



# Breathe, you are alive!

SUTRA ON THE FULL AWARENESS OF BREATHING

THICH NHAT HANH

Author of *Being Peace*





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# Breathe, You Are Alive!

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*The Sutra on the Full Awareness  
of Breathing*

Thich Nhat Hanh



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## ***Breathe, You Are Alive!***

Breathe and you know that you are alive.  
Breathe and you know that all is helping you.  
Breathe and you know that you are the world.  
Breathe and you know that the flower is breathing too.  
Breathe for yourself and you breathe for the world.  
Breathe in compassion and breathe out joy.

Breathe and be one with the air that you breathe.  
Breathe and be one with the river that flows.  
Breathe and be one with the earth that you tread.  
Breathe and be one with the fire that glows.  
Breathe and you break the thought of birth and death.  
Breathe and you see that impermanence is life.

Breathe for your joy to be steady and calm.  
Breathe for your sorrow to flow away.  
Breathe to renew every cell in your blood.  
Breathe to renew the depths of consciousness.  
Breathe and you dwell in the here and now.  
Breathe and all you touch is new and real.

—Annabel Laity

# INTRODUCTION

## Stop and Breathe

IN THE Sutra on the Full Awareness of Breathing, also known as the Anapanasati Sutta, the Buddha shows us how to transform our fear, despair, anger, and craving. I was so happy the day I discovered this sutra. I thought I'd discovered the greatest treasure in the world. Before, I'd been content to simply gain knowledge. I didn't know how to enjoy the present moment, how to look deeply into my life, and how to enjoy the positive conditions that were all around me. This sutra is so basic and so wonderful. There are many great sutras, but approaching them without this sutra is like trying to reach the top of a mountain without a path to go on.

Breathing is a means of awakening and maintaining full attention in order to look carefully, long, and deeply, see the nature of all things, and arrive at liberation. The Sutra on the Full Awareness of Breathing is the Buddha's way to help us remember to breathe and to enjoy our breath. When you breathe in slowly, mindfully, you can enjoy your in-breath. Just breathing in can make you very happy. Allow yourself to be happy while breathing in. You know that many people have a stuffed nose. They don't enjoy their in-breath very much. So if you're able to breathe freely, that's already something. You know that breathing out freely helps release toxins and that is something wonderful and healthy. For those of us who enjoy breathing in and out, this is already the practice of peace and happiness. Peace and happiness are already there inside of you and around you.

We all have the tendency to run away from suffering. But the fact is that without suffering, there is no way to cultivate understanding and compassion. I don't want to send my friends and children to a place without suffering, because a place without suffering is a place without understanding and compassion. Without understanding and compassion, there can be no happiness.

In Plum Village, where I live, we have a lotus pond. A lotus can never grow without mud. We cannot plant a lotus on marbles. So just as the mud plays a very vital role in bringing out the lotus, suffering plays a vital role in bringing understanding and compassion. When we embrace our suffering and look



deeply into it, we can learn a lot.

In Buddhism, we often speak of taking refuge in the Buddha. The Buddha is not a person outside of us, but the energy of mindfulness, concentration, and insight in us. We have the seeds of compassion in us. There are times we are capable of understanding and capable of being compassionate. The energy of understanding and compassion can be generated from within us. That is the energy of the Buddha inside. The Buddha is always there within you, and you can touch the Buddha at any time you like. One of the ways to reach the Buddha, anytime and anywhere, is through your breath.

Several years ago I was in Seoul, South Korea. The police had blocked traffic so that we could have a walking meditation in the city. When the time came to lead the walking meditation, I didn't know what to do. I couldn't walk, because hundreds of journalists and people with cameras were closing in. There was no path to walk. So I told the Buddha, "Dear Buddha, I give up, you walk for me." The Buddha came right away. He walked and people made a path for the Buddha to walk.

The Buddha is in you, and the Buddha knows how to breathe and how to walk very beautifully. When you forget, you can ask the Buddha to come, and he will come, right away. You don't need to wait. I wrote these *gathas*, small practice poems, to remind us of this.

#### BREATHING GATHA 1

Let the Buddha breathe,  
Let the Buddha walk.  
I don't have to breathe,  
I don't have to walk.

We're lazy from time to time. We're human. We can allow ourselves to be lazy. This first gatha responds to my laziness; the Buddha is doing everything.

In the beginning, we distinguish between ourselves and the Buddha within ourselves. But as we let the Buddha walk and breathe for us, we can begin to enjoy the walking and breathing.

#### BREATHING GATHA 2

The Buddha is breathing,  
the Buddha is walking.  
I enjoy the breathing,  
I enjoy the walking.

### BREATHING GATHA 3

Buddha is the breathing,  
Buddha is the walking.  
I am the breathing,  
I am the walking.

In the beginning, we believe that there must be someone in order for the breathing to be possible. There must be someone in order for the walking to be possible. But in fact the walking, the breathing is enough. We don't need a walker; we don't need a breather. Think of the rain. We're used to saying, "the rain is falling," or "the wind is blowing." But if it's not falling, it's not the rain. And if it's not blowing, it's not the wind. It is the same with breathing and walking with the Buddha. We begin to touch the reality of no-self. There is only the breathing going on; there's only the walking going on.

### BREATHING GATHA 4

There is only the breathing,  
There is only the walking.  
There is no breather,  
There is no walker.

### BREATHING GATHA 5

Peace while breathing,  
Peace while walking.  
Peace is the breathing,  
Peace is the walking.

In traditional Chinese medicine, doctors often offer their patients something healing that is delicious to eat. And just by eating, you begin to heal in a pleasant and relaxed way. The same thing is true with the practice. While you practice sitting, you enjoy sitting. While you practice breathing, you enjoy the breathing. And if you are able to enjoy yourself, then healing and transformation will take place.

When you're able to stop and breathe and enjoy each moment, you're doing it for all your ancestors. Make a peaceful step. Smiling and touching the earth happily is very important. Your practice is not for yourself alone, it benefits the whole world.

We practice stopping and observing to arrive at liberation. We live as if we're in a dream. We're dragged into the past and pulled into the future. We're bound by our sorrows, agitation, and fear, and we hold on to our anger, which blocks communication. "Liberation" means transforming and transcending these conditions in order to be fully awake, at ease and in peace, joyfully and freshly. When we live in this way, our life is worth living, and we become a source of joy to our family and to everyone around us.

# **Sutra on the Full Awareness of Breathing**

## SECTION ONE

I HEARD THESE words of the Buddha one time when he was staying in Savatthi in the Eastern Park, with many well-known and accomplished disciples, including Sariputta, Mahamoggallana, Mahakassapa, Mahakaccayana, Mahakotthita, Mahakappina, Mahacunda, Anuruddha, Revata, and Ananda.<sup>1</sup> The senior *bhikkhus* in the community were diligently instructing *bhikkhus* who were new to the practice—some instructing ten students, some twenty, some thirty, and some forty; and in this way the *bhikkhus* new to the practice gradually made great progress.<sup>2</sup>

That night the moon was full, and the Pavarana Ceremony was held to mark the end of the rainy season retreat.<sup>3</sup> Lord Buddha, the Awakened One, was sitting in the open air, and his disciples were gathered around him. After looking over the assembly, he began to speak:

“O *bhikkhus*, I am pleased to observe the fruit you have attained in your practice. Yet I know you can make even more progress. What you have not yet attained, you can attain. What you have not yet realized, you can realize perfectly. [To encourage your efforts,] I will stay here until the next full moon day.”<sup>4</sup>

When they heard that the Lord Buddha was going to stay at Savatthi for another month, *bhikkhus* throughout the country began traveling there to study with him. The senior *bhikkhus* continued teaching the *bhikkhus* new to the practice even more ardently. Some were instructing ten *bhikkhus*, some twenty, some thirty, and some forty. With this help, the newer *bhikkhus* were able, little by little, to continue their progress in understanding.

When the next full moon day arrived, the Buddha, seated under the open sky, looked over the assembly of *bhikkhus* and began to speak:

“O *bhikkhus*, our community is pure and good. At its heart, it is without useless and boastful talk, and therefore it deserves to receive offerings and be considered a field of merit.<sup>5</sup> Such a community is rare, and any pilgrim who seeks it, no matter how far he must travel, will find it worthy.

“O *bhikkhus*, there are *bhikkhus* in this assembly who have realized the fruit of arahatship, destroyed every root of affliction, laid aside every burden, and attained right understanding and emancipation.<sup>6</sup> There are also *bhikkhus*

who have cut off the first five internal formations and realized the fruit of never returning to the cycle of birth and death.<sup>7</sup>

“There are those who have thrown off the first three internal formations and realized the fruit of returning once more.<sup>8</sup> They have cut off the roots of greed, hatred, and ignorance and will only need to return to the cycle of birth and death one more time. There are those who have thrown off the three internal formations and attained the fruit of stream enterer, coursing steadily to the Awakened State.<sup>9</sup> There are those who practice the Four Establishments of Mindfulness.<sup>10</sup> There are those who practice the Four Right Efforts and those who practice the Four Bases of Success.<sup>11</sup> There are those who practice the Five Faculties, those who practice the Five Powers, those who practice the Seven Factors of Awakening, and those who practice the Noble Eightfold Path.<sup>12</sup> There are those who practice loving kindness, those who practice compassion, those who practice joy, and those who practice equanimity.<sup>13</sup> There are those who practice the Nine Contemplations and those who practice the Observation of Impermanence. There are also bhikkhus who are already practicing Full Awareness of Breathing.”<sup>14</sup>

## SECTION TWO

“O bhikkhus, the method of being fully aware of breathing, if developed and practiced continuously, will have great rewards and bring great advantages. It will lead to success in practicing the Four Establishments of Mindfulness. If the method of the Four Establishments of Mindfulness is developed and practiced continuously, it will lead to success in the practice of the Seven Factors of Awakening. The Seven Factors of Awakening, if developed and practiced continuously, will give rise to understanding and liberation of the mind.

“What is the way to develop and practice continuously the method of Full Awareness of Breathing so that the practice will be rewarding and offer great benefit?

“It is like this, bhikkhus: the practitioner goes into the forest or to the foot of a tree, or to any deserted place, sits stably in the lotus position, holding his or her body quite straight, and practices like this: ‘Breathing in, I know I am breathing in. Breathing out, I know I am breathing out.’

1. ‘Breathing in a long breath, I know I am breathing in a long breath. Breathing out a long breath, I know I am breathing out a long breath.’
2. ‘Breathing in a short breath, I know I am breathing in a short breath. Breathing out a short breath, I know I am breathing out a short breath.’
3. ‘Breathing in, I am aware of my whole body. Breathing out, I am aware of my whole body.’ He or she practices like this.
4. ‘Breathing in, I calm my whole body. Breathing out, I calm my whole body.’ He or she practices like this.
5. ‘Breathing in, I feel joyful. Breathing out, I feel joyful.’<sup>15</sup> He or she practices like this.
6. ‘Breathing in, I feel happy. Breathing out, I feel happy.’ He or she practices like this.
7. ‘Breathing in, I am aware of my mental formations. Breathing out, I am aware of my mental formations.’ He or she practices like this.
8. ‘Breathing in, I calm my mental formations. Breathing out, I calm my mental formations.’ He or she practices like this.
9. ‘Breathing in, I am aware of my mind. Breathing out, I am aware of my mind.’ He or she practices like this.
10. ‘Breathing in, I make my mind happy. Breathing out, I make my

mind happy.’ He or she practices like this.

11. ‘Breathing in, I concentrate my mind. Breathing out, I concentrate my mind.’ He or she practices like this.

12. ‘Breathing in, I liberate my mind. Breathing out, I liberate my mind.’ He or she practices like this.

13. ‘Breathing in, I observe the impermanent nature of all dharmas.

Breathing out, I observe the impermanent nature of all dharmas.’<sup>16</sup>

He or she practices like this.

14. ‘Breathing in, I observe the disappearance of desire. Breathing out, I

observe the disappearance of desire.’<sup>17</sup> He or she practices like this.

15. ‘Breathing in, I observe cessation. Breathing out, I observe

cessation.’<sup>18</sup> He or she practices like this.

16. ‘Breathing in, I observe letting go. Breathing out, I observe letting

go.’<sup>19</sup> He or she practices like this.

“The Full Awareness of Breathing, if developed and practiced continuously according to these instructions, will be rewarding and of great benefit.”



## SECTION THREE

“In what way does one develop and continuously practice the Full Awareness of Breathing in order to succeed in the practice of the Four Establishments of Mindfulness?”

“When the practitioner breathes in or out a long or a short breath, aware of his breath or his whole body, or aware that he is making his whole body calm and at peace, he abides peacefully in the observation of the body in the body, persevering, fully awake, clearly understanding his state, gone beyond all attachment and aversion to this life. These exercises of breathing with Full Awareness belong to the first Establishment of Mindfulness, the body.

“When the practitioner breathes in or out, aware of joy or happiness, aware of the mental formations, or to make the mental formations peaceful, he abides peacefully in the observation of the feelings in the feelings, persevering, fully awake, clearly understanding his state, gone beyond all attachment and aversion to this life. These exercises of breathing with Full Awareness belong to the second Establishment of Mindfulness, the feelings.

“When the practitioner breathes in or out with the awareness of the mind or to make the mind happy, to collect the mind in concentration, or to free and liberate the mind, he abides peacefully in the observation of the mind in the mind, persevering, fully awake, clearly understanding his state, gone beyond all attachment and aversion to this life. These exercises of breathing with Full Awareness belong to the third Establishment of Mindfulness, the mind. Without Full Awareness of Breathing, there can be no development of meditative stability and understanding.

“When the practitioner breathes in or breathes out and contemplates the essential impermanence or the essential disappearance of desire or cessation or letting go, he abides peacefully in the observations of the objects of mind in the objects of mind, persevering, fully awake, clearly understanding his state, gone beyond all attachment and aversion to this life. These exercises of breathing with Full Awareness belong to the fourth Establishment of Mindfulness, the objects of mind.

“The practice of Full Awareness of Breathing, if developed and practiced continuously, will lead to perfect accomplishment of the Four Establishments of Mindfulness.”

## SECTION FOUR

“Moreover, if they are developed and continuously practiced, the Four Establishments of Mindfulness will lead to perfect abiding in the Seven Factors of Awakening. How is this so?

“When the practitioner can maintain, without distraction, the practice of observing the body in the body, the feelings in the feelings, the mind in the mind, and the objects of mind in the objects of mind, persevering, fully awake, clearly understanding his state, gone beyond all attachment and aversion to this life, with unwavering, steadfast, imperturbable meditative stability, he will attain the first Factor of Awakening, namely mindfulness. When this factor is developed, it will come to perfection.

“When the practitioner can abide in meditative stability without being distracted and can investigate every dharma, every object of mind that arises, then the second Factor of Awakening will be born and developed in him, the factor of investigating dharmas. When this factor is developed, it will come to perfection.

“When the practitioner can observe and investigate every dharma in a sustained, persevering, and steadfast way, without being distracted, the third Factor of Awakening will be born and developed in him, the factor of energy. When this factor is developed, it will come to perfection.

“When the practitioner has reached a stable, imperturbable abiding in the stream of practice, the fourth Factor of Awakening will be born and developed in him, the factor of joy.<sup>20</sup> When this factor is developed, it will come to perfection.

“When the practitioner can abide undistractedly in the state of joy, he will feel his body and mind light and at peace. At this point the fifth Factor of Awakening will be born and developed, the factor of ease. When this factor is developed, it will come to perfection.

“When both body and mind are at ease, the practitioner can easily enter into concentration. At this point the sixth Factor of Awakening will be born and developed in him, the factor of concentration. When this factor is developed, it will come to perfection.

“When the practitioner is abiding in concentration with deep calm, he will cease discriminating and comparing.<sup>21</sup> At this point the seventh factor of

Awakening is released, born, and developed in him, the factor of letting go.<sup>[22](#)</sup>  
When this factor is developed, it will come to perfection.

