number of words they devote to the topic points to the difficulty in describing cessation. And, I'd say, it also suggests that there isn't that much to say about it. What can you say about the end of anything, especially the end of suffering? That by no means implies that this step isn't important. It's vital, just not easy to talk about.

[101] Pasanno, 2021, p.19

While they touch on similar themes, the emphases are quite different. Clearly they've each had profound experiences working with the sutta, and what seems to happen is that for each of them different elements of this step stand out. They are drawn to different insights—which suggests how rich this step is, the broad range of possibilities we can take from it.

That encourages me—us—to find our own insights and benefits from this step, and each of the sixteen instructions. As we approach the final step of the sutta, we may be touching nibbana, awakening to our mortality, letting go of various attachments, or simply watching the mind in a state of stillness, not creating anything. As you practice *anapanasati*, see what aspect you are drawn to and what stands out for you.

Step 16: Breathing and Contemplating Letting Go

"One trains: 'contemplating letting go I shall breathe in'; one trains: 'contemplating letting go I shall breathe out.'"

We discover, when we arrive at step sixteen, one of the most familiar terms in Buddhist teachings, and one of the easiest to understand in the sutta: letting go. Bhikkhu Bodhi translates this as "relinquishment," which could bring more confusion, but Analayo makes it simply "letting go."

I suppose, after working through the previous fifteen steps, one might ask, "What is left to let go of?"

Buddhadasa says we are letting go of the things we have taken to be "I." In this step, he says, we "train in throwing away the burdens of life." [102] There's something very appealing in

[102] Buddhadasa, 1997, p.97

that image. Life is a burden—or we make it so. To think that we could drop it all, throw it all away, suggests the possibility of a lightness that sounds freeing.

Ajahn Pasanno makes a key clarification that we are letting go of the "misapprehension" of a self, "as opposed to the relinquishment of some kind of solid self."[103] This distinction is where people often get hung up when they hear the idea of "letting go of self." They think they are going to lose something or that they have to make some special effort at eradicating or annihilating something. In fact, what the Buddha is saying is that you experience a "sense of self," a feeling or perception which is in fact inaccurate. The thing you think you are perceiving is actually a conglomerate of disparate pieces that you misinterpret as solid. Letting go of self, then, is really seeing through this illusion, not getting rid of anything. There's nothing to get rid of—no *thing*, just a feeling that creates a belief.

There is a finality to this step—not just because it's the final step—that suggests a total surrender. In my own experiences of becoming profoundly still on longer retreats, I have sometimes come to a place where it felt as if I had let go of *almost* everything, that thoughts and emotions, mental formations and all movements of mind had ceased. And yet. I sensed that something remained. I can describe what that felt like, to some degree, but to understand what it actually was is beyond me—if I knew, perhaps I could have let it go. What it felt like was a tiny pinprick of tension deep in my solar plexus. On a couple of occasions when I was able to bring myself to this deep state and have this perception, I tried to let go of that tension without success.

Whether this perception has any connection to reality, whether I really was on the verge of anything, I don't know. It seems as likely that I was making the whole thing up as that it had any meaning. But beyond the specifics of that experience and interpretation, I think I am getting

[103] Pasanno, 2021, p.19

at something of the reality of step sixteen in the *Anapanasati Sutta*. Whatever is being let go of at this point is far more subtle than anything we have previously encountered. Much of the practice has been one of letting go, first through the body, then feelings, then the mind. So, whatever is left must be difficult even to apprehend, much less operate upon or abandon.

Ajahn Pasanno says, "The experience of a deep letting go *is* very subtle, but it can be approached through those small experience that we *do* have. The 'taste or scent of what nothing happening would be like' is really what keeps us going."[104]

This inevitably brings us back to the question of *nibbana*, the unconditioned, and to the enlightenment that occurs in encountering that. As the unconditioned, *nibbana* has no cause and encountering it cannot be caused. Rather, the conditions for that encounter are prepared with no guarantee of a result. I think that in some way, a deep meditative state is an imitation of *nibbana*. There's *almost* nothing happening, so you get a taste or scent of what *nothing* happening would be like.

Let me come at this step from a slightly different angle. What are we letting go of?

