

Anapanasati

The 16 stages of the Anapanasati (MN 118)

Body Tetrad:

1. One trains oneself: breathing in long I know I breathe in long; breathing out long I know I breathe out long
2. One trains oneself: breathing in/out short I know I breathe in/out short
3. One trains oneself: mindful of the whole body I breathe in/out
4. One trains oneself: calming the body I breathe in/out.

Feelings Tetrad:

1. One trains oneself: sensitive to *priti* I breathe in/out
2. One trains oneself: sensitive to *sukha* I breathe in/out
3. One trains oneself: attentive to the mind-with-feelings I breathe in/out
4. One trains oneself: calming the mind-with-feelings I breathe in/out

Mind Tetrad:

1. One trains oneself: experiencing the mind I breathe in/out
2. One trains oneself: gladdening the mind I breathe in/out
3. One trains oneself: concentrating the mind I breathe in/out
4. One trains oneself: liberating the mind I breathe in/out

Dharmas Tetrad:

1. One trains oneself: contemplating impermanence I breathe in/out
2. One trains oneself: contemplating dispassion I breathe in/out
3. One trains oneself: contemplating cessation I breathe in/out
4. One trains oneself: contemplating relinquishment I breathe in/out

A progressive path of cultivation and development

- The anapanasati follows 4 key stages corresponding to the 4 foundations of mindfulness
- It is progressive: starting with one's immediate sense experience one progresses steadily through stages that unfold naturally and organically, each stage giving rise to the next in its fruition.

Just as, bhikkus, when rain pours down in thick droplets on a mountain top, the water flows down along the slope and fills the cleft, gullies, and creeks; these being full fill up the pools ... the lakes ... streams ... rivers ... the great ocean, so too, ... with tranquillity as cause arises happiness ... concentration ... knowledge and vision of things as they really are (SN 2.23)

- This is the natural unfolding of spiral conditionality, not a forced result of willed effort: our effort should be a balanced and patient persistence, an endeavour to establish the conditions, and a working on whatever estranges us from meditation: as much a letting go as a bringing about.

For one feeling pleasure no volition need be exerted: 'Let my mind be concentrated.' It is natural that the mind of one feeling pleasure is concentrated. (AN 10.2)

Location, Duration, and Quality

In the first two stages (practiced together) we are not controlling the length of the breath, just noting its duration. The breath will tend to lengthen as we relax but we do not deliberately lengthen it.

We also note the location of the sensations of the body breathing, investigating their extent and how sensations in different locations occur at different points in the breath cycle.

Along with this we note the quality of the breath: easy or difficult, rough or smooth, tight or relaxed.

Balance: Focus and Breadth

The focus in each stage is on the physical experience of the body breathing. This is a good focus because it brings us in to the body, and hence in to embodiment: the home of feelings and emotions.

Watch out for the near enemy of attending to an idea or concept of the breath and identifying with the idea or concept of doing the mindfulness of breathing. The practice is an opportunity to let go of concepts and move in to a direct awareness of sensations. We are not trying not to think: we are just choosing a focus of physical sensation.

Breadth includes, along with whatever thoughts are arising, emotions, feelings, other sense perceptions (such as sounds) and other physical experience (such as the weight of the body on the cushions).

Balanced effort

A balanced effort is as little direct effort as possible, and as much as necessary to retain the focus.

The effort is in persistence, and in turning towards our experience – leaning in to its sharp point (Pema Chodron: The places that scare you)

Turning the mind towards the focus (vitaka) and keeping it in mind (viccāra) develops one pointedness and pleasant vedāna (prīti and sukha). One discovers interest and enjoyment through kindly, patient attention.

Conversely a forced and wilful effort will lead to a painful, dry and unpleasant experience which will build up a resistance to meditation practice.