“This is how the Four Establishments of Mindfulness, if developed and practiced continuously, will lead to perfect abiding in the Seven Factors of Awakening.”

## **SECTION FIVE**

“How will the Seven Factors of Awakening, if developed and practiced continuously, lead to the perfect accomplishment of true understanding and complete liberation?”

“If the practitioner follows the path of the Seven Factors of Awakening, living in quiet seclusion, observing and contemplating the disappearance of desire, he will develop the capacity of letting go. This will be a result of following the path of the Seven Factors of Awakening and will lead to the perfect accomplishment of true understanding and complete liberation.”

## SECTION SIX

This is what the Lord, the Awakened One, said; and everyone in the assembly felt gratitude and delight at having heard his teachings.

—*Majjhima Nikaya, Sutta No. 118, translated from the Pali*

# CHAPTER ONE

## Exploring the Sutra

THE SUTRA on the Full Awareness of Breathing can be divided into six sections.

The first part of the sutra describes the circumstances under which the Buddha delivered this Dharma talk. We are told about the community of his disciples during the time he was staying at the Eastern Park, a large park with many trees located right outside the city of Savatthi. The number of monks staying with the Buddha at that time may have been more than four hundred. The senior monks each taught ten, twenty, thirty, or forty newer monks.

Every morning after sitting in meditation, the monks went into the city together, bowls in hand, to beg for food. Before midday, when the sun was directly overhead, they returned to their retreat center to eat. From time to time, they would all be invited to eat at the king's palace or at the home of a wealthy patron, someone whose home was large enough to accommodate so many monks. Poorer households would wait for the bhikkhus to walk by so they too could make offerings. There were also some people who would bring food to the park to offer to the community.

The Buddha and his disciples ate only one meal a day, before noon. There was no cooking or baking at the retreat center itself. The monks had no responsibility for performing funerals or praying for sick or deceased laypersons, as is the case today in many Buddhist countries. Instead they offered a brief lecture to their sponsors either before or after eating the meal offered by them. They were able to speak clearly and powerfully, because they were living an integrated life, putting their study into practice.

While the sun was still up, the Buddha would teach his disciples under a shady grove of trees. Sometimes, he would also give a Dharma talk in the evening if the moon was bright enough, as was the case with this sutra. The Buddha had previously explained aspects of the practice of the Full Awareness of Breathing a number of times (there were many disciples already practicing it), but the evening he delivered this sutra was probably the first time he taught the entire method completely. He probably chose this occasion because there were so many bhikkhus from all over the country present,

including a number of new disciples.

That year the retreat of the Buddha and his disciples in the Eastern Park was extended an additional month, to four months, so there would be a chance for disciples from all over the country to be together in one place. Many monks were able to be there because they had completed their rainy season retreat one month earlier than the monks staying at the Eastern Park. There may have been as many as one thousand bhikkhus present the evening the Lord Buddha delivered the Sutra on the Full Awareness of Breathing.

## SECTION TWO: THE SIXTEEN EXERCISES

The second section is the heart of the sutra. This section elaborates the sixteen methods of fully aware breathing in connection with the Four Establishments of Mindfulness.

### *The Four Preliminary Exercises*

*“Breathing in, I know I am breathing in. Breathing out, I know I am breathing out.”*

1. *“Breathing in a long breath, I know I am breathing in a long breath. Breathing out a long breath, I know I am breathing out a long breath.”*
2. *“Breathing in a short breath, I know I am breathing in a short breath. Breathing out a short breath, I know I am breathing out a short breath.”*
3. *“Breathing in, I am aware of my whole body. Breathing out, I am aware of my whole body.”*
4. *“Breathing in, I calm my whole body. Breathing out, I calm my whole body.”*

The first four exercises of fully aware breathing help us return to our body in order to look deeply at it and care for it. In our daily lives, it is important that we learn to create harmony and ease in our body and to reunite body and mind. The Buddha never taught us to mistreat or oppress our bodies.

In exercises one and two, the object of awareness is our breath itself. Our mind is the subject, and our breathing is the object. Our breath may be short, long, heavy, or light. Practicing awareness in this way, we see that our breathing affects our mind and our mind affects our breathing. Our mind and our breath become one. We also see that breathing is an aspect of the body and that awareness of breathing is also awareness of the body.

In the third exercise, the breath is connected with our whole body, not just a part of it. Awareness of the breathing is, at the same time, awareness of our entire body. Our mind, our breath, and our whole body are one.

In the fourth breathing exercise, our body’s functions begin to calm down. Calming the breath is accompanied by calming the body and the mind. Our mind, our breathing, and our body are calmed down, equally.



In these four breathing exercises, we can realize the oneness of body and mind. Breathing is an excellent tool for establishing calmness and evenness.

### *The Second Four Exercises*

5. *“Breathing in, I feel joyful. Breathing out, I feel joyful.”*
6. *“Breathing in, I feel happy. Breathing out, I feel happy.”*
7. *“Breathing in, I am aware of my mental formations. Breathing out, I am aware of my mental formations.”*
8. *“Breathing in, I calm my mental formations. Breathing out, I calm my mental formations.”*

The second four exercises of fully aware breathing help us return to our feelings in order to develop joy and happiness and transform suffering. Our feelings are us. If we do not look after them, who will do it for us? Every day, we have painful feelings, and we need to learn how to look after them. Our teachers and friends can help us to a certain extent, but we have to do the work. Our body and our feelings are our territory, and we are the king or queen responsible for that territory.

Practicing the fifth exercise, we touch pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feelings. As a result of conscious breathing and calming the body (the fourth method), joy, a pleasant feeling, arises.

In the sixth exercise, joy is transformed into peace and happiness, and we are fully aware of it. The seventh and eighth exercises bring our attention to all feelings that arise, whether produced by the body (*kayasamskara*) or the mind (*cittasamskara*). The mind's functions include feelings and perceptions. When we are aware of every bodily and every mental action, we are aware of every feeling.

The eighth exercise calms the body and mind and makes them peaceful. At this point, we can perfectly and completely unify body, mind, feelings, and breath.

### *The Third Four Exercises*

9. *“Breathing in, I am aware of my mind. Breathing out, I am aware of my mind.”*
10. *“Breathing in, I make my mind happy. Breathing out, I make my mind happy.”*
11. *“Breathing in, I concentrate my mind. Breathing out, I concentrate my mind.”*

12. *“Breathing in, I liberate my mind. Breathing out, I liberate my mind.”*

The third group of four exercises of fully aware breathing has to do with our mind, which means the activities of our mind. Buddhist psychology in the Vijñānavada tradition lists fifty-one mental functions (cittasamskara). These exercises help us deal with whatever mental formations are present, cultivating mental formations that are beneficial and being in touch with and transforming mental formations that are not beneficial. Mental formations are part of our territory, also. There are seeds buried deep in our consciousness that we do not touch often enough, seeds of love, understanding, compassion, joy, knowing right from wrong, the ability to listen to others, nonviolence, and the willingness to overcome ignorance, aversion, and attachment. Through the practice of mindfulness, we learn to identify these traits in us and nurture them, with the help of teachers and spiritual friends, until they grow into beautiful flowers. When we survey our territory, we also find destructive traits, such as anger, despair, suspicion, pride, and other mental formations that cause us suffering. Because we do not like to look at these negative traits, we do not want to come back to ourselves. But with the aid of the practice of mindful breathing, we learn to take full responsibility for restoring our territory and taking good care of it.

The tenth exercise makes our mind happy, because it is easier for the mind to become concentrated when it is in a peaceful, happy state than when it is filled with sorrow or anxiety. We are aware that we have the opportunity to practice meditation and that there is no moment as important as the present one. Calmly abiding in the present moment, immense joy arises each time we touch in ourselves the seeds of faith, compassion, goodness, equanimity, liberty, and so on. These seeds are buried deep in our consciousness, and we need only to touch them and water them with conscious breathing for them to manifest.

Using the mind to observe the mind, the eleventh exercise brings us to deep concentration. Mind is the breath. Mind is the oneness of the subject that illumines and the object that is illuminated. Mind is peace and happiness. Mind is the field of illumination and the strength of concentration. All mental formations that manifest in the present moment can become objects of our concentration.

The twelfth exercise can release the mind to freedom, if it is still bound. Mind is bound either because of the past or the future, or because of other latent desires or anger. With clear observation, we can locate the knots that

are binding us, making it impossible for our mind to be free and at peace. We loosen these knots and untie the ropes that bind our mind. Full Awareness of Breathing shines into the mind the light of the observation that can illumine and set the mind free. Looking deeply at the nature of mental formations such as fear, anger, anxiety, and so on brings about the understanding that will liberate us.

### *The Four Final Exercises*

13. *“Breathing in, I observe the impermanent nature of all dharmas. Breathing out, I observe the impermanent nature of all dharmas.”*
14. *“Breathing in, I observe the disappearance of desire. Breathing out, I observe the disappearance of desire.”*
15. *“Breathing in, I observe cessation. Breathing out, I observe cessation.”*
16. *“Breathing in, I observe letting go. Breathing out, I observe letting go.”*

Mind cannot be separated from its object. Mind is consciousness, feeling, attachment, aversion, and so on. Consciousness must always be conscious of something. Feeling is always feeling something. Loving and hating are always loving and hating something. This “something” is the object of the mind. Mind cannot arise if there is no object. Mind cannot exist if the object of mind does not exist. The mind is, at one and the same time, the subject of consciousness and the object of consciousness. All physiological phenomena, such as the breath, the nervous system, and the sense organs; all psychological phenomena, such as feelings, thoughts, and consciousness; and all physical phenomena, such as the earth, water, grass, trees, mountains, and rivers, are objects of mind, and therefore all are mind. All of them can be called “dharmas.”

The thirteenth breathing exercise sheds light on the ever-changing, impermanent nature of all that exists—the physiological, the psychological, and the physical. Breathing itself is also impermanent. The insight into impermanence is very important because it opens the way for us to see the interrelated, interconditioned nature as well as the selfless nature of all that exists. Nothing has a separate, independent self.

The fourteenth exercise allows us to recognize the true nature of our desire, to see that every dharma is already in the process of disintegrating, so that we are no longer possessed by the idea of holding on to any dharma as an object

of desire and as a separate entity, even the physiological and psychological elements in ourselves.

The fifteenth exercise allows us to arrive at the awareness of a great joy, the joy of emancipation and the cessation of illusion, by freeing us from the intention to grasp any notion.

The sixteenth exercise illuminates for us what it is to let go of ourselves, to give up all the burdens of our ignorance and our grasping. To be able to let go is already to have arrived at liberation.

These sixteen exercises can be studied and practiced intelligently. Although the first four exercises help our concentration very much, and every time we practice it is helpful to do these, it is not always necessary to practice the sixteen exercises in sequence. For example, you might like to practice only the fourteenth exercise for several days or months.

Although these exercises are presented very simply, their effectiveness is immeasurable. Depending on our experience, we can enter them deeply or superficially. The Lord Buddha did not intend to generate new theories or to confuse the minds of those new to the practice, so he used simple terms, like impermanence, disappearance of desire, cessation, and letting go. In fact, the deeper meaning of the term impermanence also includes the concepts of nonself, emptiness, interbeing, signlessness (*alakshana*), and aimlessness (*apranihita*). That is why it is so important to observe deeply that which lights our path and leads to emancipation.

## SECTION THREE: THE FOUR ESTABLISHMENTS OF MINDFULNESS

After explaining the sixteen methods of conscious breathing, the Buddha speaks about the Four Establishments of Mindfulness and the Seven Factors of Awakening. Everything that exists can be placed into one of the Four Establishments of Mindfulness—the body, the feelings, the mind, and the objects of the mind. Another way of saying “objects of mind” is “all dharmas,” which means “everything that is.” Therefore, all Four Establishments of Mindfulness are objects of the mind. In this sutra, we practice full awareness of the Four Establishments through conscious breathing. For a full understanding of the Four Establishments of Mindfulness, read the Satipatthana Sutta.[23](#)

The phrases “observing the body in the body,” “observing the feelings in the feelings,” “observing the mind in the mind,” and “observing the objects of mind in the objects of mind,” appear in the third section of the sutra. The key to “observation meditation” is that the subject of observation and the object of observation not be regarded as separate. A scientist might try to separate herself from the object she is observing and measuring, but students of meditation have to remove the boundary between subject and object. When we observe something, we *are* that thing. “Nonduality” is the key word. “Observing the body in the body” means that in the process of observing, we do not stand outside our own body as if we are an independent observer, but we identify ourselves one hundred percent with the object being observed. This is the only path that can lead us to the penetration and direct experience of reality. In “observation meditation,” the body and mind are one entity, and the subject and object of meditation are one entity also. There is no sword of discrimination that slices reality into many parts. The meditator is a fully engaged participant, not a separate observer.

Observation meditation is a lucid awareness of what is going on in the Four Establishments: body, feelings, mind, and all dharmas, “persevering, fully awake, clearly understanding his state, gone beyond all attachment and aversion to this life.” “Life” means all that exists. Stubbornly clinging to all that exists or resisting and rejecting it all both lack the lucidity of an awakened mind. To succeed in the work of observation, we must go beyond both attachment and aversion.

The Four Establishments of Mindfulness are also called the Four Foundations of Mindfulness because they are at the base of our ability to be present in the moment. The first foundation of our being is our body. The practice of mindful breathing brings us back home to our body, to reconcile ourselves with our body, to take care of our body, to look deeply into our body, to understand our body, and to allow transformation and healing to take place.

The second foundation of our being is our feelings. Very often, we leave our feelings unattended. Mindful breathing helps us go back to our feelings to recognize them, reconcile ourselves with them, and look deeply into their nature so that understanding is possible. By practicing mindful breathing, we take good care of our feelings; we can calm them, transform them, and heal them. Our feelings are very much interconnected with our body. We cannot take our feelings out of our body, and we cannot take our body out of our feelings. They inter-are.

The third foundation of our being is our mental formations. “Formation” means a thing that is conditioned by different kinds of elements. A flower is a physical formation. It is made of several elements. When these elements come together, a flower manifests itself. Among its elements we can see the sunshine. If we touch the being of a flower deeply, we touch the sunshine. We know that we cannot take the sunshine out of a flower. If we did, the flower would collapse. There would be no flower. The flower and the sunshine inter-are. When we touch a flower deeply, we also touch a cloud. There is a cloud in the heart of a flower, and we cannot take the cloud out of the flower. The cloud and the flower inter-are. If we continue to look deeply, we can see the earth, the minerals, the air, and everything in a flower. All these elements have come together to bring about the formation called “flower.” All formations are impermanent. When one of the conditions is no longer sufficient, the formation dissolves. There is no flower.

There are other kinds of formations that are not physical, like fear. Fear is a mental formation; it is made of several elements, including the element of ignorance. Despair, anguish, attachment, love, and mindfulness are all mental formations. In the teaching of my tradition, there are fifty-one categories of mental formations. Mindful breathing brings us close to our mental formations as they manifest within ourselves. Sometimes fear manifests, and our mindful breathing brings us back to our fear so that we can embrace it. We look deeply into the nature of our fear to reconcile ourselves with it. If we do well, we can calm our fear, look deeply into it, and discover its true nature. Insight into our fear helps us transform it.

This is true with all mental formations—such as anger, despair, agitation, and restlessness. Sometimes restlessness is present as a form of energy, and it prevents us from being peaceful. It prevents well-being. When restlessness manifests itself within us, we can practice mindful breathing in order to come back to it, to hold it mindfully, tenderly, and lovingly. The practice consists of two parts: the first part is calming, the second part is looking deeply. We calm down our mental formation, look deeply into it, and see its deep roots.