We live in a delusion, summed up in the opposite of the Three Characteristics of Existence: there is permanence; there is a self; satisfaction is accessible in ordinary consciousness. We have to see through that illusion. Analayo tells us that "The consummation of the convergence of tranquility and insight…comes within reach…" with this step. "Comes within reach" appears to be a key phrase here. Nothing is for sure. This isn't a mechanical process with a predictable outcome. Instead, he tells us, the language of this step is understood to mean "an inclining of the mind towards the realization of Nirvana."[105] Again, that inclining

[104] Pasanno, Notes
[105] Analayo, 2019, p.109

doesn't necessarily get us there. But this is the most we can do. "Inclining" is a useful term for meditation practice because it suggests a non-striving effort. As we've talked about, a striving effort is bound to fail as it embodies the second Noble Truth, the grasping and craving that causes suffering. And yet, doing nothing can't produce results, either. So, inclining gives us a sense of being pointed or leaning in the right direction, Right Intention, without ego or efforting.

The meticulousness of Venerable Analayo is on full display as he comes to this final step in the sutta. He takes great pains to fill out the meaning of "letting go." I will try to do justice to his thinking because among our experts, he's the one who goes into the most detail and tries the hardest to bring out the Buddha's thinking on this question.

He uses what he calls a "maxim" from "The Greater Discourse to Malunkyaputta" (MN 64) to flesh out his thinking.

> "This is the peaceful, this is the sublime, that is, that stilling of all formations, the relinquishing of all attachments, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, Nibbana."

This passage encapsulates much of the *Anapanasatti Sutta*: stilling of formations is essentially steps four and eight (calming body and mind); destruction of craving corresponds with step twelve (liberating the mind); dispassion and cessation are steps fourteen and fifteen; and relinquishing of all attachments is step sixteen.

Analayo goes deeper by bringing in a similar passage from the "Girimananda Sutta" (AN 10.60). He makes what, for me, is a subtle distinction between dispassion as "freedom from all passion, lust, and attachment," and cessation as "the complete ending of all defilements and traces of unwholesomeness in the mind." What seems clear is that this is very much related to sila. While there's the sense that such cleansing can only happen through deep meditative states,

such practice is dependent on a foundation of *sila* and Right Intention. What I mean is that, although you might get to very deep states of concentration and clarity of mind, if you don't take "freedom from attachment" and "ending of unwholesomeness" as your driving impulses, what the Buddha is pointing to may simply evade you. You aren't pointing—or inclining—the mind in the right direction.

Analayo goes on to say that a further aim of practice is letting go of "views, preferences, and opinions."[106] I think we often overlook this critical aspect of letting go. It might be easier to focus on material attachments or even emotional ones, but "views, preferences, and opinions" in many ways define us. Our world view is more or less held together by such ideas. They are the hidden biases, the unseen assumptions, the ways we frame our belief systems. Letting go of them seems risky. At the heart of that risk is that we can no longer be "right." We are admitting that even our most basic frames of reference in life are constructions, relative, and by nature questionable. Are we willing to admit that everything we believe and are guided by may be wrong? That's a tough one.

This doesn't mean that we stop living by these cherished principles. We don't simply throw our values out the window. Rather, we keep in mind their conditioned nature and when met with alternative values respect them as well. We admit that our beliefs may be wrong and even stay open to change if exposed to new information. What comes to mind is the Dalai Lama's famous statement that if science proves some Buddhist principle wrong, then Buddhism needs to change and accord with that proof.

Such letting go is probably more relevant to interpersonal relations than our highest values. It's not often that we'll need to reassess our spiritual principles. However, it's very

[106] Analayo, 2019, p.110

common to disagree with others about simpler issues, to see things differently from your friends or partner. We live with a lot of "shoulds" in our minds, and those can easily come into conflict with other people's "shoulds." In those moments, remembering that our should is a "view, preference and opinion" and not a commandment etched in stone can help us to let go, consider alternatives, and restore harmony. We all know what it's like when we stubbornly hold to a position in resistance to others' preferences. That's kind of what makes the world go round, as they say. Whether at home, at work, or in the halls of power, such disagreements drive personal anger, relationship breakups, professional clashes, and even the wars that arise between nations.

Finally, Analayo says that a "keen appreciation of the impermanent nature of all formations" helps us to become "disenchanted" with conditioned things and "inclines" us toward the unconditioned.[107]

What this remarkable teacher has done is helped us to understand what letting go means in step sixteen. As I suggested in the opening of this step, it can be tough to find anything left to let go of by this stage of practice. Just to make it clear, here are the four things he's suggesting we let go of:

- Passion, lust, and attachment
- Defilements and unwholesomeness in the mind
- Views, preferences, and opinions
- All conditioned things.

