

# Mindfulness of Breathing

## *Ānāpānasati Sutta*

*Majjhima Nikāya 118*

How is mindfulness of breathing developed and cultivated, so that it is of great fruit and great benefit?

Here a person, gone to the forest, or to the root of a tree, or to an empty hut, sits down.

With the legs folded crosswise, the body set erect, and the presence of mindfulness established:

Mindful, one breaths in. Mindful, one breaths out.

### FULFILLING THE FOUNDATIONS OF MINDFULNESS

Breathing in long, one is aware: "I breathe in long."  
Breathing out long, one is aware: "I breathe out long."  
Breathing in short, one is aware: "I breathe in short."  
Breathing out short, one is aware: "I breathe out short."  
One practices: "I will breathe in experiencing the whole body."  
One practices: "I will breathe out experiencing the whole body."  
One practices: "I will breathe in calming bodily activity."  
One practices: "I will breathe out calming bodily activity."

#### FIRST FOUNDATION

On whatever occasion a person [does this], on that occasion one abides observing **body as body**, ardent, fully aware, and mindful, having put away covetousness and grief for the world.

One practices: "I will breathe in experiencing joy."  
One practices: "I will breathe out experiencing joy."  
One practices: "I will breathe in experiencing happiness."  
One practices: "I will breathe out experiencing happiness."  
One practices: "I will breathe in experiencing mental activity."  
One practices: "I will breathe out experiencing mental activity."  
One practices: "I will breathe in calming mental activity."  
One practices: "I will breathe out calming mental activity."

#### SECOND FOUNDATION

On whatever occasion a person [does this], on that occasion one abides observing **feelings as feelings**, ardent, fully aware, and mindful, having put away covetousness and grief for the world.

One practices: "I will breathe in experiencing the mind."  
One practices: "I will breathe out experiencing the mind."  
One practices: "I will breathe in gladdening the mind."  
One practices: "I will breathe out gladdening the mind."  
One practices: "I will breathe in composing the mind."  
One practices: "I will breathe out composing the mind."  
One practices: "I will breathe in freeing the mind."  
One practices: "I will breathe out freeing the mind."

#### THIRD FOUNDATION

On whatever occasion a person [does this], on that occasion one abides observing **mind as mind**, ardent, fully aware, and mindful, having put away covetousness and grief for the world.

One practices: "I will breathe in observing impermanence."  
One practices: "I will breathe out observing impermanence."  
One practices: "I will breathe in observing dispassion."  
One practices: "I will breathe out observing dispassion."  
One practices: "I will breathe in observing cessation."  
One practices: "I will breathe out observing cessation."  
One practices: "I will breathe in observing letting go."  
One practices: "I will breathe out observing letting go."

#### FOURTH FOUNDATION

On whatever occasion a person [does this], on that occasion one abides observing **mind-objects as mind-objects**, ardent, fully aware, and mindful, having put away covetousness and grief for the world.

## Understanding Key Terms

### **developed:** *bhāvītā*

This word is simply the causative form of the verb "to be," and thus means "causing to be," from which we get "development." It is a word used often for meditation in general, and for certain kinds of meditation in particular, such as the development of loving kindness (*mettā-bhāvanā*).

### **cultivated:** *bahulākatā*

Used often beside development as a synonym, this term literally meant something that is done (*kata*) a lot (*bahuli*). The way we develop a particular skill or a new habit is by constant practice and repetition—by "doing it alot."

### **presence of mindfulness established:**

#### *parimukhaṃ sati upaṭṭhapetvā*

This phrase is idiomatic both in Pali and in English. Literally it calls for the establishment—standing or setting (*-ṭṭhapetvā*) up (*upa-*)—of mindfulness around (*pari-*) the mouth or face (*-mukhaṃ*). Sometimes this has been taken to specify placing attention on the breath just where it enters the nose, but usually it is seen as a metaphor of intimate presence, as we might say something is "in your face" or we come "face to face" with something we scrutinize carefully.