As soon as you use the energy of mindfulness to hold your mental formation, there is a tendency in that mental formation to calm down. As you continue holding your mental formation, you are capable of looking into it, and you begin to have the insight you need regarding what kinds of conditions have brought that mental formation to you. This is the practice of looking deeply, which we call *vipassana* in Pali, or *vipashyana* in Sanskrit.

The fourth foundation of our being is our perception. Most of our suffering comes from our wrong perceptions. We do not have correct insight about the nature of reality. Mindful breathing brings us back to ourselves to investigate the nature of our perceptions. Looking deeply into the nature of our perceptions, we discover the reasons why we suffer, or why our fear or despair are born. If we know how to practice looking deeply into the nature of our perceptions, the insight we get liberates us from our suffering, grief, and fear. We practice looking deeply into the true nature of reality, the true nature of a flower, the true nature of our body, of our feelings, or of our mental formations. Form, feelings, and mental formations are all the objects of our perceptions.

We cannot take form out of feelings nor take feelings out of form. The same is true of mental formations and perceptions. These four foundations of our being—form, feelings, mental formations, and perceptions—inter-are. We cannot take one out of the other three. If we know the art of looking deeply, we will discover reality as it truly is. By doing so, we remove all errors and wrong perceptions. This is liberation through understanding, salvation by knowledge. If we speak in terms of grace, grace is understood here as wisdom, as knowledge, as understanding. We know that sometimes we suffer because of our ignorance, jealousy, and anger. At the base of our jealousy and anger is ignorance, because we don't understand why we suffer. The moment we begin to understand our jealousy, our anger begins to dissolve. That is why understanding is the liberating factor, and the aim of the practice of meditation is to get this liberating insight. That is why our perceptions are so important. We have to go back to them and inquire about their nature.

## **SECTION FOUR: THE SEVEN FACTORS OF AWAKENING**

In the fourth section of the sutra, the Buddha discusses the arising, growth, and attainment of the Seven Factors of Awakening, through abiding in them in conjunction with conscious breathing.

[1] Full attention is the main Factor of Awakening. Full attention is awareness, being fully awake. If full attention is developed and maintained, the practice of observation to shed light on and see clearly all that exists will meet with success. [2] The work of observation to shed light on the object of our attention and see clearly all that exists is investigation of dharmas. [3] Energy is perseverance and diligence. [4-5] Joy and ease are wonderful feelings nourished by energy. [6] Concentration gives rise to understanding. When we have understanding, we can go beyond all comparing, measuring, discriminating, and reacting with attachment and aversion. [7] Going beyond is letting go. Those who arrive at letting go will have the bud of a half smile, which proves compassion as well as understanding.



## **SECTION FIVE: EMANCIPATION**

In this very short section, the Buddha reminds us that the Seven Factors of Awakening, if practiced diligently, lead to true understanding and emancipation.

## **SECTION SIX: CONCLUSION**

The sixth section is the concluding sentence of the sutra. This sentence is used at the end of every sutra.

### **THE SIXTEEN WAYS OF BREATHING**

#### Form

1. in/out
2. long/short
3. experiencing body
4. calming body

#### Feelings

5. experiencing joy
6. experiencing bliss
7. experiencing mental formations
8. calming mental formations

#### Mental Formations

9. experiencing mind
10. gladdening mind
11. concentrating mind
12. liberating mind

#### Perceptions

13. contemplating impermanence
14. contemplating non-craving
15. contemplating nirvana
16. contemplating letting go

# CHAPTER TWO

## Seven Ways to Practice

HERE ARE seven different ways to focus on putting the Sutra on the Full Awareness of Breathing into practice. Please use whatever focus suits you in your present situation and practice those exercises first. Although the sixteen exercises of practicing full awareness breathing are intimately connected to one another, the order in which they're given in the sutra is not necessarily a progression from easy to difficult. Every exercise is as wonderful as every other, as easy and as difficult as every other one. We can, however, say that the preliminary instructions place greater importance on "stopping," and the later ones place more importance on "looking deeply," although, of course, stopping and looking deeply cannot exist separately from one another. If there is stopping, looking deeply is already present, more or less; and if there is looking deeply, there is a natural stopping.

The subjects for full awareness suggested below can be divided into seven categories: Following the Breath in Daily Life, Awareness of the Body, Realizing the Unity of Body and Mind, Nourishing Ourselves with Joy and Happiness, Observing Feelings, Caring for and Liberating the Mind, and Looking Deeply in Order to Shed Light on the True Nature of All Dharmas.

Laypersons as well as monks and nuns must know how to practice both the first subject (following the breath in daily life) and the fourth (nourishing ourselves with the joy of meditation). Every time we practice sitting meditation, we should always begin with these two subjects. Only after that should we go into the other subjects. Every time we notice our state of mind becoming agitated, dispersed, or ill at ease, we should practice the fifth subject (observing in order to shine light on our feelings). The seventh subject (seeing things as they truly are) is the door that opens onto liberation from birth and death, and all those of great understanding have to pass through this door. This subject is the greatest gift the Buddha has given us. The first six subjects all involve stopping as well as looking deeply, but the seventh emphasizes looking deeply. Only after we have the capacity to concentrate our mind with great stability should we embark on this subject.

## **SUBJECT ONE: FOLLOWING THE BREATH IN DAILY LIFE**

*“Breathing in, I know I am breathing in. Breathing out, I know I am breathing out.”*

1. *“Breathing in a long breath, I know I am breathing in a long breath. Breathing out a long breath, I know I am breathing out a long breath.”*
2. *“Breathing in a short breath, I know I am breathing in a short breath. Breathing out a short breath, I know I am breathing out a short breath.”*

Most of us don't live in forests or in monasteries. In our daily lives, we drive cars, wait for buses, work in offices and factories, talk on the telephone, clean our houses, cook meals, wash clothes, and so on. Therefore, it's important that we learn to practice full awareness of breathing in our daily lives. Usually, when we perform these tasks, our thoughts wander and our joy, sorrow, anger, and unease follow close behind. Although we're alive, we're not able to bring our minds into the present moment, and we live in forgetfulness.

We can begin to enter the present moment by becoming aware of our breath. Breathing in and breathing out, we know we are breathing in and out, and we can smile to affirm that we are in control of ourselves. Through Awareness of Breathing, we can be awake in, and to, the present moment. Being attentive, we already establish “stopping” and concentrating the mind. Full Awareness of our Breathing helps our mind stop wandering in confused, never ending thoughts.

Most of our daily activities can be accomplished while following our breath according to the exercises in the sutra. When our work demands special attentiveness to avoid confusion or an accident, we can unite Full Awareness of Breathing with the task itself. For example, when we are carrying a pot of boiling water or doing electrical repairs, we can be aware of every movement of our hands, and we can nourish this awareness by means of our breath: “Breathing in, I am aware my hands are carrying a pot of boiling water.” “Breathing out, I am aware that my right hand is holding an electrical wire.” “Breathing in, I am aware that I am passing another car.” “Breathing out, I know that the situation is under control.” We can practice like this.

It is not enough to combine Awareness of Breathing only with tasks that require so much attention. We must also combine Full Awareness of our

Breathing with every movement of our body: “Breathing in, I am sitting down.” “Breathing out, I am wiping the table.” “Breathing in, I smile to myself.” “Breathing out, I light the stove.” Stopping the random progression of thoughts and no longer living in forgetfulness are giant steps forward in our meditation practice. We can realize this by following our breath and combining it with awareness of each daily activity.

There are people who have no peace or joy because they cannot stop their unnecessary thinking. They are forced to take sedatives to fall asleep, but even in their dreams, they continue to feel fears, anxieties, and unease. Thinking too much can give us headaches, and our spiritual power will diminish. By following our breath and combining conscious breathing with our daily activities, we can cut across the stream of disturbing thoughts and light the lamp of awakening. Full Awareness of an out-breath and an in-breath is something wonderful that anyone can practice. Combining Full Awareness of Breathing with full awareness of the movements of our body during daily activities—walking, standing, lying, sitting, working—is a basic practice to cultivate concentration and live in an awakened state.

During the first few minutes of sitting meditation, you can use this method to harmonize your breathing, and if it seems necessary, you can continue following your breath with full awareness throughout the entire period. We simply recognize when we are breathing in and when we are breathing out. We can abbreviate “Breathing in, I know I am breathing in. Breathing out, I know I am breathing out,” to “In, Out.” We say these two words silently as we breathe in and out to help our concentration.

In this teaching, we consider our breath as part of our body. Our breathing is a physical formation. It is the door through which we go home to ourselves and reconcile with ourselves. The object of our mindfulness is our in-breath and out-breath, nothing else. We identify our in-breath as our in-breath and our out-breath as our out-breath. “In” is no longer a word; it is the reality of our in-breath, and all our thinking stops.

We don’t suppress our thinking or make an effort to stop it. If we really enjoy our in-breath one hundred percent, then thinking suddenly stops. Sometimes we try to force ourselves to be mindful. This isn’t good. Mindfulness is very enjoyable. The key is to make it interesting, pleasant. We breathe so that our in-breath and out-breath are pleasant, so that we are awake and mindful and our concentration is strong. If concentration is here, then insight will be born. Mindfulness, concentration, and insight give birth to one another. Mindfulness carries the energy of concentration within itself, and

concentration carries the energy of insight within itself.

During sitting meditation, you can sit and enjoy your in-breath and out-breath and nothing else. Make your in-breath mindful and genuine. This is already resting and healing. Sometimes you may like to lie down and enjoy your in-breath and out-breath. When you sit, sit in such a way that your body can rest. You are erect with your head and spinal column forming a straight line, yet your muscles are completely relaxed. Sit in the lotus or half-lotus position, or in a position that's comfortable for you, keeping your back straight. You can sit with or without a cushion. The cushion may be thick or thin; you need to find a cushion that suits your physical condition. If you sit in a chair, your back should be straight and your feet flat on the floor. Find a way of sitting that allows you to sit for at least twenty minutes without feeling tired or stiff. As soon as you sit down, begin to practice mindful breathing, paying attention to your breath. Then pay attention to your sitting position. Relax the muscles in your face—there are about three hundred muscles in your face. Every time you get angry, worried, or afraid, these muscles become tense. Other people can see the tension in your face. If you breathe in mindfully and become aware of your face, and breathe out mindfully and smile lightly, you relax the hundreds of muscles in your face. Then you move down to your shoulders and also let go. Don't try hard to practice. If you struggle or make an effort, you can't relax. Very soon you'll feel tension in your shoulder muscles, and you may get a headache.

When you sit and watch television, you don't make any effort. That's why you can sit there for a long time. When you sit in meditation, if you struggle, you won't be able to sit for very long. Please imitate the way you sit in your living room. Effortlessness is the key to success. Don't fight. Don't try hard. Just allow yourself to sit. This relaxing way of sitting is also resting. Allow your body to rest.

When you pour fresh juice into a glass and let it stand for fifteen minutes, all the pulp sinks down to the bottom of the glass. If you allow your body to sit in a relaxed, peaceful way, it calms your body and your mind. Sitting like this allows you to enjoy your in-breath and out-breath, to enjoy being alive, to enjoy sitting here. To enjoy your in-breath and out-breath is a miracle, the miracle of being alive. Just sit there and be yourself; don't try to become someone else. Your thinking will stop. You will touch the wonders of life that are available in the here and the now. The period of sitting is time worth living.

*“Breathing in a long breath, I know I am breathing in a long breath.*

*Breathing out a long breath, I know I am breathing out a long breath.”*

*“Breathing in a short breath, I know I am breathing in a short breath. Breathing out a short breath, I know I am breathing out a short breath.”*

Our breath is usually short at first, but as we practice, our breath slows down and deepens. To practice these two exercises is to know whether our breath is short or long. We do not purposefully make our breath long. We do not say, “I will breathe in a long breath.” Strictly speaking, we should say, “Breathing in, I know I am breathing in a long (or a short) breath.”

In the version of the Anapananusmriti Sutra from the Chinese canon that is in Appendix One, the first of the sixteen breathing exercises is, “Breathing in, I know I am breathing in. Breathing out, I know I am breathing out.” The second is, “Breathing in a long breath or a short breath, I know whether it is a long breath or a short breath. Breathing out a long breath or a short breath, I know whether it is a long breath or a short breath.” This version is more in accord with the instructions given here, that we should just recognize the length of our breath.

As we continue to follow our breathing, we recognize its quality, “I know I am breathing in, and I know it is a short breath.” If it is short, let it be short. It is not important to make it long. This is called “mere recognition.” It is the same when we have a painful feeling. The first thing to do is to recognize it. If your breathing is fast, recognize that it is fast. If it is slow, recognize that it is slow. If it is uneven, recognize that it is uneven. If it is even, recognize that it is even. When we begin, our breathing may be uneven, but after a few minutes of practice, it will become even and it will bring us peace and joy. We do not force our breathing to be deep or slow. It is our continued practice that makes our breathing become deep or slow, quite naturally. When we recognize a deep, slow breath, we can say “Deep” as we breathe in, and “Slow ” as we breathe out. With the first two exercises, the nourishment of the joy of meditation is already present, and once we have it, we can begin to share it with our family and friends. We do not have to wait until we are a Dharma teacher.

Sometimes we think and worry nonstop. It is like having a cassette tape continually turning in our mind. When we leave a television set on for a long time, it becomes hot. Our head also becomes hot as a result of our thinking.

Because we can't stop, we may not sleep well. Even if we take a sleeping pill, we continue to run, think, and worry in our dreams. The alternative medicine is mindful breathing. If we practice mindful breathing for five minutes, allowing our body to rest, then we can stop thinking for that time. The words "in" and "out" aren't thinking, aren't concepts. They're a guide for mindfulness of breathing. When we think too much, the quality of our being is reduced. If we can stop thinking, we increase the quality of our being. There is more peace, relaxation, and rest.

When we look into the first two exercises, we see that when we practice the first exercise well, we're also practicing the second one well. "Breathing in, I know I'm breathing in." We're aware throughout our in-breath. Practicing with awareness, we're already doing the second exercise. And when we practice the second exercise well, we're also doing the first exercise. As we go along, we will see the nature of interbeing of all sixteen exercises. We can train ourselves to see the nature of interbeing in everything, including one breathing exercise.

## **SUBJECT TWO: AWARENESS OF THE BODY**

3. *"Breathing in, I am aware of my whole body. Breathing out, I am aware of my whole body."*

With this second subject, we embrace our body with mindfulness rather than just embracing our breathing, as in the first two exercises. We recognize the presence of our body and we "return home" to be one with it. Breathing is the vehicle that brings us home, to our body. If we do not come back to our home and care for it, who will? When we come home to it, our body breathes a sigh of relief and says, "She has come back at last!" We do not blame our body, accusing it of being a nuisance because we have a headache or an upset stomach. We embrace our wounded body, care for it, and heal it with right mindfulness.

In the Anapanasati Sutta, the Buddha teaches four exercises in connection with the body: [1] Breathing. [2] Recognizing the body, calming the body. [3] Recognizing the positions of the body. When standing, sitting, walking, or lying down, you know you are standing, sitting, walking, or lying down. [4] Recognizing actions of the body: bending down, drinking tea, lifting up a cup of tea. If your actions are hurried and forgetful, you recognize that, and once you do, your hurriedness and forgetfulness will disappear.



During the practice of meditation, body and mind become unified. In the sitting, lying, standing, or walking position, we practice awareness of our body. We know that the Buddha taught walking meditation. Today, when we practice walking meditation, we can use ideas from the Anapanasati Sutta to help us succeed in our walking. If we are walking slowly, as in the meditation hall, we can take one step and say “In” silently. It means, “Breathing in, I know I am breathing in.” For as long as the in-breath lasts, we continue stepping with our left foot. As soon as the out-breath begins, we begin stepping with our right foot and say the word “Out” silently, which means, “Breathing out, I know I am breathing out.” We just take a step and know we are breathing in, and we take a step and know we are breathing out. That is all we need to do. There is nothing else besides that. If we put our whole body and mind into one step, we are successful in walking meditation. After practicing “In, Out” four or five times, our breath will become deeper and slower quite naturally. We can recognize that and say “Deep” as we breathe in and “Slow” as we breathe out. When we practice walking meditation outdoors, rather than taking one step with each breath, we take two or three steps for every breath. For every step, we say “In,” so if we are taking three steps with each in-breath, we say “In, in, in.” And if we take three steps with each out-breath, we say “Out, out, out.” And then, “Deep, deep, deep. Slow, slow, slow.”