As soon as you get done with that, give me a call. I'd love to chat.

[107] Analayo, 2019, p.110

Thich Nhat Hanh's earlier book on the *Anapanasati Sutta*, *Breathe! You Are Alive* gives us a summation of step sixteen whose tone is so different from that of Analayo that I think it's worth quoting extensively:

> "Seeing that there is a precious jewel in our pocket, we give up every attitude of craving or coveting like one who is deprived. Seeing that we are lions, we do not long to nurse from a mother deer. Seeing that we are the sun, we give up the candle's habit of fearing the wind will blow us out. Seeing that life has no boundaries, we give up all imprisoning divisions."[108]

Like the poet that he is, Thay transmits something that's not literal or technical, but can perhaps inspire us and express the wisdom of the sutta more directly than more scholarly teachings. He's trying to help us to let go, to see that there's nothing we need to grasp after, to crave, that at this point of practice we have everything we need. It's a brilliant transmission.

As we wrap up the sixteen steps of the *Anapanasati Sutta*, it's only natural that we return to the topic of death. Life begins with an in-breath and ends with an out-breath. As I get older (and older) my final passing becomes more apparent as a reality, even as the idea of no longer being conscious can seem unimaginable. Of course, what is there to imagine? It's like imagining sleep.

Death, though, is the final letting go. We hear stories of families telling an elder who is hanging on that it's okay to "let go." But what does this really mean? I suppose that under the circumstances, there can be a resistance to the end—why wouldn't there be? But really, how much control do we have over living and dying? Can we really "let go" or for that matter, "hold on"? I don't know.

What I know is that the idea of impermanence as a spiritual reflection takes on much more meaning and importance when viewed in the context of death. Images of clouds passing or

[108] Nhat Hanh, 1988, p.62

waves crashing are all well and good, but the truth of my breath stopping, my body disintegrating, and my mind no longer functioning, those realities aren't romantic at all. I'm not spellbound by insight into those realities. I'd rather not think about them. Which is the problem, isn't it? I never really penetrate the truth of my death because I don't want to think about it. But the insight into impermanence tells me that true freedom only comes when I fully know this truth.

And so I take the Buddha's advice and recite the contemplation that I am of the nature to die every day. And more than that, I bring that reflection into other moments of the day when perhaps my body is hurting or I look in the mirror and see an old man. This intentional reflection isn't insight, but it's a start.

Thoughts on Practice

The key element of the fourth tetrad is realizing the pervasiveness of impermanence. That is the ultimate motivation to let go.

The fourth tetrad presents unique challenges to practice. No longer are we developing concentration, or indeed, focusing on a felt experience, besides the continuing mindfulness of breathing. As I understand the instructions of the sutta, "contemplating" impermanence, fading away, cessation, and letting go requires more use of concepts and thought than the other tetrads. But we need to be able to follow these instructions without proliferating, getting lost in discursive or self-centered thinking. That's why the development of concentration in the first three tetrads is so important. It stills those thoughts enough so that the reflections in the fourth tetrad can be done effectively. The challenges of this tetrad inspired me to take a longer retreat so that I might find some way to work with this part of the sutta for myself. Here is what I came up with

For the first instruction, “breathing and contemplating impermanence,” we focus successively on body, feelings, and mind, the topics of the first three tetrads. For each of these we simply feel, in real time, the ways these things are changing. My body is filled with changing sensations; my feelings are unstable; my mind state is in flux.

Once I’ve carefully observed these elements of experience, I move to “breathing and contemplating fading away.” Using Analayo’s suggestion that this is about dukkha, I focus on the unsatisfactory nature of body, feelings, and mind. My body, even when it is comfortable, can’t bring total peace because it is constantly changing (see the previous instruction); my feelings, even when they are pleasant, can’t bring total pleasure because they are constantly changing; my mind, even when it is concentrated and gladdened, can’t bring total peace because it is constantly changing.

Having absorbed these truths, I reflect on “breathing and contemplating cessation.” As we sit with this reflection, we see that in this moment, we have (temporarily) ceased to suffer. Because these changing experiences can’t bring satisfaction and are beyond my control, they can’t reasonably be called me or mine. It is time to cease seeking happiness through body, feelings, and mind. I must seek another path to happiness.