### **mindful:** *sato*

Mindfulness (*sati*) as a key term of Buddhist meditation has been construed in many different ways in recent usage, from the very broad (almost any degree of attentiveness or awareness), to the very narrow (a special mental factor arising only under very specific conditions). It is used here as an adjective of the meditator, and is defined functionally by what follows.

### **one is aware:** *pajānāti*

Based on a verbal root meaning simply "to know," it is the pivotal word in this text. What is the difference between breathing with awareness—consciously, deliberately, attentively, intently—and the breathing that occurs automatically at all times? Mindful breathing means knowing that you are breathing, not in an abstract or conceptual way, but immediately, viscerally, and uninterrupted—moment by micro-moment.

### **"I breathe in...":** *assasāmī ti*

The immediacy of this experiential knowing is brought home by the grammatical construction of using the first person present tense set in quotation marks. The fragment "*ti*" or "*iti*" is simply a way of indicating that what precedes it is to be considered direct speech. The meditator's direct knowing of her breathing is demonstrated again and again in this phrase, silently understood if not actually uttered to oneself.

### **one practices:** *sikkhati*

In all that follows the verb is significantly altered from "to know" to "to train," "to learn," or "to practice." This phrasing shifts the emphasis slightly from following what is already happening to taking some intentional stance toward, or participating creatively with, what now unfolds. It marks a subtle shift from an entirely passive to a somewhat more active or directed way of knowing the breath.

### **"I will breath in...":** *assasissāmī ti*

This movement is emphasized by a change in the tense of the verb, from present to future. It is still in the first person, and is still in direct speech, but now it points, at least figuratively, to what will occur in the next moment rather than in the present moment. Again, this brings a gentle sense of guiding the practice through the curriculum that follows.

### **experiencing:** *paṭisaṃvedī*

Another important word in this text, this one is rooted in a word for "to know" that tilts strongly in the direction of "to feel." In contemporary idiom these seem to be antithetical verbs, but in Buddhist thought the sensations of pleasure and pain are treated as a sort of direct knowledge. The prefixes amplify the feeling: "*paṭi-*" suggests falling back upon or getting in touch with something, while "*saṃ-*" brings a sense of totality or completion. This is a word for direct encounter or intimate contact with what arises in experience.

### **observing:** *anupassī*

This is another word of great importance in mindfulness texts. At its core is the verb "to see" (*pass-*), and the prefix *anu-* means "following along" or going along with the way something naturally unfolds. Together they conjure a sense of observing, viewing, or watching what is happening. The term is sometimes rendered as "contemplating," which works in some of its senses, but not when it suggests "thinking about" a problem. Like the words for "one is aware" and "experiencing," the sense intended here has to do with a direct and experience-near, rather than a conceptual, mode of observation.

### **ardent:** *ātāpī*

This adjective is based upon the word for "heat" (*tapas*). In ancient India all spiritual practice, and ascetic practice in particular, was viewed as a kind of "burning" or "heating up." Much as a chemist might heat substances in a crucible to study the transformations that occur as it breaks down, the yogi or meditator would subject his mind and body to certain disciplines and examine the experiences that ensued. The image here is of intensive applied energy, such as one might exert while rubbing two sticks together to generate heat.

### **fully aware:** *sampajāno*

Based on the root "to know," like *pajānāti* above, the term is amplified here with the prefix *saṃ-* to suggest fullness or completeness. If *pajānāti* means "to know," *sampajāno* means to know fully, to know comprehensively, to know in its entirety without interruption. It is often combined with the word for mindfulness (*sati-sampajāno*), in which case the former term refers to detailed, micro-awareness while the latter indicates a broader, more global awareness of an object as it is viewed in its wider context.

### **having put away:** *vineyya*

The gentle "leading away" of the reflex to hold on to or push away from the objects of experience, resulting in the mental attitude of benign equanimity characteristic of mindfulness.