Sometimes we identify ourselves with our body. Sometimes we believe our body is a stranger to us, and we may hate our body. These attitudes show that we are alienated from our own body. So we have to go home to our body and reconcile with it. Our breathing is part of our body. Our breath is the door through which we can go back to our body, our perceptions, and so on. With the energy of mindfulness, we embrace our breathing, our in-breath and our out-breath. We become one with our in-breath and out-breath. As our practice continues, our in-breath and out-breath become deeper, more harmonious, more peaceful.

Then we go a bit deeper and embrace our body and reconcile ourselves with our body. We might do this in a sitting position or lying down. It is very important to go back to our body and show our concern, attention, and love. Our body might be suffering. It might have been abandoned for a long time. This is the beginning of the practice of love. We become aware of our body; we are determined to take good care of our body. And our body will feel much better when we’re able to do so.

*Sabbakaya* means the whole body. During our in-breath we become aware of our body as a whole. We embrace our body in its entirety. The object of our

mindfulness is no longer our in-breath alone. It now includes our body. We embrace our body tenderly during our in-breath and out-breath with the intention to reconcile ourselves with it, to take care of it, and to show our concern and loving kindness. You may want to modify the language a little, but the content of the practice is the same: “Breathing in, I am aware of my body. Breathing out, I smile to my body.” This is a smile of awareness, a smile that shows your concern and loving kindness.

How much time do we spend going back to our body, holding it tenderly with the energy of mindfulness, and smiling to it? Each of us knows that we need to do this frequently, with compassion and tenderness, smiling to our body with the smile of recognition, “Oh, my body, I know you are there. I will take good care of you.”

One useful way of practice is to observe different parts of our body, one by one, and then observe the whole body. We can start with our hair, “Aware of my hair, I breathe in. Smiling to my hair, I breathe out,” and then we survey all the different parts of our body, down to the tips of our toes. We are in contact with each of them by means of mindfulness. We can practice this meditation when we are sitting or when we are lying down. Hospitals examine patients with a scanner, an instrument that scans the body using a laser beam to help diagnose what is wrong. Mindfulness also scans the body, though not with laser beams. Right mindfulness is a ray of light that recognizes the different parts of our body, helps us become acquainted with them, and shows us how to take care of them.

You can lie down and guide yourself in this meditation: “Breathing in, I am aware of my eyes. Breathing out, I smile to my eyes,” and then do the same for the other parts of your body. If your concentration is strong, you will see how much joy your eyes bring into your life, and that alone will make you feel happy. Seeing how precious your eyes are will help you take good care of them.

During this practice, difficult feelings sometimes arise. For example, you may be observing your heart when suddenly you notice anxiety arising. Perhaps your friend has a heart condition, and you are anxious about that. In any case, do not push the feeling away. Just look at it and say, “Breathing in, I am aware that I am anxious,” and then continue observing your body under the supervision of the Full Awareness of Breathing.

Here is another example. As you become aware of your digestive organs, you may see millions of minute living beings that are living inside your intestines. Do not push this perception away. Simply remain aware of it,

“Breathing in, I am aware of the minute organisms living within me.” Your awareness of your symbiotic relationship with these organisms can be a rich subject for meditation. Recognize it as such, and make an appointment with yourself to return to this subject later, and then continue on your journey observing the rest of your body. We call this practice “scanning the body with our awareness.”

We generally pay very little attention to the organs of our body unless they cause us pain. We may pass half our life so caught up in our goals and projects that we never even take time to notice our little toe. Our little toe is very important. It has been kind to us for many years. If, one day in the future, there is a sign of cancer in it, what will we do? You may think somehow that being aware of your body is not an important spiritual practice, but that is not correct. Any physiological, psychological, or physical phenomenon can be a door to full realization. If you meditate on your toe, holding your toe between your fingers, that can lead to your goal of realization. The secret of practicing this second subject of Full Awareness, “Awareness of the Body,” is to concentrate your mind and observe each organ of the body in full awareness. If you practice this way, one day you will see things in a new way that will change your view and your way of life. The hairs on your head may seem ordinary, but each hair is an ambassador of truth. Please receive the credentials of your hair. Observe them well and discover every message that each hair sends to you. According to the principle of interpenetration, each hair contains all the information of the cosmos. Are your eyes unimportant? Of course not. They are the windows that open up onto the miracle of reality. Don’t neglect anything. Look deeply, and you will see.

In the Discourse on the Four Establishments of Mindfulness, the Buddha mentions thirty-six parts of the body. Each part should be embraced by our mindfulness, and we should smile to it. First we enjoy relaxing, either sitting or lying down. After a few minutes of relaxation with the help of mindful breathing (total relaxation cannot be perfect without mindful breathing), then you direct your attention to each part of your body. You breathe in and embrace each part of your body with mindfulness, like a mother holding her baby tenderly in her arms. And smile to it. This is very healing, very important.

When you practice “Breathing in, I am aware of my liver. Breathing out, I smile to my liver,” your liver might react right away, “Oh, I have been waiting for this for a long time. I have been sending SOS messages for help, day and night. But he just neglected me. He continued to drink and smoke. And it

gives me a hard time. I could not tell him how hard it is for me to bear all that. I suffer so much day and night, and I work so hard day and night, and my message has been neglected.” If we practice mindful breathing, we will get a lot of relief. If we pay attention to our liver and smile to it, we will get some insight into the condition of our liver. Our liver has been trying its best to maintain our well-being, but we have been neglectful.

Forgetfulness is the opposite of mindfulness. We have been forgetful, and we didn't know it. For the first time, we pay attention to our liver. Our liver is comforted at that moment. If we continue for three, four, or five breaths, then insight will come. There is the intention to be kind to our liver, to protect it, because we know that our liver is a condition for our well-being. When that awareness is born, we know what to do and what not to do. We don't need anyone to tell us to stop drinking alcohol. We just embrace our liver and stop drinking and ingesting the poisons that harm it. Each part of our body should be embraced and taken care of in exactly the same way.

### **SUBJECT THREE: REALIZING THE UNITY OF BODY AND MIND**

4. *“Breathing in, I calm my whole body. Breathing out, I calm my whole body.”*

Now that we have observed and accepted our whole body, we can bring peace and calm to it. Sometimes our body does not function peacefully. We may work hard and notice that our body is not at peace. When we lie down, we see that our body is shaking from exhaustion. Our breath can be strained as well. When we are angry or exhausted, we may feel our body and our breath coming apart at the seams. We can use this exercise to remind us to take care of our body: “Breathing in, I calm the functions of my body. Breathing out, I calm the functions of my body.” Just by concentrating this way, we help our blood circulate better and make the rhythm of our heart more even.

During another period of meditation, we can observe our whole body without discriminating between the parts: “Breathing in, I am aware of my whole body.” At this point, allow your breathing, your body, and your observing mind to all become one. Breathing and body are one. Breathing and mind are one. Mind and body are one. Mind is not an entity that exists independently, outside of our breathing and our body. The boundary between the subject and the object of observation does not actually exist. We observe

“the body in the body.” The mind is one with the object it is observing. This principle has been developed extensively in Mahayana Buddhism: Subject and object are empty. Subject and object are not two.

If you practice this way for ten or twenty minutes, the flow of your breathing and of your bodily functions will become very calm, and your mind will feel quite released. When you begin to practice, it may seem as rough as coarsely milled wheat, but as you continue to practice, the flour will become finer and finer.

The fourth breathing exercise accompanies you along this path: “Breathing in, I calm my whole body. Breathing out, I calm my whole body.” It is like drinking a glass of cool lemonade on a hot day and feeling your body becoming cool inside. When you breathe in, the air enters your body and calms all the cells of your body. At the same time, each “cell” of your breathing becomes more peaceful and each “cell” of your mind also becomes more peaceful. Body, breathing, and mind are one, and each one is all three. This is the key to meditation. Breathing brings the sweet joy of meditation to you. It is food. If you are nourished by the sweet joy of meditation, you become joyful, fresh, and tolerant, and everyone around you will benefit from your joy.

Although the aim of the fourth breathing exercise is to bring calmness to your body, its effect is to bring calmness to your breathing and to your mind as well. The calmness of one brings calmness to all three. In the calmness of meditation, discrimination between body and mind no longer exists, and you dwell at rest in the state of “body and mind at one,” no longer feeling that the subject of meditation exists outside of the object of meditation.

The Buddha said that if you have a wound within your body or within your mind, you can learn how to take care of it. There are many ways of taking care of your wound. You allow the wound in your body and soul to heal. You don’t stand in the way of its healing. But very often we do just that. We forbid our body to heal itself; we do not allow our mind, our consciousness, to heal itself, because of our ignorance. We know that our body has the capacity to heal itself. When we cut our finger, we don’t have to do much. We just clean it and allow it to heal—maybe for one or two days. If we tamper with the wound, if we worry too much or panic, it may not heal. We know that when an animal is wounded, it looks for a quiet place to lie down. Wisdom is present in the animal’s body. It knows that rest is the best way to heal. It doesn’t do anything, not even eat or hunt; it just lies down. Some days later, it can get up. It is healed. Human beings have lost confidence in their body. We

don't know how to rest. Mindful breathing helps us to relearn the art of resting. Mindful breathing is like a loving mother holding her sick baby in her arms saying, "Don't worry, I'll take good care of you, just rest."

We have to relearn the art of resting. Many of us do not know how to make use of our vacations. Very often we are more tired after a vacation than before it. We should learn the art of relaxation and resting, and practice deep relaxation on our own or with others.

We have to believe in our body's capacity to heal itself. The power of self-healing is a reality, but many of us don't believe in it. Instead, we take a lot of vitamins and medicines that may sometimes be more harmful to our body than not. Taking good care of our bodies, eating well but not too much, sleeping, drinking water, we have to trust the power of understanding, healing, and loving within us. It is our refuge. It is the Buddha. It is the Kingdom of God existing within us. If we lose our faith and confidence in it, we lose everything. This is not abstract, it is very real. We can touch it, hold it, and take refuge in it. Instead of panicking or giving ourselves up to despair, we practice mindful breathing and put our trust in the power of self-healing, self-understanding, and loving within us. We call this the island within ourselves in which we can take refuge. It is an island of peace, confidence, solidity, love, and freedom. Be an island within yourself. You don't have to look for it elsewhere. Mindful breathing helps you go back to that precious island within, so that you can experience the foundation of your being.

When you find yourself in a dangerous or difficult situation, or when you feel like you are losing yourself, mindful breathing helps you go back to the island of self. Our practice is based on the insight that mindfulness is the energy of the Buddha that is within us. To be mindful means to be here, fully present, with body and mind united, not in a state of dispersion. Mindfulness is the energy we generate in mindful walking, mindful breathing, sitting, and even washing dishes. It is a protecting agent, because within mindfulness is the energy of concentration and insight. Mindfulness makes it possible for us to understand, to accept, to love, and to relieve suffering. That is why the island of mindfulness is our best refuge. Before passing away, the Buddha recommended to his students that they take refuge in the island of mindfulness within themselves.

"Experiencing my body, I breathe in. Smiling to my body, I breathe out. Calming my body, I breathe in. Smiling to my body, I breathe out." This is a wonderful practice that everyone can enjoy. We have to learn the art of mindful breathing, mindful living, mindful smiling, and mindfully taking care

of our body. Students can set up mindfulness practice groups in their schools, because students are under stress, their bodies are under stress. Teachers are also under stress. They suffer because of their students. They can also set up a group to take care of their bodies. Psychotherapists can do the same. They take care of many people who suffer. If they don't take good care of themselves, they might become exhausted and give up. They can practice with other therapists or with a group of their clients. The police also suffer. They are victims of fear and stress. There is so much violence and suffering. They, too, can practice in a group and take good care of themselves. People living in correctional houses can also start a group. Anyone can practice mindfulness. You don't need to be a Buddhist. You don't need to be a Dharma teacher. You don't need transmission from a teacher in order to start a practice group. You can start a mindfulness practice group anytime, anywhere.

## **SUBJECT FOUR: NOURISHING OURSELVES WITH THE JOY AND HAPPINESS OF MEDITATION**

5. *“Breathing in, I feel joyful. Breathing out, I feel joyful.”*

6. *“Breathing in, I feel happy. Breathing out, I feel happy.”*

Those who practice meditation should know how to nourish themselves with the joy and happiness of meditative concentration in order to reach real maturity and help the world. Life in this world is both painful and miraculous. The violet bamboo, the yellow chrysanthemum, the white clouds, and the full moon are all wondrous expressions of the Dharmakaya, the body of the Dharma. Our body, even though it is impermanent, without an independent self, and subject to suffering, is also infinitely wondrous. The joy of beginning to meditate is like leaving the busy city and going off to the countryside to sit under a tree. We feel ourselves filled with peace and joy. What a relief!

At the end of each day, you can sit cross-legged on a cushion or sit on a chair and begin to practice conscious breathing. If you do this, you will feel great joy. This is the initial sensation of the peace and joy of meditation. The fifth breathing exercise helps us touch this sensation. If you can set aside the stresses and difficulties of your day and enter your meditation filled with joy, it is easy to arrive at the state of peace and happiness.

Joy is a positive psychological and physiological state. Joy helps our blood circulate throughout our body, which makes us feel more alive. When we feel

joyful, concentration is easy. When we do not feel joyful, it can be difficult to concentrate. When we are concentrated, we see more clearly and have a deeper understanding of things. How can we encourage the feeling of joy? Please try the following exercises:

*“Breathing in, I know I have two good eyes. Breathing out, I feel joy.”*

*“Breathing in, I recognize that my liver is in good condition. Breathing out, I feel joy.”*

*“Breathing in, I am aware of my Sangha protecting me. Breathing out, I feel joy.”*

The last exercise is for those of you who are part of a Sangha, a community of practitioners. Your community may not seem to be doing anything special, but just by its existence, it is protecting you. When you attend a retreat and practice with the Sangha—sitting, eating, walking, breathing together in mindfulness—you feel great security and encouragement. In each session of sitting meditation, you can treat yourself to this kind of practice. Touching joy for twenty or thirty minutes is truly nourishing for your body and mind.

The sixth exercise allows us to experience happiness as we breathe in and out. Happiness is easiest when our body and mind are at ease, free of excessive worries and preoccupations.

Happiness is more than joy. According to the teachings of the Buddha, joy is less pure because there can be excitement in it. When we anticipate some special occasion, we may say, “I feel very excited. I can’t wait.” But when we feel too excited, our mind is not at peace. In Chinese, the characters “Peace” and “Joy” often appear together. One student said to me, “I can’t wait to hear you teach on Friday!” If we are too excited about something in the future, how can we enjoy what is happening in the present moment? In the West, joy is often equated with excitement. According to the Buddha, joy is not the same as happiness. In the beginning, we need joy. But as we develop our happiness, the excitement that is present in joy disappears.

The example given in the sutra is of a man in the desert, about to die of thirst, who all of a sudden sees an oasis, a pool of water, in the midst of a grove of trees. He feels joy and excitement. His mind and body race towards the pool, and he bends down, puts his hands in the water and brings the water to his mouth. Until the very last moment before he drinks the water, joy is



there. His hands are shaking from excitement. But when he finally drinks the water, he tastes real happiness, and his excitement has completely disappeared. The Buddha was not criticizing joy. We need joy very much, but we also need to go further than joy.