That path is “breathing and letting go.” Chasing satisfaction, happiness, or freedom through mind, feelings, or body is fruitless. Instead, I let go of this path and take Refuge in Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. This means that I vow to stay present for each and every experience; to always view these experiences through the lens of anicca, dukkha, and anatta (impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self); to live a life of kindness and wisdom in community with other practictioners.

Part III: Fulfillment

Fulfilling the Foundations of Mindfulness

I've found little written about the fulfillment of the foundations of mindfulness aspect of the sutta. Like the opening section on the setting, most commentators skip this part of the sutta and focus exclusively on the sixteen steps of mindful breathing, while Bhikkhu Analayo goes further into the fulfillment of the Seven Factors of Awakening. However, fulfillment is signaled in the opening of that sixteen-step section when the Buddha says that this practice fulfills the Four Foundations of Mindfulness and the Seven Factors of Enlightenment (MN 118.15). How this works seems worthy of some attention. Most of what I learned about fulfilling the four foundations beyond my own reflections came from Bhikkhu Bodhi's lectures on the *Anapanasati Sutta* which are only available on audio online, not in book form.

I've already talked about the relationship between the *Anapanasati Sutta* and the *Satipatthana Sutta*. After completing the sixteen steps on mindfulness of breathing the Buddha makes this connection explicit. He uses some of the same language from the *Satipatthana* here, saying, first, that if you practice the four steps of the first tetrad you are "contemplating the body as a body, ardent, fully aware, and mindful, having put away covetousness and grief for the world." These words, which appear in the opening of the *Satipatthana* sutta, are repeated for "contemplating feelings as feelings," "mind as mind," and "phenomena as phenomena," thus covering the four foundations. (MN 10)

This occurs only if mindfulness of breathing is "developed and cultivated," which are critical terms here. It takes time and determination to bring this practice to fruition. If we are in a hurry

to reap the fruits of mindful breathing, we probably aren't going to get a lot out of it. Instead we need to slow down, be patient with ourselves and our practice. The sutta describes a path to enlightenment. While I believe you can benefit from mindful breathing to any degree you take your practice, it will take a good amount of time, and some committed retreat practice for it to be fully "developed and cultivated."

The connection between these two suttas takes me back to one of my earlier thoughts, that *Anapanasati* is a refinement of *Satipatthana*. Buddhadasa Bhikkhu takes an even stronger stand, which I find quite striking. First, he argues that the *Satipatthana Sutta* doesn't give us any actual meditation instruction, calling it "nothing more than a list of names, a lengthy catalog of sets of dhammas...no method of practice is given or explained."[109] It's somewhat shocking to see this revered sutta characterized in this way. He argues that "some people" take these groups of dhammas and turn them into practices and systems that they then call *satipatthana*.

It sends me back to look at the *Satipatthana* to ask if this is true, and it doesn't really bear out, since the *Satiptthana* starts with the same instructions on mindful breathing that open the *Anapanasati*, and throughout the sutta the Buddha tells us to "abide contemplating" various things: feelings, mind states, and dhammas. Nonetheless, I think he does have a point, which is perhaps why I was drawn to *anapanasati* practice to begin with.

While I can see that the *Satipatthana* often seems a bit vague about how we do all this, Buddhadasa sounds as if he has a particular target for his criticism in mind. I'm going to guess, in fact, that he is talking about certain Burmese teachers who developed very systematic approaches to meditation that kind of lose touch with the essence of mindful breathing. Here we're likely going back to a historic conflict between Buddhist communities, the Thai having a

[109] Buddhadasa, 1997, p.121

more intuitive and organic approach to mindfulness, the Burmese a stricter, effort-driven system. Such conflicts, while evident to the outside observer, rarely bubble up to the surface in the way I see here in Buddhadasa's teaching. This is, perhaps, one of the reasons Buddhadasa became something of an outlier in the Thai monastic world. He was never shy about speaking his mind, and he had strongly held—and I'd say, deeply considered—positions about practice and how to understand the teachings of the Buddha.

I'd like to also make some more comparisons between these suttas. There are some significant distinctions that bear examination.

As I've already said, the *Satipatthana's* first instructions under mindfulness of the body are the same as the first tetrad of the *Anapanasati* sutta, although the *Satipatthana* adds a simile of a lathe operator following the turns of their machine. Such a worker needs to be attentive to every subtlety of the operation so that their work will result in the best product.

