

Anapanasati Sutra

The Discourse on the Full Awareness of Breathing

Homage to Thich Nhat Hanh: In a dharma talk he gave in January, 1998, Thay, speaking about himself in the third person, talks about the Anapansati Sutra. He says: “The day Thay discovered this Sutra he was so happy because in the past he tried to learn this sutra and was satisfied with a lot of knowledge but he didn’t know how to enjoy the present moment. He did not know how to look deeply into this life, where he was able to enjoy his youth, the conditions he had. So the day he discovered this Sutra he was so happy, he thought he discovered the greatest treasure in the world. That Sutra is called, in Pali, the Anapanasati Sutra. It is so basic and so wonderful. There are many great sutras but without this one it is like you want to go to the top of the mountain but there are no paths leading there. This sutra is like the stairs for you to climb into the most beautiful Sutra of Mahayana Buddhism.

We pay homage to our teacher for sharing with us his enthusiasm for and understanding and love of the Buddha’s teachings, including the Anapanasati Sutra.

“Anna” means breathe in, “pana” means breathe out and “sati” means mindfulness, awareness —so the Anapanasati Sutra is the Sermon on the Full Awareness of Breathing, sixteen breathing exercises to help us transform our suffering. The first 4 exercises focus on the body, the next 4 focus on feelings, the next 4 on mental activity and the last 4 on the objects of our mind, the 4 foundational teachings in Buddhism.

I have found these exercises to be a profound path for healing. I have used them many times. When our 6 day-old grandbaby Jose Sebastian died, it took me several days to go through the 16 exercises. I worked with the first 4 until I felt strong enough to go on to the next 4 and so on. When I got “stuck” in an exercise (for example, #5 where the Buddha asks us to bring up a feeling of joy) I returned to exercise one and began again.

Rather than just read about the 16 exercises, I invite you to take the time to actually do the exercises as we go through them. This means that this talk might take you several days. Or weeks. The first time I studied the Anapanasati Sutra it took me a year.

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Exercise 1.

Breathing in, I know I am breathing in. The Buddha said, Practice like this.

Breathing out, I know I am breathing out.

As you breathe in, to help your concentration, you might say “in” to yourself. As you breathe out, you might say, “out” to yourself. Enjoy your breathing.

Exercise 2.

Breathing in, I notice the quality of my in-breath.

Breathing out, I notice the quality of my out-breath.

What qualities does your in-breath have? long? short? quick? slow?

What qualities does your out-breath have? deep? soft? shallow? smooth?

Is each breath like the other? Or is each breath different from the other? For a few breaths, just observe the qualities of your in-breath and out-breath.

When you're ready, with your next in-breath bring your attention to your tail bone. As you breathe in, “watch” your breath roll up your spine one vertebrae at a time to the base of your skull. Notice a little pause. As you breathe out, watch your breath roll down your spine one vertebrae at a time. Notice the little pause before you take another in-breath. Enjoy several slow wave-like breaths.

Exercise 3.

Breathing in, I bring my attention to my whole body.

Breathing out, I experience my whole body.

As you breathe in bring your attention to each part of your body beginning with your scalp and working slowly down to your feet; notice where there is tightness... tension... stress. As you breathe out release whatever anxiety, worry, stress, pain or discomfort you encounter in that part of your body. Let the tension, the tightness go out with your out-breath.

Exercise 4.

Breathing in, I calm my whole body.

Breathing out, I calm my whole body.

You may have noticed that just by bringing your attention to your breath and body, you begin to feel relaxed, peaceful, calm. You do not have to do any work. Paying attention to your breath puts your body at ease.

The first 4 exercises focus on our body. In the next 4 exercises the Buddha asks us to focus on our feelings.

Exercise 5.

Breathing in, I feel joyful. Practice like this.

Breathing out, I feel joyful.

Joy has a little zing in it, some excitement.

Anchored in your mindful breathing, bring up a feeling of joy, some exciting joyful time in your life. Maybe several moments pop in your mind but see if you can concentrate on just one joyful time.

Can you visualize it? Where were you? Do you remember the colors? The sounds? Did you laugh? Smile? If there were people there, can you visualize them?

Or maybe you don't remember the details of the moment but simply feel the joy from the past, now, in your body.

Enjoy several joyful breaths. When you are ready, let that joyful feeling go and bring your attention back to your in-breath and out-breath.

Exercise 6.

Breathing in, I feel happy.

Breathing out, I feel happy.

Happiness is like joy only less hyper. The Spanish word for happiness is “contento” or “contenta.” Happiness is like that. A feeling of contentment. Peace. Ease.

As you breathe in and breathe out, bring up a calmer, contented, peaceful memory from your past. Bring that relaxed happy feeling of ease into the present moment. If you want, remember the details of it. Or just notice how that happiness feels in your body.

In exercises 5 and 6 the Buddha asks us to *bring up* our pleasant feelings. What does “bring up” mean? *From* where and *to* where do we bring our pleasant feelings?

There are 8 kinds of consciousnesses taught by the Buddha: mind consciousness, 5 sense consciousnesses, mana, and store consciousness. To answer our question about "bringing up pleasant feelings" we need to look closely at the mind consciousness and store consciousness.