In the river of our feelings are many unpleasant ones. We want more than anything for them to change. The Buddha understood this. That is why the first two exercises that he proposed on the subject of feelings are to nourish us with joy and happiness. They are the medicine we need to strengthen us before we try to cure the deepest, most fundamental causes of our sickness. If we endeavor to write down one condition for happiness that exists in our life right now, I think that before long we will surprise ourselves by being able to fill a whole sheet of paper. Whatever we are doing—sitting meditation, walking meditation, washing, cooking, or cleaning—we can ask ourselves, “What are the conditions that we have for happiness?” When we see one such condition, we can write it down. According to the Lotus Sutra, we are the heirs to many priceless jewels, but we wander around as if we were destitute children.

To succeed in the practice, we must “experience” joy and happiness. It is not enough to repeat the words “joy ” and “happiness” to ourselves. If we do not use our eyes of understanding and practice right mindfulness, we will not be able to touch the conditions that can bring us joy and happiness in the present moment.

The Buddha taught us to look deeply at pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feelings. Neutral feelings are those which are neither pleasant nor unpleasant. When we have a toothache, for example, we have an unpleasant feeling. But when we do not have a toothache, we do not enjoy our non-toothache. We think having a non-toothache is a neutral feeling. Having the toothache helps us see that not having a toothache is a very pleasant feeling. Only after we become blind are we aware that having eyes to see the blue sky and the white clouds is a miracle. While we are able to see, we rarely notice. We think seeing is neutral. The fact that we have a Sangha and the opportunity to practice may be just a neutral feeling, but when we are aware how precious a jewel a Sangha is, the feeling is very pleasant. The fact that we are alive is truly a miracle. We could say there is nothing special about it, but when we are deeply aware of being alive in this moment, we see how wonderful, how pleasant it is!

Through the practice of meditation, we learn to transform so-called neutral feelings into pleasant ones that are healthy and long lasting. Meditation helps

us see what is painful and what is miraculous. Happiness in itself is nourishing. It is not necessary to look for happiness outside of ourselves. We only need to be aware of the existence of happiness, and we have it right away. We can enjoy pleasant feelings—like the the sensation of the breeze on our cheek—as we need them. Nourished by the happiness of meditation, we become tolerant, at ease and compassionate with ourselves and others, and our happiness is felt by everyone. With peace in ourselves, we can share peace with others, and we have enough strength and equanimity to face the many hardships in life with patience and perseverance.

Some of us feel that our lives make no sense nor hold any meaning. When we don't see a meaningful path in our lives, we suffer greatly. We're unhappy because we do not know where to go. Our confusion makes us suffer, no matter how rich and powerful we are. If we see a direction in our lives, find meaning in our lives, and live with compassion, we will know how to help ourselves and others around us to suffer less. We know the Dharma, have practiced it, and know that in difficult moments the Dharma can rescue us and the people we love. We have been freed by the Dharma. Just by touching the Dharma within us and touching our confidence in it, joy and happiness are born in us, making us truly happy.

If we know how to manage all twenty-four hours in a day, we realize that a day is a long time. What makes it long is our concentration. Older people live in a more concentrated way than the young, establishing themselves more in the present moment. With mindfulness and concentration, older people can appreciate each moment that is offered to them. Each moment of daily life can become a story for their children and grandchildren. This is possible. The Buddha did it. He didn't leave behind a set of dogmas and theories; he left behind his life. Every step he took was peaceful and solid. His compassion penetrated not only the living beings of his time, but also of our time. Each step, each breath, each word of the Buddha conveys and transports the energy of mindfulness, understanding, and compassion. From this source, his students continue to inherit compassion and knowledge. If they practice well, they can transmit this source of compassion, healing, and happiness to future generations.

## **SUBJECT FIVE: OBSERVING OUR FEELINGS**

7. *“Breathing in, I am aware of my mental formations. Breathing out, I am aware of my mental formations.”*

8. “*Breathing in, I calm my mental formations. Breathing out, I calm my mental formations.*”

Mental formations are psychological phenomena. There are fifty-one mental formations according to the Vijñānavada School of the Mahayana, and fifty-two according to the Theravada. Feelings are one of them. In the seventh and eighth breathing exercises, mental formations simply mean feelings. They do not refer to the other fifty mental formations. In the *Vimutti Magga*, we are told that mental formations in these exercises mean feelings and perceptions. It is more likely that mental formations here simply mean feelings, although feelings are caused in part by our perceptions.

Some feelings are more rooted in the body, such as a toothache or a headache. Feelings that are more rooted in our mind arise from our perceptions. In the early morning when you see the first light of day and hear the birds singing, you might have a very pleasant feeling. But if once at this time of day you received a long distance telephone call that your parent had suffered a heart attack, the feeling that comes from that perception may be painful for many years.

When you feel sad, do remember that it will not last forever. If someone comes and smiles at you, your sadness may vanish right away. In fact, it has not gone anywhere. It has just ceased to manifest. Two days later, if someone criticizes you, sadness may reappear. Whether the seed of sadness is manifesting or not depends on causes and conditions. Our practice is to be aware of the feeling that is present right now: “Breathing in, I am aware of the feeling that is in me now. Breathing out, I am aware of the feeling that is in me now.”

If it is a pleasant feeling, when we are aware that it is a pleasant feeling, it may become even more pleasant. If we are eating or drinking something that is healthy and nourishing for us, our feeling of happiness will grow as we become aware of it. If what we are consuming is harmful for our intestines, our lungs, our liver, or our environment, our awareness will reveal to us that our so-called pleasant feeling has within it many seeds of suffering.

The seventh and eighth breathing exercises help us observe all our feelings—pleasant and unpleasant, neutral and mixed. Feelings arising from irritation, anger, anxiety, weariness, and boredom are disagreeable ones. Whatever feeling is present, we identify it, recognize that it is there, and shine the sun of our awareness on it.

If we have an unpleasant feeling, we take that feeling in our arms like a

mother holding her crying baby. The “mother” is mindfulness and the “crying baby” is the unpleasant feeling. Mindfulness and conscious breathing are able to calm the feeling. If we do not hold the unpleasant feeling in our arms but allow it just to remain in us, it will continue to make us suffer. “Breathing in, I touch the unpleasant feeling in me. Breathing out, I touch the unpleasant feeling in me.”

In Buddhist meditation, looking deeply is based on nonduality. Therefore, we do not view irritation as an enemy coming to invade us. We see that we are that irritation in the present moment. When we are irritated, we know, “This irritation is in me. I am this irritation,” and we breathe in and out in this awareness. Thanks to this approach, we no longer need to oppose, expel, or destroy our irritation. When we practice looking deeply, we do not set up barriers between good and bad in ourselves and transform ourselves into a battlefield. We treat our irritation with compassion and nonviolence, facing it with our heart filled with love, as if we were facing our own baby sister. We bring the light of awareness to it by breathing in and out mindfully. Under the light of awareness, our irritation is gradually transformed. Every feeling is a field of energy. A pleasant feeling is an energy that can nourish. Irritation is a feeling that can destroy. Under the light of awareness, the energy of irritation can be transformed into a kind of energy that nourishes us.

Feelings originate either in the body or in our perceptions. When we suffer from insomnia, we feel fatigue or irritation. That feeling originates in our body. When we misperceive a person or an object, we may feel anger, disappointment, or irritation. This feeling originates in our perception. According to Buddhism, our perceptions are often inaccurate and cause us to suffer. The practice of Full Awareness is to look deeply in order to see the true nature of everything and to go beyond our inaccurate perceptions. Seeing a rope as a snake, we may cry out in fear. Fear is a feeling, and mistaking the rope for a snake is an inaccurate perception.

If we live our daily lives in moderation, keeping our bodies in good health, we can diminish painful feelings which originate in the body. By observing each thing clearly and opening the boundaries of our understanding, we can diminish painful feelings that originate from perceptions. When we observe a feeling deeply, we recognize the multitude of causes near and far that helped bring it about, and we discover the very nature of feeling.

When a feeling of irritation or fear is present, we can be aware of it, nourishing our awareness through breathing. With patience, we come to see more deeply into the true nature of this feeling, and in seeing, we come to

understand, and understanding brings us freedom. The seventh exercise refers to the awareness of a mental formation, namely a feeling. When we have identified the feeling, we can see how it arises, exists for a while, and ceases to be in order to become something else.

With mindfulness, a so-called neutral feeling can become a pleasant or an unpleasant feeling. It depends on your way of handling it. Suppose you are sitting in the garden with your little boy. You feel wonderful. The sky is blue, the grass is green, there are many flowers, and you are able to touch the beauty of nature. You are very happy, but your little boy is not. First, he has only a neutral feeling but, since he doesn't know how to handle it, it turns into boredom. In his search for more exciting feelings, he wants to run into the living room and turn on the television. Sitting with the flowers, the grass, and the blue sky is not fun for him. The neutral feeling has become an unpleasant feeling.

Mindfulness helps us to identify a feeling as a feeling and an emotion as an emotion. It helps us hold our emotions tenderly within us, embrace them, and look deeply at them. By observing the true nature of any feeling, we can transform its energy into the energy of peace and joy. When we understand someone, we can accept and love him, and there is no longer any feeling of reproach or irritation against him. The energy of the feeling of irritation, in this case, has been transformed into the energy of love. The Buddha had much love and compassion as far as the body and the feelings of people are concerned. He wanted his disciples to return to, look after, care for, heal, and nourish their bodies and minds. How deeply the Buddha understood human beings!

## **SUBJECT SIX: CARING FOR AND LIBERATING THE MIND**

9. *“Breathing in, I am aware of my mind. Breathing out, I am aware of my mind.”*
10. *“Breathing in, I make my mind happy. Breathing out, I make my mind happy.”*
11. *“Breathing in, I concentrate my mind. Breathing out, I concentrate my mind.”*
12. *“Breathing in, I liberate my mind. Breathing out, I liberate my mind.”*

These four exercises refer to how our breath can help free our mind. In the Sutra on the Four Establishments of Mindfulness, we are taught to observe “the mind in the mind.” We can observe mental formations in the spirit of nonduality, with no barrier between the subject and object of observation. When we look at the blue sky, the boundary between the observer and the infinite blue of the sky disappears, and we feel a deep contact between ourselves and the blue sky. When a grain of salt standing next to the sea asks, “How salty is the sea?” he is told that the only way to know is to jump into the sea and become one with it.

Mind here is composed of psychological phenomena that exist as seeds in our store consciousness. We have the chance to become aware of them when they manifest as mental formations in our mind consciousness. As soon a mental formation arises, we should breathe in and out and identify it. As we continue to observe it, we can see its connection with the whole of our mind. The meaning of the ninth breathing exercise is: “I breathe in and out and identify the mental formation that is present at this moment in me.”

To identify a mental formation with the help of conscious breathing means to recognize, embrace, and become one with that mental formation. It does not mean to drown in that mental formation, because the subject that is recognizing, embracing, and becoming one with the mental formation is the energy of mindfulness. When our mindfulness is one with the mental formation, the mental formation quite naturally changes for the better.

The first four breathing exercises help us become one with our breathing and drop all thinking, discriminating ideas, and imaginings. The ninth exercise helps us identify psychological phenomena, such as thoughts or imaginings, as they arise. The term *citta* includes all psychological phenomena, such as feelings, perceptions, thoughts, reasoning, and so forth, along with their objects. It does not refer to a single, unchangeable psychological subject. Mind is a river of psychological phenomena that is always flowing. In this river, the arising, duration, and cessation of any phenomenon is always linked with the arising, duration, and cessation of all other phenomena. To know how to identify psychological phenomena as they arise and develop is an important part of meditation practice. When we recognize the mental formation that is manifesting in us, we recognize whether it is wholesome or unwholesome. Attachment, aversion, ignorance, pride, suspicion, and being caught in views are unwholesome mental formations, and they cause us to suffer. When we suspect someone of committing a wrongdoing, whether it is our teacher or our friends on the path, we suffer. When we doubt the teachings and have no confidence in anyone

around us, we suffer a lot. We can only practice when we have faith and confidence. Pride is a great hindrance to progress. We think that we are better than others, that only we can see the truth. That is not at all conducive to peace and joy.

The activities of our mind, often unstable and agitated, are like a torrent of water washing over the rocks. In traditional Buddhist literature, mind is often compared to a monkey always swinging from branch to branch or to a horse galloping out of control. Once our mind is able to identify what is happening, we will be able to see clearly our mental formation and make it calm. Just that will bring us peace, joy, and stillness.

We have to go home and take care of ourselves. First our body, then our feelings, and now our mental formations. We can begin by simply recognizing the presence of a mental formation. We do not try to grasp it, possess it, or be attached to it. We do not try to push it away, either. This is called simple recognition of a mental formation. Recognize it, call it by its true name, and say, “I am here to take care of you because you are myself.”

We already know that many of us do not want to go home to ourselves. We are afraid. There is a lot of internal suffering and conflict that we want to avoid. We complain that we do not have time to live, but we try to kill our free time by not going back to ourselves. We escape by turning on the television or picking up a novel or magazine; we go out for a drive. We run away from ourselves and don't attend to our body, feelings, or mental formations.

We have to go home. If we are at war with our parents, friends, society, or church, it may be because there is a war raging within us. An internal war facilitates other wars. The Five Skandhas—forms, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness—comprise a large territory. Each of us is the king or queen of our territory which is comprised of these five elements. But we have not been responsible monarchs. We don't want to survey our territory or to govern over it, we just want to abandon it. There are many wars being fought in it. It has turned into a mess, because we just want to escape and are afraid of going back to our own kingdom. The Buddha advised us to go home and tidy up, restoring our peace and harmony.

We are afraid of going home because we lack the tools or the means of self-protection. Equipped with mindfulness, we can go home safely and not be overwhelmed by our pain, sorrow, and depression. Going home mindfully, we can talk to our wounded child within using the following mantra: “Darling, I have come home to you. I am here for you. I embrace you in my arms. I am

sorry that I left you alone for a long time.” With some training, with mindful walking and mindful breathing, we will be able to go home and embrace our pain and sorrow.

If mental formations manifest during sitting meditation and prevent you from meditating, you may have to practice recognizing them one by one. This is also meditation. When a thought, feeling, perception, pain, or sorrow manifests itself, practice breathing in and out and recognize it for what it is. Say, “I know you. I know you are there. I am here for you,” and embrace it. The object of our practice in the ninth exercise is any kind of mental formation—jealousy, fear, hatred, despair, restlessness—positive or negative.

When you’re meditating on an interesting subject, your power of concentration is sufficient to quiet your mental formations. This is called guided or directed meditation. You choose a special subject for meditation and look deeply into it to discover something. The more interesting the subject, the stronger your concentration. If it is not interesting, then, even if you try hard, you will still feel sleepy, and other things will continue to come up. One guided meditation is identifying and writing down the names of all our attachments. Another is to write down what we can do for ourselves every day to bring ourselves joy. At first, you may think that there aren’t many things, but when you sit and look deeply, you will discover dozens.

Another way of working with your mind is to allow things to come up and handle them with mindfulness. You nourish your mindful breathing and recognize each mental formation that manifests. Every time you embrace a wholesome mental formation, your joy and happiness grow, and the wholesome mental formation grows. You realize your compassion and faith in the Dharma, and use the happiness you receive to nourish yourself. Every time negative, unwholesome, and painful mental formations manifest themselves, you recognize and embrace them to calm them and look deeply into them.

The tenth breathing exercise is intended to gladden our mind. Compare this with the fifth and sixth exercises. The fifth aims at the experience of joy, and the sixth aims at the experience of happiness. These three methods can bring us to the land of great bliss, to a state of relaxation in meditative concentration. To better succeed in the practice of the tenth exercise, we must know how to recognize and touch the positive mental formations that are already present in us, such as faith, goodwill, compassion, understanding, tolerance, and equanimity. Our mind becomes joyful every time we recognize these positive mental formations.



