

Comments on Anapanasati

There are many approaches that evolved in Buddhist tradition that enable the aims of the entire 'system of practice' — to address and integrate all elements in the mind, to cultivate love and compassion, to meet spiritual death or seeing through of the ego, the deeper transformational training in insight that comes out of that, and finally the path of completion, of realising one's innate Buddha Nature. One historical approach is Dzogchen, another is Mahamudra, another is the Mind Training approach with tonglen and Bodhicitta, and another, presumably the original, is Satipatthana. This sequence, Anapanasati, also enables the entire system, especially through its connection to Satipatthana. I feel that for a system to fully embody the system of practice, it must connect with some kind of whole life practice.

The anapanasati system, which means mindfulness of breathing, is in four stages. Each stage also contains four sub stages making 16 in all. But sixteen stages of anything is just too much, it's not relatable for many of us. I find it's easier to relate to this practice if you just take the four. So I'll be referring to the four stages. Often these are called 'tetrads' because of the four substages. The four main stages of anapanasati are the same as in those in the satipatthana training, that is mindfulness of Body, Feeling, Mind and Dharmas, Dharmas referring to the insight stages where you are looking into all the arising and passing phenomena of experience. Anapanasati practice uses the breathing, at least initially, to achieve a deep grounding in the body, then breathing to taking stock of the feelings, then breathing to take stock of the mind, and then breathing to engage with vipashyana. This aware breathing, which gives its name to the entire approach, can be centre stage or in the background, or even be dispensed with. However in general it is what brings awareness to each of the four stages. Anapanasati is a bit like tong-len in this respect.

Here are the four stages with sub-stages:

ONE: BODY

1. Breathing in long, s/he understands, 'I breathe in long'; or breathing out long, s/he understands, 'I breathe out long.'
2. Breathing in (or breathing out) short, s/he understands, 'I breathe in (or out) short.'
3. I shall breathe in (and breathe out) experiencing the whole body.
4. I shall breathe in (and breathe out) tranquillising the bodily formation (kāyasankhāra).

TWO: FEELING

5. I shall breathe in (and out) experiencing rapture (prīti).
6. I shall breathe in (and out) experiencing bliss (sukha).
7. I shall breathe in (and out) experiencing the mental formation.
8. I shall breathe in (and out) tranquillising the mental formation.

THREE: MIND

9. I shall breathe in (and out) experiencing the heart/mind.
10. I shall breathe in (and out) gladdening the heart/mind.
11. I shall breathe in (and out) concentrating the heart/mind.
12. I shall breathe in (and out) liberating the heart/mind.

FOUR: DHARMAS

13. I shall breathe in (and out) contemplating impermanence.
14. I shall breathe in (and out) contemplating dispassion
15. I shall breathe in (and out) contemplating cessation.
16. I shall breathe in (and out) contemplating relinquishment

So it's after the connection has been made with the body and with the mind, including feeling, that the engagement with vipashyana starts. That is, it starts at the end of the third stage, where the citta is seen as not owned, and therefore as potentially liberated. Each of the four stages begins with awareness and ends with some kind of liberation. So in the mind tetrad, the citta or heart-mind is liberated at the end of the third stage by realising that it cannot be owned or grasped. Then in the fourth tetrad, first you're seeing the many kinds of change in what is known or experienced by the citta. Then you are focusing on the endings aspect of change. This highlights a growing contemplation of one's dispassion (viraga) that stems naturally from seeing not only how all phenomena fade away, but also from realising the special quality of dukkha, how unsatisfactory it is that we are subject to the pushes and pulls of our mental poisons and unhelpful views. Looking at endings highlights the final unsustainability of all samsaric attractions and repulsions.

Analayo in his book on anapanasati ('Mindfulness of Breathing', Windhorse) suggests looking at the fact that the breath comes to an end in each moment, and will at one point come to a complete finish. Many people find that contemplating death at this point is helpful, but not all. We all need simply to find what works: there isn't a set way. Me, I find looking at thoughts quite provocative in this way. I try to see their impermanence directly, and to see the way they exist. This I find quite a challenge in all kinds of ways. For me it raises the questions, how am I taking hold of a thought, i.e. what does that holding entail — and what

actually constitutes a thought? It simply is not clear how apprehending a thought takes place, or indeed what it is that is apprehended. When I turn to look at a thought, I have to ask if this experience now, when I'm facing what I previously considered to be the thought, in fact that thought? How can it be, when what I now perceive is pretty much just nothing?