Mind consciousness—This is your mind that thinks, worries, analyzes, makes judgements, plans. It is your “conscious mind” that you are using now.

Store consciousness—The base of all the consciousnesses is the mind that *stores, keeps forever, and transforms* all of your past experiences—everything you've ever seen, heard, touched, smelled, tasted and everything you've ever thought, said or done!

But that's not all—because your mama and daddy are in you, the store consciousness also stores each of *their* sense experiences, thoughts, words and actions! But that's not all!

Because their mama and daddy are in them.....

The store consciousness holds all of the experiences of *all* of our human ancestors but also all of our animal, plant and mineral ancestors—since beginningless time. All ideas, concepts, thoughts, words, actions, perceptions, experiences and every possible emotion is stored in the store consciousness.

The store consciousness is a stream that all of us are a part of; that is a part of all of us. Some may call it “God.” Or One Consciousness. Universal Consciousness. Cosmic consciousness. The store consciousness helps us understand “interbeing.” I am in you, you are in me because we are both part of the stream of this ONE consciousness.

In Buddhism the information that the store consciousness holds, preserves and transforms is called “bija” which is translated as “seeds.” “Seeds” in the Buddhist context, means possibilities, or potential—information that is untapped, unused, undiscovered—until *touched*. There are seeds in your store consciousness which may never manifest in your lifetime, but they are always available to manifest.

In your store consciousness are positive, wholesome seeds like understanding, compassion, nonviolence, joy, forgiveness and negative, unwholesome seeds like anger, violence, fear, despair, miscommunication. Because we are all part of one stream of consciousness we all have the same seeds.

The seeds stay unused in the store consciousness until you see, hear, smell, taste, touch or think of something that comes in contact with the seed—and then anger, or joy or whatever seed is contacted— is produced. When the seed is “watered” like that, it manifests on the level of mind consciousness.

So in exercises 5 and 6 when the Buddha asks us to explore our feelings, he begins by having us contact the seeds of joy and happiness; seeds that are always waiting silently in our store consciousness for our attention. And when we contact those seeds of pleasant feelings, they *rise* to our mind consciousness where we can act on them.

Just as in the first 4 exercises we calmed our breath and our body, in exercises 5 and 6 we are able to calm our feelings. This ability is always available to us.

The Buddha has given us courage and confidence with exercises 5 and 6. Now it is safe to experience exercises 7 and 8.

Exercise 7.

Breathing in, I am aware of all of my feelings.

Breathing out, I am aware of all of my feelings.

Recognize *whatever* feelings arise, both positive and negative. Feelings like humility, patience, faith; also craving, anger, irritation, envy, remorse, doubt.

You know you won't get stuck in the *difficult* feelings that arise because you have just experienced being able to contact your pleasant feelings whenever you want. Even just recognizing and tenderly embracing the feeling of pain can bring you some relief.

Exercise 8.

Breathing in, I calm all of my feelings.

Breathing out, I calm all of my feelings.

How do you calm *all* of your feelings, unpleasant as well as pleasant?

You can work with difficult feelings in two main ways. One way is to look directly at your— let's say anxiety. What all caused your anxiety? What are the many internal and external conditions that came together for the feeling of anxiety to be awakened? You can look at your habits, cultural influences, your experiences with your parents, teachers and friends.

Another way that is equally effective, is to replace your unpleasant feelings with pleasant feelings. You can go for a walk in nature for instance. Or as we've seen, you can bring up *memories* of joy or happiness.

So exercises 1-4 ask us to focus on becoming aware of and calming our body; exercises 5-8 ask us to focus on becoming aware of and calming our feelings.

In exercises 9-12 we are asked to focus on and calm the activity of our mind.

Exercise 9.

Breathing in, I am aware of the activity of my mind. Practice like this.

Breathing out, I am aware of the activity of my mind.

We bring our attention to whatever thoughts we are experiencing in the moment. Pleasant or unpleasant, positive or negative, wholesome or unwholesome. We accept them all.

It's like Rumi says in his poem, "The Guest House. "

This being human is a guest house.

Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes

As an unexpected awareness.

Welcome and entertain them all!

Even I'd they're a crowd of sorrows,

who violently sweep your house

empty of its furniture,

Still, treat each guest honorably.
It may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

Thay says, There is a river of consciousness that's flowing day and night. Anger, hate, despair, joy, jealousy, compassion, all continue to take turns manifesting. As a practitioner, you are always present so you can recognize them. You don't need to fight or to grasp; you just recognize them as they arise, as they stay for some time, and as they go away.

The 9th exercise is a manifestation of the 1st and 3rd noble truths. What *suffering* is present in me now? What *happiness* is present in me now?

Exercise 10.
Breathing in, I gladden my mind.
Breathing out, I gladden my mind.

How can you gladden your mind?

To make joyful thoughts appear in our mind consciousness we contact the positive, wholesome seeds in our store consciousness that are waiting to be watered. As we know, we all have seeds there of joy, happiness, love, forgiveness, gratitude, generosity, understanding. We need to catch these wholesome seeds and help them manifest. That is our practice in this 10th breathing exercise; that is what is meant by gladdening the mind.