This state brings us ease and can nourish the power of our concentration. The Buddha wants us to be nourished by feelings of peace and joy. To gladden the mental formations (as the tenth breathing exercise is sometimes expressed) or to make the mind happy is to see the beneficial mental formations that are within us. For instance, to have faith and confidence in the path we are following is beneficial. To know what it is right to do and not to do is also beneficial. If I see others practicing sitting meditation and I recognize that it is a good thing to do, I will have the intelligence to join them. If I do not want to kill a slug or caterpillar that is eating the lettuce in my garden because I have the wholesome mental formation of nonviolence, I will know to go out with a flashlight while it is still dark and gently remove the slugs and caterpillars from the lettuce plants and put them somewhere else. Or I may decide to be a vegetarian because I do not feel happy about factory farming, the slaughter of animals, or the death from starvation of thousands of children because there is not enough grain for human consumption. These decisions arise from the mental formation of nonviolence in me.

There are ways you can practice the tenth breathing exercise during sitting meditation: “Breathing in, I recognize the mental formation of nonviolence in me. Breathing out, I feel happy.” “Breathing in, I have faith in the practice I am doing. Breathing out, I feel happy.” “Breathing in, I know that at this moment I am not caught in any desire. Breathing out, I feel happy.” “Breathing in, I know that I am not angry at anyone. Breathing out, I feel happy.” But we should not stop at this. We can continue by “observing the mental formation to shed light on it,” in order to arrive at an awakened understanding. Only awakened understanding can lead us to complete freedom.

We cultivate joy because it helps us get the nourishment we need in order to be stronger and go further in the practice. The Buddha encourages us to relax our bodies, to embrace our pleasant feelings, and to create joy and happiness for our nourishment. Cultivating joy means to strengthen our happiness and nourish ourselves.

Deep in our consciousness there are many wholesome, positive seeds. If we know how to touch them and water them, they will manifest themselves on the upper level of our consciousness—the mind consciousness. We have to practice looking deeply to recognize our wonderful seeds—the seeds of mindfulness, enlightenment, understanding, joy, and loving kindness. We might think that we cannot love because we have not been able to touch the seed of love within us. Through our practice, and with the support of a brother

or a sister, we are able to touch our seeds of love, forgiveness, compassion, and joy. Some people say, “I don’t know what joy is. I have absolutely no joy within me.” That is because that person has not been able to touch the seed of joy within himself. The practice is to touch it and recognize it. This is the practice of cultivating joy.

We need to organize our daily lives so that the positive seeds are watered every day and the negative seeds are not watered. We all have seeds of suspicion, despair, and anger. In one person, they are stronger; in another person, they are weaker. We do not want the people who live around us to water our negative seeds. Every time a negative seed is touched and watered, we suffer.

But we can do better than simply not watering our negative seeds; we can water our positive seeds of happiness, loving kindness, forgiveness, and joy. We call this the practice of selective watering. We water the flowers, not the weeds, so that the flowers will bloom in the other person. When we make the other person smile, we benefit as well. It does not take long to see the result of our practice.

The eleventh exercise of mindful breathing proposed by the Buddha is concentrating our mind. We bring all our power of concentration and place it on the mental formation that is present. Concentration means to direct the energy of our mind towards one object. It is called *ekagatta* in Pali, which means “one-pointedness.” The mental formation that is manifesting in our mind at that moment is a unique object, such as faith. We are in touch with that mental formation. We recognize it and we call it by its name. Through this practice the energy of joy arises, and our faith develops. If the mental formation is negative, we also recognize it and call it by its name, directing all our mental energy upon it. We embrace it and look deeply at it, and doing this already begins the work of transforming that negative mental formation. It is like waking up on a cold morning and lighting a fire. The cold air is warmed by the warm air of the fire. We do not need to open the door and force the cold air to go outside to make the room warm. All we have to do is tend the fire. In the case of a negative mental formation, all we have to do is look after it with the warmth of the fire of our mindfulness. Only by concentrating steadily on an object can we observe it. The object of our mind is lit up by our observation, like a performer standing in a spotlight on a stage. The object might be moving in time and space, since it is alive. But our mind is also alive, and in the state of concentration, subject and object become one.

Breathing is an object of our concentrated mind. We put all our attention on

our breath, and our mind and our breath become one. That is concentration. After practicing with the breath, we can practice with other physiological, psychological, and physical phenomena. Only if there is concentration can the work of looking deeply take place.

The twelfth exercise aims at untying all the knots of the mind—the sorrows and memories of the past, the anxieties and predictions concerning the future, feelings of irritation, fear, and doubt in the present, or confusion created by inaccurate perceptions. Only by concentrating the mind do we have the capacity to observe, illumine, and be emancipated from obstacles. Looking deeply into our body and consciousness, we recognize our internal knots. True happiness is not possible unless we know how to untie these knots and become free. When the person you love says something unmindful or unkind, you might get an internal knot—it may be a small knot, but it is a knot. It can become harmful if you don't untie it, and the next time your beloved makes the same mistake, the knot will grow. Out of forgetfulness, we create internal knots in each other and don't realize it, until one day we can no longer look each other in the eye, and we watch television instead. To untie the knot, we have to begin anew with our beloved. Say, "Darling, why did you say such a thing to me? Why did you do such a thing to me?" If we are skilled practitioners, we do not allow the knot to become stronger. Mindful living helps us know when an internal knot is being formed. If you are a good practitioner, you don't let it go unnoticed. You are aware that you must untie the knot right away to ensure your long-lasting happiness.

When we say "liberate my mind," "mind" refers to any mental formation that makes us anxious, makes us suffer, or pushes us in the wrong direction. We open our mind so the light of concentration will reveal what is there and liberate what is there. It is the same as trying to untie knots in thread. We have to be calm, and we need to take time. By observing our mind in all its subtlety, in a calm and self-contained way, we can free our mind from all confusion. "Breathing in, I open my heart for all the knots to be untied. Breathing out, I open my heart for all the knots to be untied."

The practice of concentration helps us to understand the nature of affliction, and with that kind of insight, we can burn affliction away. Concentration as energy has the power of transformation. Concentration is something extremely important in the teaching of the Buddha.

To concentrate means to concentrate on something. In the teaching of the Buddha, many kinds of concentration are proposed. According to our need, we can apply one or two of these concentrations to free us, like concentration

on impermanence, concentration on nonself, concentration on compassion, concentration on interbeing, and so on. Each concentration, each *samadhi*, has its own name.

The contemplation on love and compassion can bring you a lot of relief and can bring the nectar of healing to you. *Maitri* and *karuna* are Sanskrit for loving kindness and compassion. Suppose someone has made you suffer. You think of that person as being very cruel. They've inflicted a lot of suffering on you, your family, your country. This has made you suffer so much that you want revenge. You want that person or group of people to suffer so you can get relief. You want to punish them. But your hatred and anger and the desire for revenge are a kind of fire that continues to burn your body and your mind, and you are in hell. Hell is here in the here and the now. We've said that the Kingdom of God can be in the here and the now. That is also true of hell. Hell can be in the here and the now. If we allow the flame of affliction to burn us, there may be times we can't sleep because our whole body, our whole being is being burned by the fire of hate, of anger, of despair.

The concentration on loving kindness and compassion, will help you to suffer less. With your attention focused on the other person, you can see that they also suffer a lot. The fact is that when someone suffers a lot and is not capable of handling her own suffering, she will spill her suffering all over, and you will become a victim of her suffering. You may be like that too. If you're suffering a lot and you don't know how to manage your suffering, you will continue to suffer and make others around you suffer, including the people you love.

Looking deeply, we may see that when that person was a child, he had no chance to learn love and compassion from his parents. They caused him many wounds which no one has helped him to heal. When he went to school, the teacher didn't help, the students didn't help. The seeds of anger, suffering, and hatred continued to grow. Such a person needs help, not punishment. By looking deeply and recognizing the presence of suffering in the other person, you might see that truth—that he needs help. And now if we punish him, he will suffer more.

This insight may motivate you to do something to help that person. This insight brings the nectar of compassion. Hate and anger vanish. The nectar of compassion is wonderful; you stop suffering right away. The fire that has been burning, stops burning. That is the effect of *metta* meditation, the meditation on loving kindness and compassion.

In my experience, the concentration on compassion is a wonderful practice.

You may need only fifteen minutes of breathing deeply and looking deeply to recognize that the other person is a victim of their suffering. That person needs your help, not your punishment. Suddenly the nectar of compassion is born, your heart is blessed with that nectar, and you don't suffer anymore. Instead, you want to do something, to say something. If you're not capable of using loving speech, you can write a letter. You can say something kind to help that person. But you can't help another until you've been able to help yourself. Peace and compassion always begin with yourself.

## **SUBJECT SEVEN: LOOKING DEEPLY IN ORDER TO SHED LIGHT ON THE TRUE NATURE OF ALL DHARMAS**

13. *“Breathing in, I observe the impermanent nature of all dharmas. Breathing out, I observe the impermanent nature of all dharmas.”*
14. *“Breathing in, I observe the disappearance of desire. Breathing out, I observe the disappearance of desire.”*
15. *“Breathing in, I observe cessation. Breathing out, I observe cessation.”*
16. *“Breathing in, I observe letting go. Breathing out, I observe letting go.”*

The thirteenth breathing exercise proposed by the Buddha aims at looking deeply to shed light on the impermanent nature of all dharmas. All phenomena, whether physiological, psychological, or physical, without exception, are impermanent. The meditation to look deeply at the impermanent nature of all phenomena is one of the basic practices. If we hear someone talking about impermanence, we may think we understand. But understanding impermanence is not a matter of words or concepts, but a matter of practice. Only through our daily practice of stopping and looking deeply can we experience the truth of impermanence.

Impermanent does not only mean, “Here today, gone tomorrow.” The meditation on impermanence is a deep, penetrating, and wonderful path of meditation. There is no phenomenon whatsoever with a separate, lasting individuality. All things are in endless transformation, and all things are without an independent self. To be impermanent is to be without self (*anatman*). This is a fundamental recognition in Buddhism regarding the nature of all that exists. “Breathing in, I am looking deeply at some object. Breathing out, I observe the impermanent nature of that object.” The object I am observing might be a flower, a leaf, or a living being. Looking deeply this

way, we can see that change is taking place in every instant. The Sanskrit word for instant is *kshana*, the shortest unit of time. One second contains many *kshana*. The first kind of impermanence is called *kshana-anitya*, “impermanence in every instant.” When something reaches the end of a cycle of arising, duration, and cessation, there is a marked change. This second kind of impermanence is called “cyclic impermanence.” When we heat water, the water is getting hotter all the time. That is *kshana-anitya*. Then, suddenly, we see steam. The appearance of steam is a cyclic impermanence of water.

We have to look deeply at cyclic change in order to accept it as a necessary part of life and not be surprised or suffer so greatly when it occurs. We look deeply at the impermanence of our own body, the impermanence of the things around us, the impermanent nature of the people we love, and the impermanent nature of those who cause us to suffer. If we do not look deeply at impermanence, we may think of it as a negative aspect of life, because it takes away from us the things we love. But looking deeply, we see that impermanence is neither negative nor positive. It is just impermanence. Without impermanence, life would not be possible. Without impermanence, how could we hope to transform our suffering and the suffering of our loved ones into happiness? Without impermanence, how can we hope that a tyrannical regime might become democratic?

Impermanence also means interdependence, that there is no independent individual because everything is changing all the time. A flower is always receiving non-flower elements like water, air, and sunshine, and it is always giving something to the universe. A flower is a stream of change, and a person is also a stream of change. At every instant, there is input and output. When we look deeply at the flower, we see that it is always being born and always dying, and that it is not independent of other things. The components of the universe depend on one another for their existence. In the Majjhima Nikaya, it says, “This is, because that is. This is not, because that is not.” Impermanence also means “signlessness” (*alakshana*). The reality of all that exists is beyond every concept and linguistic expression. We cannot go directly to their essential and true nature, because we are accustomed to grasping phenomena through the intermediaries of perception and thought. The categories of perception and thought are “signs.”

The example of wave and water is often given to help us understand the “signless” nature of all that exists. A wave can be high or low, can arise or disappear, but the essence of the wave—water—is neither high nor low, neither arising nor disappearing. All signs—high, low, arising, disappearing—cannot touch the essence of water. We cry and laugh according to the sign,

because we have not yet seen the essence. The essence (*svabhava*) is the very nature of everything that is, and it is the reality of ourselves. If we only see the wave with its manifestations of being born and dying, we will suffer. But if we see the water, which is the basis of the wave, and see that all the waves are returning to the water, we have nothing to fear. When we begin the practice, we want things to be permanent and we think things have a separate self. Whenever things change, we suffer. To help us not suffer, the Buddha gave us the truths of impermanence and nonself as keys. When we look deeply at the impermanent and nonself nature of all things, we are using those keys to open the door to reality, or nirvana. Then our fears and our suffering disappear, and we do not mind whether we are young or old, or even alive or dead. We realize that we do not die in the usual sense of having existed and then ceasing to exist. We see that all of life is ongoing transformation.

“Breathing in, I see the nature of impermanence. Breathing out, I see the nature of impermanence.” We have to practice this many times to have success in the practice. We have to practice on our own and with a community, not just during sitting meditation but in whatever we are doing—watering the garden, washing the dishes, walking up and down the stairs, and so on. The reality of everything that exists is its signlessness, since it is a reality that cannot be grasped by concepts and words. Because it cannot be grasped, it is called empty. Emptiness here does not mean nonexistent as opposed to existent. It means signless, free from all imprisonment by concepts—birth/death, existent/nonexistent, increasing/decreasing, pure/impure. This is developed in the fifteenth breathing exercise. It says in the Prajñāparamita Heart Sutra, “All dharmas are marked with emptiness; they are neither produced nor destroyed, neither defiled nor immaculate, neither increasing nor decreasing.”

Impermanence also means aimlessness (*apranihita*). The presence of everything that exists is not to attain a final goal. We cannot add on to the true nature of all that exists, nor can we remove anything from it. It has no origin and no end. We do not need to seek realization outside of all that exists. In the very “stuff ” of every dharma, the awakened nature is already fully present.

Many teachers, including those of ancient Greece and China, gave teachings on impermanence. In the Buddhist tradition, impermanence is not just a description of reality but also an instrument for understanding. You cannot understand impermanence without understanding the teaching of interbeing or emptiness. Impermanence is the first key to unlocking the door of reality. Impermanence is a *samadhi*, a form of concentration. Intellectually, you may agree that things are impermanent, but you might behave as if reality

were permanent. We have to train ourselves to maintain the insight of impermanence in every minute of our lives. Then we will always have wisdom and happiness.

Because life and reality are impermanent, we feel insecure. I think the teaching on living deeply in the present moment is what we have to learn and practice to face this feeling of insecurity. We have to handle the present moment well. We live deeply in the present moment so that in the future we will have no regrets. We are aware that we and the person in front of us are both alive. We cherish the moment and do whatever we can to make life meaningful and to make him or her happy in this moment.

When I drink a glass of water, I invest one hundred percent of myself in drinking it. You should train yourself to live every moment of your daily life like that. Hugging is a deep practice. You need to be totally present to do it correctly. When you open your arms and hold the other person, you practice three mindful breaths. “Breathing in, I know that he is still alive in my arms. Breathing out, I feel so happy.” Life becomes real at that moment.

Impermanence is a key that can unlock the door of reality. It is also a concentration, a practice. Intellectually we know that things are impermanent. We can agree with the truth of impermanence. Our scientists also agree that things are impermanent. But in reality we still behave as though things are permanent. We have to keep the insight of impermanence alive. When we come in touch with anything, we should be able to see the nature of impermanence in it.