The *Satipatthana* then inserts a refrain that appears repeatedly in the sutta that refers to having awareness "internally" and "externally," to contemplating the "nature of arising" and the "nature of vanishing," and simply that "there is a body." This refrain concludes by saying that the meditator "abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world."

So, we're faced with several things here. The question of what internally and externally means is debated, and frankly, I just don't have a strong view, and I'm not really convinced by any of the sides in the debate. I'll just leave it as meaning be aware of everything, not just your inner experience; be aware of stuff around you too. Arising and ceasing points to impermanence, and more specifically, to seeing the causes for arising the causes for ceasing. And impermanence only appears explicitly in the fourth tetrad of the *Anapanasati*. Many teachers suggest that

breathing itself is a kind of display of impermanence, the constant in and out, but the *Satipatthana* is bringing it forth directly throughout the text.

Not clinging is the final instruction in the *Anapanasati*, letting go. Again, we find something from the fourth tetrad right up front, and then throughout the *Satipatthana*. Is there something we can infer from this contrast? If so, I don't see it. I just think the Buddha has these topics and insights he wants to convey and at different times, in different settings, with different audiences, he lays it out differently.

However, in terms of what we are going to do with these two suttas, how they function, we do see some important contrasts. The essential difference, at least with the first tetrad, is that the *Anapanasati Sutta* is very focused on one thing: mindful breathing and its results. The *Satipatthana* goes on from the breath to cover a wide range of topics: posture, body parts, the elements, and charnel ground contemplations. So, the *Anapanasati* is really more of a meditation and, indeed, concentration instruction, where the *Satipatthana* has broader functions aimed at all activities.

With the second tetrad, vedana, we start to see even stronger divergences between the suttas. The *Satipatthana* only asks us to see whether we are experiencing a pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral feeling and whether that feeling is "worldly" or "unworldly." This points to the most common understanding of what vedana is, essentially, good, bad, indifferent. According to Bhikkhu Bodhi, worldly and unworldly refer to whether the feeling is physical or mental; other teachers say it is more specifically about whether a feeling is a jhana (unworldly) or not. (It's hard to see how a jhana can be unpleasant, but let's leave that question for another time.)

When the *Anapanasati* addresses this tetrad it takes a completely different tack. The first two steps are specifically pleasant—*piti* and *sukha*—so there's no question of what kind of vedana

they are. Further, the common understanding of vedana is that the content of the feeling isn't part of vedana. It doesn't matter whether it's painful anger or pleasant joy. The vedana is the painful or pleasant aspect, not the anger or the joy. But, as Bhikkhu Bodhi points out defining *piti*--which is typically translated as rapture—as vedana contradicts that. Sukha, he says, can mean, "a pleasant feeling," though I've often heard it described as "happiness" or some other pleasant emotion. In any case, it does seem that the Buddha is being somewhat loose in saying that the second tetrad is just about vedana. I am probably being too picky here, but it does confuse me. It just seems that there's a certain lack of precision, which may just be from the inevitable variations that happened in the preservation of the suttas.

With that, going to the third step of the second tetrad, "experiencing mental formations," again doesn't seem to connect with the *Satipatthana's* second foundation. We've learned that mental formations refer to the combination of *vedana*—feeling—and *sanna*—perception. The *Satipatthana* makes no mention of sanna. And further, the very idea of a formation, of vedana combined with something else overturns the essential focus of the second foundation of mindfulness, which is to pay attention to the pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral quality of our experiences alone.

Finally, we are encouraged to "calm the mental formation" in the *Anapanasati*, an instruction that has nothing to do with the *Satipatthana*. I think we can safely go back to the idea that the *Anapanasati* is more of a meditation instruction here, whereas the Satpatthana is a more exacting division of topics for mindful contemplation. There's much more of a sense of flow, of a progression of meditative experiences in the *Anapanasati*. I think this is what Buddhadasa is talking about, how the *Satipatthana* lays out a lot of objects for contemplation, but there's no sense of a meditative unfolding that we can follow, just a list of things to pay attention to. This is

what makes the *Anapanasati* so appealing, the feeling that you are moving organically through a process in real-time, something you can sense and experience almost in just reading the words.