Thay: There are many ways to calm a negative energy without suppressing or fighting it. You recognize it, you smile to it, and you invite something nicer to come up and replace it; you read some inspiring words, you listen to a piece of beautiful music, you go somewhere in nature, or you do some walking meditation.

It is not until after we've experienced the first 10 exercises that it is safe to work with the 11th exercise.

Exercise 11.
Breathing in, I concentrate my mind.
Breathing out, I concentrate my mind.

Thay says that exercise 11 is the *art* of taking care of our negative mental activity: transforming our fear, anxiety, impatience, anger, self absorption and so on. Anchored in your in-breath and out-breath, relaxing your body, releasing your feelings, allowing your thoughts to become quiet,

you focus your whole being, not with effort, not by struggling, but by surrendering to the peace, ease. You take refuge in the wisdom of your true self.

One way we can work with the negative as well as the positive seeds in us is to practice Selective Watering.

The idea of Selective Watering is that we either strengthen the seeds in our store consciousness or we weaken them. *We don't fight seeds.* Anger, fear, greed, overwhelm are not our enemies, we don't try to destroy them. In fact, we *can't* get rid of even one of our seeds. Our work is to help the unwholesome negative seeds become *dormant*. And to help the wholesome, positive seeds awaken and be active.

It is not until our body, feelings and mind are at ease that we should look at bringing our concentration to our suffering. If we skip the other breathing exercises and go straight to our pain, we'll just be using our *intellect* to look at our unhappiness and we're likely to get caught in it. We sure won't come up with any new way of transforming our suffering.

The truth is we don't want to mess with our suffering at all. We want to tune out our suffering; we want to ignore our negative seeds because when we're aware of them, when they surface in our conscious mind, we hurt. We want the seeds of suffering to lay low, down deep in the bottom of our store consciousness so we can be at peace. But since they won't always stay down there, after we've calmed our breathing, body, feelings and mind, we have to allow— or deliberately bring up— the negative seeds.

That's the 11th breathing exercise, the art of taking care of our negative mental formations.

Exercise 12.

Breathing in, I liberate my mind. I let my suffering go. Practice like this.

Breathing out, I liberate my mind. I let my suffering go.

Anchored in our in-breath and out-breath, we are eventually able to release the difficult thoughts, judgments, prejudices that our teacher says "[imprison us in our suffering.](#)"

Exercise 13.

Breathing in I am aware of the impermanence of all phenomena.

Breathing out, I am aware of the impermanence of all phenomena.

Our in-breath is there and then turns into our out-breath which changes to our in-breath.

Our body is tense... and then relaxed and gets tight again.

Our feelings come...stay awhile....then leave. We feel anxious then calm.

Our thoughts, too: arise...linger....disappear.

We "get" impermanence—not just intellectually, but in our very being.

The certainty of impermanence is surprisingly reassuring.

Because we realize in our very cells that nothing lasts, that nothing is solid, nothing is stable, every *one* and every *thing* changes—we recognize that there is nothing to hold on to. Nothing to grab for. Nothing to grasp.

That's the 14th exercise: end of desire, end of craving.

Exercise 14.

Breathing in, since everything is in a state of change and there is nothing to hold on to, I observe the disappearance of desire.

Breathing out, since everything is in a state of change and there is nothing to hold on to, I observe the disappearance of desire.

Whatever it is you want, whatever it is you're trying to hold on to is impermanent—here this moment, gone the next— so...there is nothing *there* to grasp. You can run after pleasure... but the pleasure keeps moving, changing.

And besides, getting what we want never satisfies us, but only waters our seeds of wanting.

A man asked Lord Buddha, "I want happiness."

Lord Buddha said, "First remove 'I' that's ego.

Then remove 'want' that's desire.

See...now you are left with happiness

Exercise 15.

Breathing in I contemplate Nirvana. No permanence, no impermanence. No desire, no end of desire.

Breathing out I contemplate Nirvana. No permanence, no impermanence. No desire, no end of desire.

No permanence, no impermanence; no craving, no non-craving; no fear, no courage, no baby Jose Sebastian, no me, no pain, no non-pain. Nirvana.

Our true nature—the true nature of all phenomena— is the nature of no beginning, no end, no birth, no death. You have never been nothing. You have always existed in some form or another. You will never be nothing. You will always exist in some form or another. Nirvana is not a place. It is the nature of reality.

Our teacher says, "Please don't be satisfied with words and notions. You have to get real thing. The real thing is stability, solidity, freedom and peace. Nirvana is the world of no suffering. If you dwell in the present moment and if you practice looking deeply, one day you will touch very deeply the ground of your being, the ground where suffering vanishes. Your true nature is the nature of nirvana.

You surrender to the place of ease.

Exercise 16.

Breathing in I surrender. I let go. I seek nothing.

Breathing out I surrender. I let go. I seek nothing.

Your attention is soft and hazy; your body and mind are at ease.

The next day you can begin again with exercise 1.

May the fruit of our study and practice of the Anapanasati Sutra benefit ourselves which includes our teacher and all beings.

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true virtuous action