We have to distinguish between the notion of impermanence and the insight of impermanence. We may have the notion of impermanence, we may have understood what impermanence is, but we do not have the insight of impermanence. The insight is something alive. When you are able to see the nature of impermanence, you’ll begin to see the nature of nonself. Nonself is not different from impermanence. Since everything is changing in every second, nothing can remain itself in two consecutive moments. So impermanence means nonself. They’re the same thing. Looking in terms of time, we say impermanence. Looking in terms of space, we say nonself. They are exactly the same thing.

The fourteenth breathing exercise aims at looking deeply to shed light on the true nature of all dharmas and the true nature of our desire.<sup>24</sup> We see that happiness does not lie in ideas about what we want to realize in the future. Therefore we’re no longer attached to the objects of our desire that we thought would bring us future happiness. When people go fishing, they



sometimes use synthetic bait. The fish thinks the bait is real and bites. If the fish knew that the bait was synthetic, it would never bite, because it would know that would only lead to suffering. When you have the thought, “If I could only have that, I would be happy,” it’s a good time to practice the fourteenth breathing exercise.

Many people think that if they don’t have a Ph.D., they can’t possibly be happy. Why do they have to have a degree to be happy? Thinking you’ll be happy if you have a degree is only an idea you have. It’s quite possible that after you have the degree, you still won’t be happy. The idea that marriage or a divorce is the only thing that can bring happiness is also just an idea. There’s no guarantee that after we’ve married or divorced, we’ll have happiness for the rest of our lives. In fact, it could be quite the opposite.

If we can see that the nature of the object of our desire is always changing and is on the way to dissolution, our desire for it to be always the same will disappear. A rose, a cloud, a human body, an ancient tree, all are on the way to dissolution. All dharmas, all phenomena, pass through the stages of birth, duration, transformation, and disappearance. A practitioner should observe clearly the impermanent and fading nature of all things, including the Five Aggregates, the Five Skandhas, that comprise his or her own self. The Nine Contemplations were a special practice used at the time of the Buddha. In them, we observe the decomposition of a corpse from the time it becomes bloated to the time when it disappears into dust and ashes. In *Lessons in Emptiness*, King Tran Thai Tong of thirteenth-century Vietnam contemplates as follows:

Formerly glowing cheeks and pink lips,  
today cold ashes and white bones.  
Position, renown though unsurpassed,  
they are but part of a long dream.  
However rich and noble you are,  
you are no less impermanent.  
Jealousy, pride, and self-clinging,  
but self is always empty.  
Great strength, ability, and success,  
but in them is no final truth.  
Since the four elements come apart,  
why discriminate old from young?  
Crevices erode even mountains,  
more quickly the hero is dead.  
Black hair has hardly grown on our head,

when suddenly it has turned white.  
Our well-wisher has just departed,  
a mourner arrives on our death.  
This six-foot skeleton of dry bones—  
with what effort it seeks riches.  
This wrapping of skin containing blood  
suffers year after year just because of attachment.

This is a way of looking at our body, and it is also a way of seeing how our mind, so subtle and quick today, can become slow and senile tomorrow. Rivers, mountains, houses, riches, health—all should be meditated on like this. The objects of our desire are all deceptive in appearance. In the light of deep looking, they are no different from the plastic bait containing a dangerous hook inside. Once their true nature is revealed, our desires vanish.

Perhaps you will smile and say that this contemplation is intended principally to bring us to a pessimistic state of mind, frustrating our love of life. This is both true and not true. Medicine may be bitter, but it can heal our sickness. Reality may be cruel, but to see things as they are is the only way to heal ourselves. Reality is the ground of effective liberation. Life passes so quickly, and there is no stopping it from being cut off. The lifeblood of joy flows in every living thing, from the mineral world through the plant world, to the world of living beings. Only because we imprison ourselves in the idea of a small self do we create a state of darkness, narrowness, anxiety, and sorrow. According to our narrow view of a truly existing self, life is just my body, my house, my spouse, my children, and my riches. But if we can extend beyond every limit we have created for ourselves, we will see that our life exists in everything, and that the deterioration of phenomena cannot touch that life, just as the arising and disappearing of the waves cannot influence the existence of the water. By observing in this way to shed light on the deterioration of everything, we can smile in the face of birth and death and attain great peace and joy in this life.

The Buddha advised us to look into the nature of the object of our desire so that reality can reveal itself strongly, and then we will no longer be caught in a wrong perception. Each of us has objects of desire, of craving. We believe that if we cannot get what we want, we cannot be happy, and we chase after these objects. The Buddha advises us to look deeply into that object, using mindfulness and concentration, so that it reveals its true nature. This is the aim of the exercise, “Experiencing non-craving, I breathe in.” We might desire wealth, believing that if we don’t have a lot of money, we cannot be happy. Those of us who have a lot of money know that it can make us very

unhappy. Money is not an element of our happiness. With money, we may feel that we have power. That power can bring us a lot of suffering because it is often linked with notions of self, discrimination, delusion, and ignorance. Looking deeply into the object of our desire, our craving, we see that it is not really an object to chase after.

If we're addicted to alcohol, we think that we can't feel good without it. We need to look deeply into its nature; how it is made; what it is going to do to us and the people around us; what the relationship is between liquor and our liver, heart, feelings, and consciousness. If we look deeply enough, we see that the object of our craving is not an element of our happiness. We can suffer tremendously because of alcohol, or die because of it, yet we may have chased after it for a long time.

The Buddha used the image of a man who is thirsty who sees a glass of water. The water looks very cold, fresh, and sweet, but there is poison in it. Someone warns the man not to drink the water, "If you drink it, you could die or be close to death. Don't drink it, I warn you. Look for something else to drink. Use anything to quench your thirst, but don't drink this." But the man is so thirsty and the water looks so appealing that he decides that dying is okay. He drinks it and thinks, "I'll die later." And he suffers. It is the same with wealth, fame, sex, and food.

We don't want to die, we don't want to suffer, but because of our desire, we're dragged into the realm of suffering. Looking deeply into the nature of the object of our desire with mindfulness and concentration, we discover the true nature of our desire, and we stop chasing after it.

We behave in much the same way as the fish who bites the plastic bait. We have a wrong perception about the object of our desire. We think that life will have no meaning, and we will not be happy if we don't have it. There are a million ways to be happy, but we don't know how to open the door so that happiness will come. We just chase after the objects of our craving. Many of us have experienced the reality that the more we chase after the object of our craving, the more we suffer.

The Buddha said that you only consider the object of your craving to be happiness when you are sick. The object of our desire can kill us. While breathing mindfully, we look directly at our object of desire and look deeply into it. If we succeed, we'll be free from it and we'll look for happiness in other places, in the here and the now.

Each one of us has to study and practice this. We have to help our young

people study and practice it, too. What is true happiness? Is happiness possible? Are the elements and conditions for happiness available in the here and the now? Do we need to chase after happiness in the future? All these questions are helpful. Therapists, teachers, politicians, everyone should learn about this, because we all want happiness and we all want to reduce suffering. Let us come together, practice looking deeply, and offer our collective insight to our community and nation. There is a way out of suffering. There is a way to build well-being. It is to look deeply into the nature of our suffering. When we can identify the elements that have brought us suffering, we can see the way out.

The Diamond Sutra advises us to throw away four notions. The first notion is the notion of self, that I am this body. Everything is made of elements that are not itself. The flower is made of the seed, the sun, the soil, the rain, and other elements. This is, because that is. If you are not there, I cannot be here. So it's very important to throw away the notion "I am," the notion of self, because it does not reflect the truth. By looking deeply into the nature of reality, you are capable of throwing away the notion of "I am." When we say the words "I am," we say them because we have the notion "I am." When the father looks deeply at himself, when the son looks deeply at his father, they see that they inter-are. The father is at the same time the son, and the son is at the same time the father. So a better statement is, "I inter-am."

The second is the notion of "human being." This is not too difficult to let go of. When we look into a human being, we see human and animal ancestors. If we look deeply, we can also see plant and mineral ancestors. The human is made of non-human elements. We see that we are at the same time a rock, a river, a cloud, a squirrel, a rose. If we take away all the non-human elements, there's no human being left.

This is the deepest teaching on deep ecology. In order to protect the human being, you have to protect elements that are not human, because these elements are our ancestors, and if you destroy them, there is no way we can be here. That is why discrimination between man and nature is a wrong view. You have to see yourself as nature, as being one with nature. With this understanding, harmony and respect for life are possible. So throw away the idea that the human being is the boss, that man can do anything to nature. The key is the contemplations on impermanence and nonself. With liberation from the notion of human being, we become less proud and less arrogant as a species. We have to respect and protect the other species in order for us to have a chance. This is why we say the Diamond Sutra is the oldest text on deep ecology.

The third notion is the notion of living beings. When we say the words “living beings,” it’s because we want to distinguish living beings from non-living beings. But by looking deeply into living beings, we see elements that could be called non-living beings. Looking deeply, we can see that plants and minerals are alive also. So there is no real boundary separating human beings and non-human beings.

We have the notion that there is inert matter, non-living matter. But if you look deeply into the notion that matter is something without soul, without life, we see that’s not true. First of all, matter is the object of our perceptions. For a long time we believed that matter existed as a separate entity, and matter was something that did not move. But now as science advances, we see that matter is not static and immobile as we thought. In fact, the atoms, the electrons, move a lot. They ’re very alive. Looking more deeply, we see the role our mind plays in how we perceive things. We’re no longer sure that things are the way we’d imagined them to be. So the distinction between living beings and non-living beings disappears after meditation. There’s no longer any discrimination.

The fourth notion to be thrown away is the notion of life span. We believe that time is linear, that we are born at a certain point in time and that we shall die at another point in time. We believe we’ll only spend seventy, eighty, ninety, or one hundred years on this planet. After that, we’ll be gone. This is what we believe. But as we look deeply, we see that this is a notion, a wrong perception. Birth is a notion, and death is also a notion. It’s not reality.

We have spoken of the deathlessness of a cloud. The cloud can never die. It can only become rain or snow. In our mind, to die means that from something you become nothing; from someone you become no one. But if you look deeply you don’t see anything like that. You see that a cloud can never die. When you burn a piece of paper, that piece of paper transforms into smoke, heat, ash. The piece of paper cannot be reduced to nothingness. The idea of annihilation is just an idea. You cannot annihilate anything.

If we look deeply we see that the nature of the cloud is also the nature of no birth. The cloud does not come from nothing. It has come from the water in the river and the ocean. It has come from the heat of the sunshine. You know that the birth of a cloud is a poetic image. The cloud is simply a new manifestation. Before being a cloud, the cloud has been many other things.

Our true nature is the nature of no birth and no death. Birth and death are notions that cannot be applied to reality, because there is nothing that can be born from nothing, and there is nothing that can become nothing at all. The

meditation practice of looking deeply will bring about insight. It will dissipate our fear and our despair.

The four notions spoken of in The Diamond Sutra are the four basic notions that are at the foundation of our fear, our desperation, our suffering. That's why the Diamond Sutra advises us to practice looking deeply, so that we can throw them away. The practice of throwing away your notions, your views, is so important. Emancipation and liberation would not be possible without this practice of throwing away. If we suffer a lot, it's because we still entertain a number of ideas. The practice of meditation helps us to get free from these ideas.

The final breathing exercises help us look deeply in order to shed light on giving up desire and attachment, fear and anxiety, hatred and anger. Usually we think that if we let go, we will lose the things that make us happy. But the more we let go, the happier we become.

We should not think that letting go means letting go of everything. We do not let go of reality. We let go of all our wrong perceptions about reality. If we cannot let go of our wrong ideas, we cannot enter the world of reality. According to Tang Hôï, letting go means first of all letting go of ideas concerning self and life span. We have an idea that we began to exist the day our mother gave us birth, and that the day we are buried, we cease to exist. We say we are our body, and outside of our own body we do not exist. "Breathing in, I let go of my idea of my body as myself." "Breathing out I let go of my idea that this period of fifty to one hundred years is my life span."

Anathapindika was a lay disciple who had always given a lot of support to the Buddha and the community of monks. When he was about to pass away and was in great pain, he was given teachings by the Venerable Shariputra to help him let go of ideas of self and life span. These teachings can be found in the Sutra on Teachings to Be Given to the Sick. After Shariputra guided Anathapindika in a meditation on the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha to nourish the seeds of joy in him, he began to offer the cream of the Buddha's teachings: "Friend Anathapindika, please meditate like this: 'These eyes are not me. I am not caught in these eyes.'" He went from eyes to ears, nose, tongue, body and mind; to form sound, smell, taste, touch and objects of mind; then to eye consciousness, up to mind consciousness. "All these things are not me. I have no need to be caught by them."

Shariputra continued, "Friend Anathapindika, all things exist because of causes and conditions. When the causes and conditions for them cease to exist, they no longer exist. The true nature of things is not to be born and not

to die, not to come and not to go.” When Anathapindika heard these teachings, he understood them immediately. He knew he had only a short time left to live, and that was enough motivation for him to put the teachings into practice without delay. When he practiced in this way, tears of happiness started to run down his cheeks, and Anathapindika passed away in peace. We, too, are fortunate to have the cream of the teachings available to us. We have to practice letting go of our ideas in order to see life everywhere, beyond space and time. Dear reader, do not wait until your last moments to practice this sutra. Practice it now so you can see that you are not enclosed in your small shell of your body or the small shell of your life span.

When we see that there is already a precious jewel in our pocket, we give up every attitude of craving or coveting. Seeing that we are lions, we do not long to nurse from a mother deer. Seeing that we are the sun, we give up the candle’s habit of fearing the wind. Seeing that life has no boundaries, we give up all imprisoning divisions. We see ourselves and our life everywhere. That is why we vow to help all living phenomena, all living species, like a *bodhisattva* who has attained great awakening.

Letting go does not mean abandoning one thing in order to seek something else. It means giving up every comparison, seeing that there is nothing to be removed and nothing to be added, and that the boundary between ourselves and others is not real. We need not give up our human condition in order to become a buddha. We seek buddhahood in our very human condition, giving up nothing and seeking nothing. That is the meaning of *apranihita*, “aimlessness,” sometimes translated as “wishlessness.” It is the same as not seeking, a concept fully developed in Mahayana Buddhism. Let go in order to be everything and to be completely free. Many people have already done so, and each of us can do so as well, if we have the intention.

The fifteenth exercise helps us free ourselves from individuality, so that we can become part of the whole universe. Cessation in Pali and Sanskrit is *nirodha*. It means cessation of all erroneous ideas, of all notions that keep us from directly experiencing the ultimate reality, and of all suffering born of our ignorance. That means the cessation of ideas like birth and death, permanence and annihilation, increasing and decreasing, being and nonbeing, coming and going. We have to go beyond these ideas because they form the basis of our suffering, which is expressed as desire and attachment, fear and anxiety, hatred and anger. When we stop having ideas like that, we are in touch with the wonderful true nature of how things are. How can we get beyond our ideas of birth and death, coming and going? First we have to see that things are impermanent; they manifest and pass away. Then we are free to look more

deeply and see that reality is beyond all ideas. It is like a coin. At first we see that it has two sides, but when we look more deeply we see that both sides of the coin are made from the same metal. The essence of the coin is the metal. The two sides both arise from the metal. In the same way, birth and death, coming and going, being and nonbeing, permanence and annihilation all arise from the same essence.

Many years ago, I could not imagine that there would one day be nonsmoking flights. I suffered when I sat amongst the smokers. Yet awakening was possible. So many of us demanded nonsmoking flights that they now exist. Awakening is possible if we are determined to practice. We practice to awaken ourselves and others. This is the only way to address a difficult situation. Now, we are much more aware of the foods we eat. Cigarette packages contain health warnings. This is the fruit of awakening. We should wake up as individuals and as nations. Now we can go on to make laws protecting us from other harmful things like weapons and films full of sex and violence.