The correlations between the third tetrad and the third foundation are much more aligned. Two of the four *anapana* steps are exactly found in the third foundation: concentration and liberation. The other two are implied: experiencing the mind is essentially what the third foundation is about; and the "exalted mind," sounds close enough to "gladdening" that we can accept it. The main difference, again, is that the *Anapanasati* is taking us through a developmental process that results or leads to concentration and liberation. The *Satipatthana* is just asking you to be aware of what mind states are present, then gives a bunch of examples of what it means. (I keep hearing Buddhadasa's complaints as I write this. I feel like I'm understanding his point more and more.) In saying all that, however, I am neglecting the claims of the *Satipatthana* that it is the "direct path…for the realisation of Nibbana," or indeed, that if one practices the Four Foundations of Mindfulness continuously for seven days one will attain either full enlightenment or the third of four stages of enlightenment.

Finally, the fourth tetrad and foundation bring the contrasts to a climax. As we've seen, the *Anapanasati* takes us through the dramatic movement and progression of insights from impermanence to letting go. The *Satipatthana* is nothing like this. Instead it asks us to contemplate various topics. These are called *dhammas*, a term that doesn't seem to have any very clear definition. Bhikkhu Bodhi, having translated this as "mind-objects," in the Majjhima Nikaya, now rejects that term, preferring "phenomena" while Venerable Analayo doesn't even like to translate the word, but rather refers to the fourth foundation as being "frameworks or points of reference," what I call "viewing experience through the lens of dharma rather than the lens of self." There are many lenses that the Buddha recommends in the *Satipatthana*, but

Analayo says that through his study of parallel suttas in Chinese (called "*agamas*"), he concludes that the Five Hindrances and the Seven Awakening Factors are the ones the Buddha emphasized. That makes for an interesting observation, since the Awakening Factors are the next thing in the *Anapanasati Sutta* that the Buddha asks us to look at, how the sixteen steps cultivate those seven factors.

Before we go there, though, let's step back and look at the main connection between the fourth tetrad and the fourth foundation: insight. The culmination of Buddhist practice is transformative insight, enlightenment. Both these suttas are trying to take us there in their own ways. The *Satipatthana*, by pointing to *dhammas*, is encouraging us to step out of the self-centered view of our experience and see it in terms of wisdom, insight, not-self. The *Anapanasati* is taking us through a process of shedding attachment, seeing impermanence and letting passion and craving fade away until we are able to let go of the sense of self. They're both trying to get us to the same place, through similar, but different paths. Some people will be drawn to the explicit nature of the *Anapanasati Sutta's* practices, while others will connect with the *Satipatthana's* broad-ranging reflections. What's important isn't finding the "right" way but finding the way that works for us. This is why I have taken to calling the fourth tetrad and foundation, "The Big Picture." I feel that captures what they're about: stepping back from the personal and seeing the deeper meaning in our experiences.

Let me see if I can encapsulate how the *Anapanasati Sutta* fulfills the four foundations of mindfulness: the first tetrad develops our awareness of the breath and the body; the second tetrad develops our sensitivity to *vedana*, feeling; the third tetrad develops our awareness of mind states; and the fourth tetrad develops our insight and wisdom.

Before we step to the Awakening Factors, I just want to remind you that, no matter what I've said, the Buddha says that practicing *anapanasati* fulfills the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. So, however we understand the correlations of the two suttas, if we do this mindful breathing practice, we're fulfilling the foundations.

Fulfilling the Seven Factors of Enlightenment

Having laid out the connections between the *Anapanasati Sutta* and the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, the Buddha now shows how the foundations, when fully developed, fulfill the Seven Factors of Enlightenment. He's not directly saying that the four tetrads of the *Anapanasati Sutta* fulfill the seven factors, but rather that when we fulfill the four foundations, we fulfill the seven factors. We can fairly easily see how many of the seven factors are developed with *anapana* practice, but it's interesting that the Buddha, in this context, doesn't draw those direct connections.

I might be being too fussy here, but at the start of the section on fulfillment of the Seven Enlightenment Factors, it says, (in Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation) "And how, Bhikkhus, do the four foundations of mindfulness, developed and cultivated, fulfill the seven enlightenment factors?" So, what I find surprising is that the Buddha isn't saying that culivating mindfulness of breathing directly develops the seven factors, but rather that it is developing the four foundations of mindfulness that evokes them. Now, we must remember that in the previous section of the sutta the Buddhas says that mindfulness of breathing fulfills the four foundations, so there's no doubt that *Anapanasati* develops the seven factors. However, Bhikkhu Analayo seems to completely ignore this intervening step and make the direct connection between the factors and

mindfulness of breathing. It makes sense, when you look at these connections, but I just feel that I have to point out this discrepancy as I go into this topic.

