

Anapanasati

Summary of the final 3 stages:

- Stage 14: Contemplating Dispassion | breath in / out
- Stage 15: Contemplating Cessation | breath in / out
- Stage 16: Contemplating Relinquishment | breath in / out

Dispassion (virago) Cessation (nirodha) and Relinquishment (patinissagga) follow on from realising impermanence (anicca) in a manner similar to the higher spiral path from knowledge and vision to liberation.

- Dispassion is the letting go of attachments
- Cessation is the cessation of the suffering consequent to attachment: the 2nd arrow (anicca dukkha), the painfulness of negative mental states
- Relinquishment is the relinquishment of any wish to pick up those attachments again

Though the language is negative, there are positive counterparts:

- Dispassion: not just the absence of greed, but also the presence of loving kindness (metta) sympathetic joy (mudita) compassion (karuna) equanimity (upekkha)
- Cessation: not just less dukkha, but also joy (priti) and bliss (sukha)
- Relinquishment: not just renouncing ties, but also freedom to engage in the world on the basis of inspiration, creativity, and the bodhicitta

Path and Mandala Models

Path:

The sutta presents a path model: a linear sequence of 16 contemplations with a start, a middle, and an end. This is a temporal model or metaphor. Each contemplation reaches a kind of fruition and naturally moves on to the next, accumulating in a particular sequence.

Mandala:

An alternative model is based on the metaphor of a mandala: a circle with a centre and 4 quadrants, inclusive of everything. This is a spatial model or metaphor: we are not going anywhere – the space contains everything.

With a mandala model approach we don't need to follow a prescribed sequence, and we don't have to do all 16 stages: we follow the process of what arises in the way that it arises, using the contemplations that are relevant.

If priti or sukha arise, we contemplate those, and the conditioning effect they have on our mind. If the hindrances arise, we greet them kindly, experiencing the mind.

The approach requires us to have all the stages at our fingertips: familiar and available. We follow an intuitive sense of natural unfoldment.

Strengths and Weaknesses

Path: upsides

- Clarity of structure: we know where we're going
- Precision: no ambiguity as to what we're doing
- Rigour: nothing missed out – so we learn all the stages

Path: downsides

- The stage we're practicing may not fit our experience, leading to a feeling that 'I'm not doing it right' or a sense of dissonance: trying to fit ourselves in to the model
- Goal orientation: this can help at the beginning but is limited, and includes a tendency to wilfulness: trying to have a different experience

Mandala: upsides

- Freedom to construct the practice according to our experience
- The approach is not prescriptive, so there is no dissonance with our experience
- In not trying to get anywhere, there is a natural relaxing and letting go

Mandala: downsides

- Not good at building concentration. There can be a tendency to drift and for one's attention to lack steadiness and coherence
- If we lack the intuition as to how to allow our practice to unfold we may find ourselves confused as to what to do and plagued by doubt: 'Is this really meditation?'

Each model has its own value and integrity, provided we don't mix them up and confuse them

We may find one model more natural and / or appropriate at a particular time.

It is useful to learn the language of each: the path uses the language of the self-developmental model. The mandala uses the language of self-discovery model. Learning both, we can combine them in to an effective practice, offsetting the disadvantages of each.

Different teachers will emphasise different approaches.

To follow a mandala approach, disregard any input for the meditation leader, and use the bells just as an indication of how long you have left, not as what to do next. A mandala approach is best supported with no interval bells: just one at the end, and perhaps one a few minutes before the end to enable you to draw the practice to a close.

Condensing the practice

16 stages is too many to follow in sequence in practice.

There are a number of ways of condensing the practice, drawing on natural affinities between the stages.

Here is one suggestion that is akin to our usual 4 stage mindfulness of breathing meditation followed by a period of just sitting:

Condensed Anapanasati:

1. Contemplations 1&2: Establish concentration. Akin to stages 1 & 2: counting
2. Contemplation 3: broad awareness. Akin to stage 3: mindful of the whole breath
3. Contemplation 11: concentrating the mind: sharpening the focus. Akin to stage 4: mindful of the point at which the breath enters the body
4. Contemplation 12: liberating the mind by just sitting. Akin to just sitting after a mindfulness of breathing practice.

The vedana tetrad and contemplations 9 (experiencing the mind: checking for hindrances) and 10 (gladdening the mind) can be integrated in to the broad awareness of contemplation 3 (experiencing the body) as we open to physical sensation and its feeling tone (perhaps priti) and the mind-body with its feeling tone (perhaps sukha) and emotions (perhaps the hindrances) – or we could include contemplation of priti, sukha, and the hindrances as they arise within this condensed path.

The last tetrad flows naturally from the just sitting approach: the ‘liberating the mind’ contemplation.

Anapanasati contemplations 1&2 always go together: investigating the duration (and location and quality) of the breath to establish concentration. This is suggested as an alternative to counting, taking up just one stage, freeing up the 4th stage for just sitting.

Note that each tetrad has a pattern of establishing conditions (bhavana) for concentration followed by relaxing: allowing those conditions to unfold to fruition. This is a good pattern to follow: allow a period of receptivity or just sitting after more active practices: bhavana meditation or puja. Jumping straight in to the next thing is jarring and you lose some of the benefit of the practice.