A thought appears like a bubble at the point where it decays. Have you ever watched a bubble decay? If you take your child's bubble kit, blow a medium size soap bubble, and set it down, watch it and see how long it lasts, it may last an unusually long time. Even when it does finally reach its end, its actual dissolution may take longer than you'd have expected. The surface of the bubble, which stayed glossy and shiny for ages, eventually starts going dull. Then you know it's getting near the end. You then actually see the surface start to break up, yet extraordinarily the sphere of the bubble still holds together for a short while. The surface now has a lacy texture, like a delicate web of almost invisible threads. There are visible holes in between. The bubble remains a perfect sphere, but with a surface that resembles a string vest. And when it finally goes, the bubble doesn't pop but the holes in its lacy exterior just get larger until it can't sustain its shape and it finally implodes, simply collapsing.

Contemplating, I have seen a thought behave like that lacy outline. The thing clearly has no substance, it is just about holding together. In fact it is just held together by bits of nothing. The bubble is of course just an image for what is actually seen in contemplating a thought, which can't properly be described. The thought was something that was real to me, that meant something to me, that seemed to be a significant element in the structure of me. Yet it is observably a conditioned phenomenon, and moreover a bubble, a shred of foam on the waters, a will 'o the wisp. Thoughts give our existence shape, we rely on them, they shore us up — and they are very illusory. In terms of the anapanasati, they, like all phenomena of experience, are impermanent. They have their uses. They are amazing. But in themselves, they are nothing: they do not last and they cannot be relied upon.

So it's seeing something of this kind (the nature of emotional responses or feelings is the same) that brings about 'dispassion' - you just lose interest in pursuing anything that has this bubble like, shred like nature, and all experience has that nature. It has always had that nature, but we cover that over with habitual delusion. It is what Padmasambhava also says. 'It is the single nature of mind which encompasses samsara and nirvana. Why did I not notice? It's inherent nature has existed right from the very beginning: yet i have not recognised it! How incredible that is! yet it is true!

So this is how those last stages can go. The anapanasati stages offer a means to take insight further as well, because of the connection with the body. Habitual response that has become deeply entrenched is held in the body and is accessible there. What Sangharakshita called spiritual rebirth entails the transformation of the individual in the light that is created by their insights into the nature of reality: moments of spiritual death. The insights need to be applied in all life situations, especially in relation to the body, which is the essential element in everyone's life. Life means being embodied in some form. That application is what mindfulness practice facilitates. Spiritual rebirth works largely through deep mindfulness of the body feelings and mind.

Do play with the practice and work with the bits that seem to help. Don't feel you have to go through sixteen stages. Just do some of them. You can skip around a bit as well. In some ways I think you can just have three stages: the body stage, feeling and mind together as one stage, and the insight stage. The feeling and mind tetrads are very similar. There is a process of acknowledging the quality of mind or feeling, enjoying it and then allowing it to become full and rich, and then resting in the fullness of it. The quality of mind is in the feeling as well (and also in the body: it's all an experience, which is what mind is), so you can blend these stages if it works for you.

There is no harm in spending a lot of time in the first stage. Don't fall into the trap of thinking it is elementary so we should get on to the real thing. It all depends what is working for you. Nowadays for us old practitioners, the body tetrad is no longer a beginners practice. We know we need to embody our experience as an aid to spiritual rebirth, so it is also an insight stage. In the sadhanas, which are the classic method for spiritual rebirth, the main stress is also on embodiment through the subtle body awareness of energy centres, rays of blessing, and absorption of adhisthana. If you have experience of that world of sadhana practice, the body stage of anapanasati can be used in that way. The inner body awareness, and the awareness of the chakras and different energies in the central channel of the body, along with their sadhana associations, also become aspects of the anapanasati. That also applies in the other stages, including when extending the practice into everyday life through satipatthana.