The connections between the Seven Factors of Enlightenment and the *Anapanasati Sutta* don't line up in such a parallel way as the Four Foundations do with the four tetrads. Rather, we see the factors developing through the sixteen steps, one by one. Before we get into that development, here are the seven:

- Mindfulness
- Investigation of States
- Energy
- Joy
- Tranquility
- Concentration
- Equanimity

The progression through these factors is logical, and many teachers have spelled it out. Let's first go through that progression, and then more explicitly tie it to the sutta.

The starting point is mindfulness. Everything starts with awareness, and awareness must be sustained throughout the process or we will lose the thread.

In order to draw out the potential for wisdom in applying mindfulness, we must investigate more closely, the second factor. The expression "investigation of states" can be confusing because it sounds as if we are thinking about what's happening. That's not what it means. Rather, we could say we are looking very closely. We're not just feeling the breath, we are examining it in detail. This is an important idea in meditation practice, that we kind of increase the magnification of the lens we are looking through. However, such intensification

isn't enough. What's essential to Buddhist mindfulness practice is that we look at the cause and effect relationship of what is happening. Here we start making connections: this thought leads to that feeling; my daily worries and obsessions keep showing up in my mind while meditating; the thought of anger or craving causes me suffering; everything in my mind and body keeps changing. And so on. The point is, we aren't just being aware of a particular experience, but rather seeing it in a larger context. That is how wisdom arises.

With the application of investigation, our interest, and thus energy grows. I like to use the example of a bored high school student who is nodding off in the back of class when the teacher suddenly says, "Let's talk about sex." Suddenly the students perks up. Their interest in the subject arouses energy in the body. (Forgive me if that sounded like a pun.) This also calls to mind the Fritz Perls line I quoted earlier: "Boredom is the lack of attention."

One aside here. Although the factor of enlightenment is energy, many teachers slip in the idea that it is also effort. Certainly, in terms of building toward enlightenment, sustained, wise effort may be more vital than energy itself.

These three factors now build to rapture, *piti*. The idea is that by just sitting with the energy in the body, with clear attention and without attachment, it eventually brightens into this intense state which is a blend of sensation and emotion. I've already talked about the *jhanas*, and here we can see how these *jhanic* qualities fit into the scheme of the factors of enlightenment. Whether piti needs to manifest at such a level that one attains *jhana* or not is something I can't answer. It seems, though, since these qualities are presented outside a *jhana* system that it isn't necessary. And by necessary, I mean, you don't need to enter the *jhanas* in order to fulfill the seven factors of enlightenment. But, don't rely on my opinion. It's worth studying both sides of this debate.

In his recorded class on the *Anapanasati Sutta*, Bhikkhu Bodhi, in describing the transition from rapture to tranquility, draws again on his saxophone and piano analogy. The *piti*/rapture is like the saxophone, intense and blaring in the body. The job of the meditator at this point, is to turn down the sax, or as Bodhi would say, end the sax solo and let the tranquil sounding piano take over. In the felt experience, the *piti* is more like an intense energy in the body, and if we can lessen that energy, we find that the tranquility is actually lurking behind or inside the piti itself. The tranquility, then, has more of an emotional and mental quality than the *piti*.

What is curious in this process is the idea that you first need to get worked up with *piti* before you can calm down into tranquility. Why not just go straight to tranquility? This goes back to the issue of balancing concentration and energy. Without sufficient energy, concentration will just put you to sleep. I think of it as two realms separated by a high wall: the ordinary and the concentrated (or "the worldly and the unworldly"). In order to get into the concentrated realm, you need *piti* to push you over the wall. Once over the wall, you can let things settle. Now there is a kind of background energy in the concentration realm that sustains you without being disruptive as it is in the ordinary realm.

Once we've attained tranquility, it's a natural step to the sixth factor, concentration. It just requires that you set the intention to focus, essentially continuing the investigation of states. Otherwise, one can easily slip into a kind of trance, just hanging out and enjoying the tranquility.

The concentrated mind develops equanimity by opening the awareness. While concentration tends to be more narrowly focused, equanimity lets everything in without being disturbed. One definition of equanimity is that it is unmoved by the pleasant, unpleasant, or

neutral *vedana*. It sees those qualities clearly but doesn't move toward or away from any of the stimulants.

Let's talk about the direct connection between the *sutta* and the factors.

The practitioner, it says, begins by establishing mindfulness "in front" of them, "ever mindful" they breathe in and out. This happens even before the initial awareness of the length of the breath. So, the mindfulness factor is there even before the sixteen steps start, and each of those steps includes mindfulness of the breath. There can be no doubt that the mindfulness factor of enlightenment is being cultivated.

The investigation-of-states factor is implied in the increasingly detailed focus on whether you are breathing long or short. While we continue to find this factor throughout the sutta in the ways that we bring forth different elements of experience, it is particularly highlighted in the fourth tetrad which asks us to look closely at impermanence.

The energy factor is implied because rapture/*piti* appears at the start of the second tetrad, and rapture couldn't arise without energy.

We see tranquility in each of the first two tetrads, tranquilising the body and transquilising mental formations.

Concentration is in the third tetrad.

Equanimity is implied in the liberation of mind and then the investigation of the fourth tetrad. Such an investigation isn't possible without a balanced mind. Otherwise the things that are being touched upon, especially impermanence, are too disturbing for one to look at. Letting go, the final instruction, is a manifestation of that equanimity.

It seems, then, that the seven factors of enlightenment are developed in a linear way through the practice of *anapanasati*. And this is true in general when thinking of the factors. At

different times our practice will be more focused on one or another factor. It can be helpful, in fact, to regularly review how your practice is going in relation to the factors. Each of us will have natural strengths and weaknesses, some people finding access to joy easily, while others are naturally skilled at concentration. Reflecting on our strengths and weaknesses in practice can help us to direct our efforts.

Fulfillment of True Knowledge and Deliverance

The final short piece in the *Anapanasati Sutta* tells us that when the enlightenment factors are "developed and cultivated," they "fulfill true knowledge and deliverance." And so, logically enough, if the seven factors of enlightenment come to fruition, you get enlightened.

This happens when each of the factors is "supported by seclusion, dispassion, and cessation." As we saw in the opening of the sutta, our practice starts with literal seclusion, separating ourselves from the hustle and bustle of life. Then it is deepened when we are "secluded from unwholesome states," that is, we are able to let go of the five hindrances. Here, though, the Buddha connects that literal and metaphoric seclusion with a deeper separation from mental disturbance with dispassion and cessation. Each of the factors then "ripens in relinquishment."

The Buddha applies this formula to each of the seven factors of enlightenment, that when each is "supported by seclusion, dispassion, and cessation," it "ripens in relinquishment." And this is how enlightenment happens.

Besides this lovely summation of how the whole practice works, it's interesting to see one of the foundation elements of practice, seclusion, paired with the final three steps of the Anapanasati Sutta. This suggests the wholistic aspect of the practice of mindful breathing. The

start is bound up with the end. It is all of a piece. Seclusion is where you start and where you end.

The sutta ends by telling us that the assembled monastics "were satisfied and delighted in the Blessed One's words," as should we all be.

Thoughts on Practice

With this journey through the Anapanasati Sutta, we might still be left with the simple question: "How do I do it?" Obviously I've been trying to answer that question in a variety of ways. But now I want to give some practical advice.

Analayo suggests that we could work through the sixteen steps at various paces. On retreat we might spend several sessions or even days on each step. However, he seems more inclined to go through all sixteen steps in one session, or even go through the sixteen repeatedly in one session.[110] Although this seems to contradict some of the suggestions of how deeply we should be experiencing each step, I've found it helpful.

I have experimented with doing all sixteen twice in one sitting. (Obviously you have to memorize the steps to do this.) It quickly developed into stronger concentration. What's helpful about that process is that it gives your meditation a very clear structure to stick to, making it easier to avoid distraction. However, for me, it gets somewhat tiring and tedious to be kind of marching myself through these steps. So, despite the benefits, I'm not sure how often I will use this rigorous approach.

- Santikaro says you can do 1st and 4th tetrad as quick way. See 123 "Condensed" and 124 "Shortcut)

[110] Analayo, 2019, p. 30

- Analayo shows sutta (SN 54.13) that says any tetrad will lead to liberation

Appendix A

[Insert English of the Sutta]

Appendix B

[Insert Pali of the Sutta]

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