Every one of us has the seeds of awakening, insight, compassion, and loving kindness. Once in touch with these, we inspire confidence in the people around us. We have to help each other practice as a Sangha. When we see a group of people living mindfully, we have confidence in the future. We cannot let the younger generation lose hope. That would be the end. We have to live our daily lives in a way that makes the future possible.

As I have mentioned previously, some of our children spend many hours a day watching television and touching violence, fear, craving, anger, and despair. The job of educators is to create a situation that helps them touch the healthy, healing elements inside and around them. Those of us who are teachers should use our intelligence and creativity to do this work. We have to ask our representative in Congress to practice with us and make the kinds of laws that we need for our protection and the protection of our children. Now is not the time for us to meditate as sole practitioners; we have to practice meditation as groups, cities, and nations. Our collective insight comes from individual insight, and vice versa. We practice on both levels so that we will know what to do and what not to do on the individual, familial, and national levels. Mindfulness is our instrument. Without mindfulness, negative things will continue to take place everywhere. Awareness helps us know which actions to stop and which to continue.

## **ENJOYING OUR BREATHING**



The Sutra on the Full Awareness of Breathing is a reminder that we can use the sixteen exercises and the Four Foundations of Mindfulness to bring our breath, body, and mind into harmony. We are able to use our breath to bring ourselves into a state of meditation, of stopping and looking deeply. Meditation is not an escape. It is the courage to look at reality with mindfulness and concentration. Our world needs wisdom and insight.

The practice of resting, of stopping, is crucial. If we cannot rest, it is because we have not stopped. We have continued to run. We began to run a long time ago. We even continue to run in our sleep. We think that happiness and well-being aren't possible in the here and the now. That belief is inherent in us. We have received the seed of that belief from our parents and our grand-parents. They struggled all of their lives and believed that happiness was only possible in the future. That's why when we were children, we already had the habit of running. We believed that happiness was something to seek in the future. But the teaching of the Buddha is that you can be happy right here, right now. The conditions for your well-being and happiness are found in the present moment.

# CHAPTER THREE

## Breathing Practices

### BREATHING GATHAS

Let the Buddha breathe,  
Let the Buddha walk.  
I don't need to breathe,  
I don't need to walk.

Buddha is breathing,  
Buddha is walking.  
I enjoy the breathing,  
I enjoy the walking.

Buddha is the breathing,  
Buddha is the walking.  
I am the breathing,  
I am the walking.

There is only the breathing,  
There is only the walking.  
There is no one breathing,  
There is no one walking.

Peace while breathing,  
Peace while walking.  
Peace is the breathing,  
Peace is the walking.

## GUIDED MEDITATIONS

Following are some ways for you to guide yourself or each other in sitting meditation, based on the exercises in the sutra. You can practice each exercise for as long as you need in order to realize its meaning. You might like to practice one exercise for as long as ten minutes. If the practice is enjoyable and you feel nourished by it, you know you are practicing correctly.

The words in parentheses after each exercise are abbreviations of the exercise for you to recall easily the subject of your meditation. You do not have to practice all the exercises here during one sitting.

1. *“Breathing in, I know I am breathing in. Breathing out, I know I am breathing out.” ( In, Out)*
2. *“Breathing in, my breath goes deep. Breathing out, my breath goes slow.” (Deep, Slow)*
3. *“Breathing in, I am aware of my whole body. Breathing out, I calm my whole body.” (Aware of my body, Calming my body)*
4. *“Breathing in, I know I am alive. Breathing out, I feel the joy of being alive.” (Alive, Joy of being alive)*
5. *“Breathing in, I know I have the opportunity to meditate. Breathing out, I feel happy to have that opportunity.” (Opportunity to meditate, Happy)*
6. *“Breathing in, I am embracing my unpleasant feeling. Breathing out, I am calming my feeling.” (Embracing my feeling, Calming my feeling)*
7. *“Breathing in, I am aware of right mindfulness in me. Breathing out, it makes me happy.” (Wholesome mental formation, I am happy)*
8. *“Breathing in, I concentrate on a mental formation which is present. Breathing out, I look deeply at that mental formation.” (Concentrate on mental formation, Look deeply at it)*
9. *“Breathing in, I open up my mind to look deeply at my fear. Breathing out, there is liberation from fear.” (Opening up my mind, Liberation)*
10. *“Breathing in, I observe a flower. Breathing out, I contemplate the impermanence of the flower.” (Observing a flower, Contemplating its impermanence)*
11. *“Breathing in, I look deeply at the object of my desire. Breathing out, I see the disappearance of desire with regard to that object.” (Object of desire, Disappearance of desire)*
12. *“Breathing in, I observe the coming and going of the wave. Breathing out, I contemplate the no-coming, no-going of the water.”*

- (Coming and going of the wave, No-coming, no-going of the water)*
13. *“Breathing in, I let go of the idea that this body is me. Breathing out, I am not caught in this body.” (This body not me, I am not caught in this body)*
14. *“Breathing in, I let go of the idea that I did not exist before I was born. Breathing out, I let go of the idea that I will not exist after I die.” (I am not born, I do not die)*

In the second exercise, do not force your breathing to become deeper or slower. This is an exercise of mere recognition. Your breath has actually become deeper and slower as the result of practicing the first exercise. In the third exercise, because of your awareness of your body, you will know how calm it is and you will know what bodily factors need calming. In the fourth and fifth exercises, you do not want to repeat the words “joy” and “happy” without giving them a content. Here we have chosen the fact that you are alive and the fact that you have the chance to meditate as being occasions for your happiness, but you can find other reasons for joy and happiness and substitute them in this exercise. The first five breathing exercises are intended to calm, stop, focus, concentrate, and nourish us. Without these elements in your sitting meditation practice, you will tire of sitting. Only when you feel happy can you have concentration. You cannot achieve concentration by forcing yourself to concentrate.

Methods seven and eight in the Anapanasati Sutta become one breathing exercise here, number six. You are aware of an unpleasant feeling or a pleasant feeling that has the capacity to poison or excite you, and you calm these feelings. In the seventh exercise, your mind feels happy because you know that in your consciousness is the capacity to realize wholesome mental formations. The capacity to be mindful, caring, and loving is within everyone. The first seven exercises here cover the first ten methods of the Anapanasati Sutta, and they are to nourish and to calm.

In exercise eight, you concentrate your mind on a mental formation. It could be wholesome, unwholesome, or neutral. When you concentrate, you have to concentrate on something; and when you are liberated, you have to be liberated from something. It is not fruitful to repeat the words “concentration” and “liberation” without there being an object for your concentration. When you concentrate and look deeply at a mental formation, you can see why it is there, and that understanding will help you mind in exercise nine, you need to have developed concentration in exercise eight. Exercises eight and nine are an opportunity for us to look at the mental formations that make us suffer.

In exercise ten, you can observe any phenomena: yourself, another person, or an object in order to contemplate impermanence. Here we have chosen to observe a flower. Buddhist monks and nuns meditate every day on the impermanence of their own person.

In exercise eleven, you should meditate on a specific object of desire. It can be a person or a thing. If a person has become the object of your desire, it can be unpleasant for them if they feel they are losing their freedom. This exercise can help you not be caught in waiting to possess or dominate others. Desire disappears when you see that the true nature of the object you desire is impermanent, has no separate self, and cannot be grasped. If you are not satisfied with what is available in the present moment, you will never be satisfied by attaining what you think will bring you happiness in the future.

In exercise twelve, you contemplate the cessation of ideas concerning birth and death, coming and going, high and low, using the images of water and wave to help you.

In exercise thirteen, you contemplate that this body is not you, and that these feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness are not you either. The vegetation, the air, and the water are constantly contributing to this body. Feelings and perceptions are dependent on your education, your ancestry, your friends, your teacher, and your upbringing. Consciousness is an vast field containing all the seeds, with constant output and constant input.

In exercise fourteen, you have to see very clearly the reason for not being born and for not dying. Your so-called birthday was not the day you began to exist. You were in your parents before that, and prior to that in a line of ancestors. After death, you will continue in the clouds and in the dust that is part of the Earth, and in the descendants of your blood family and in your spiritual heirs.

## **I HAVE ARRIVED**

A number of years ago, I went to India to visit the Buddhist community of the untouchables. A friend organized this teaching tour for me. He belonged to that caste, which has been discriminated against for many thousands of years. He was sitting with me in the bus, next to me on my right. I was enjoying the Indian countryside very much. When I looked at him, I saw that he was very tense. He had done everything to make my visit pleasant, but he continued to worry. This habit energy had been transmitted to him from many generations

of ancestors. They had struggled all their lives, for many generations, against discrimination. It is very hard to transform that kind of habit. I said, “Dear friend, why are you so tense? There is nothing to do now here on the bus. We can enjoy the countryside. When we arrive, our friends will come to the station to get us. Sit back enjoy the countryside and smile.” He said, okay, But just two minutes later, he looked exactly as before, very tense thinking about the future, and not being able to be at ease in the here and the now.

Our practice is to be aware that all wonders of life are available in the here and the now, and that we should stop running. While practicing walking meditation, we should stop. While practicing sitting meditation, we should stop. While enjoying our breakfast, we should stop. There are some people who sit down to have a meal but continue to run inside. They are not capable of stopping, being in the here and the now, and just enjoying a slice of tomato or a carrot. Let us support each other in order to really stop. The Buddha said, “The past is already gone. The future is not yet here. There is we miss the present moment, we miss our appointment with life. We can all understand this.

But our habit energy is so strong. That is why we need each other in order to stop and establish ourselves in the present moment. Eating together is an occasion for us to stop. Walking together is also an opportunity to stop. Sitting together, enjoying our in-breath and out-breath, is another opportunity to stop. Every time the runaway horse of habit energy shows its head, pushing us on, we breathe in and out and say, “My dear friend, I know you, the habit energy of running.” We smile to it, and it is not able to push us any more. It will go away. Sometime later, if it manifests itself again as a mental formation, we breathe in and out and say, “My dear friend, I know you.” We simply recognize a mental formation. Every time we practice like this, it loses some of its strength. We don’t have to fight. All we have to do is recognize it and smile to it.

I have arrived. I am home  
in the here, in the now.  
I am solid, I am free.  
In the ultimate I dwell.

“I have arrived. I am home.” Our true home is in the here and the now. It is in the island of self within. We can only touch life in all wonders in the here

and the now. It's like when we hear the bell. We practice, "Listen, listen. This wonderful sound brings me back to my true home."

Later, you might want to use the second line of the gatha, "In the here and in the now." "In the here" is for your in-breath; "in the now" is for your out-breath. "The here and the now" is the address of your true home. "In the here and in the now" means the same as "I have arrived. I am home." They are just different words. It is up to you how long to enjoy each exercise.

Later on, you may use the third line, "I am solid. I am free."

This is not auto-suggestion. If you have arrived, then you have cultivated more solidity and freedom. And you walk mindfully, you touch your true home, and you become more solid, because you are not running anymore. You have reclaimed the freedom to be yourself. Before that, you were a victim of the past and the future, both pulling you in different directions. Now you are more yourself; you have reclaimed some of your liberty. "I am solid. I am free." You are no longer a victim.

In the teachings of the Buddha, solidity and freedom are the two characteristics of nirvana. You begin to touch nirvana when you cultivate mindfulness of walking or breathing. At the same time, you cultivate the elements of solidity and freedom. Happiness is possible on the ground of solidity and freedom.

"In the ultimate I dwell." We can't understand the last line unless we learn how to touch the ground of our being. There are birth and death, a beginning and an end, being and nonbeing, high and low, success and failure. We are used to dwelling in this dimension. We have not had the chance to touch this dimension deeply in order to dwell in the ultimate dimension. But the two dimensions are out of the ultimate dimension, or the ultimate dimension is out of the historical dimension. It is like the wave and the water. You cannot take the wave out of the water, nor the water out of the wave.

Don't throw away impermanence and nonself in order to touch nirvana. If you throw away impermanence and nonself, there will be no nirvana left. It is like if you throw the water away, there will be no waves left, and if you throw all the waves away, there will be no water left. That is why when we touch the historical dimension deeply, we also touch nirvana. This is a very deep Buddhist teaching. We find relief from our suffering by embracing our despair, fear, and sorrow, but the greatest relief comes through touching nirvana.

This solidity and freedom introduces us to the world of the ultimate. The last

line of the gatha, “In the ultimate I Dwell” is best understood when we practice the last four exercises on mindful breathing concerning our perceptions. So let us help each other enjoy our sitting. Sitting is an enjoyment, not hard labor for enlightenment. Mindful walking is an enjoyment, and eating breakfast is an enjoyment. If we enjoy the practice, then the practice becomes pleasant, nourishing, and healing for us.

## **BEING AN ISLAND UNTO MYSELF**

Being an island unto myself.  
As an island unto myself.  
Buddha is my mindfulness.  
Shining near, shining far.  
Dharma is my breathing, guarding body and mind.  
I am free.

Being an island unto myself.  
As an island unto myself.  
Sangha is my skandhas, working in harmony.  
Taking refuge in myself.  
Coming back to myself.  
I am free.

This practice brings us home. The Buddha said that there is an island in each of us, and when we go home to ourselves, we are on that safe island. There, we touch the energy of the Buddha, which sheds its light on any situation, enabling us to see near and far and to know what to do. We touch the living Dharma on that island by practicing mindful breathing. Mindful breathing and mindfulness practice are the living Dharma. They generate energy and protect our body and mind.

You can touch the energy of the Sangha within yourself in your Five Skandhas: body, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness. Though mindful breathing, these elements come together to work in harmony. Unhappiness, sorrow, fear, and conflict are transformed into harmony. When we touch the energy of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, we are safe, and not overwhelmed by the negative energy of confusion, despair, and



panic. Returning to our island and practicing mindful breathing helps tremendously.

I always practice this gatha at the most difficult times. If I were in an airplane and thought it was going to crash, I would practice breathing in and out. It is the best thing to do. Please cherish this practice. It has saved many lives. It is a Dharma treasure. You can memorize this gatha and practice it while driving, making breakfast, or having lunch. Dwelling in the island of self, you chew each morsel of food with this gatha in mind. You can practice arriving, being at home, and being in a pure land. You will feel as though you are surrounded by the Sangha and are absorbing its energy. You are also producing energy and offering it to the Sangha at the same time.

# APPENDIX ONE

## Anapananusmriti Sutras

*Translated from the Chinese by Thich Nhat Hanh from the  
Samyukta Agama (Tsa A Han, Chapter 29,  
Taisho Revised Tripitaka, number 99)*

### I

THIS IS WHAT I HEARD. At that time the Buddha was staying in the Jeta grove in Anathapindika's park in the town of Shravasti during the rainy season retreat. At that time, many elder disciples were spending the retreat with the Blessed One. There were *bhikshus* staying all around where the Blessed One was, at the roots of trees or in caves. The number of young *bhikshus* present during that retreat was also quite great. They came to where the Buddha was staying, prostrated at his feet, and then withdrew and sat down to one side. The Buddha gave teachings to the young *bhikshus* on many subjects, instructing them, teaching them, enlightening them, and delighting them. After giving these teachings, the Lord was silent. When the young *bhikshus* had heard these teachings from the Buddha, they felt great joy. They stood up, prostrated to the Lord, and withdrew. After that the young *bhikshus* approached the elders. When they had paid respects to the elder monks, they sat down to one side. At this time, the elder monks thought to themselves, We should take charge of these young monks and give them teachings. Some of us can instruct one monk, others can instruct two or three monks or even more. They put this idea into practice immediately. Some elders taught one young monk, others taught two or three young monks, and others again instructed more than three young monks. There were elders who guided and instructed up to sixty young *bhikshus*.

At that time when it was the end of the retreat and time for the Inviting Ceremony, the World Honored One looked over the assembly of *bhikshus* and told them, " Well done, well done. I am very happy to see you doing the things that are right and fitting for *bhikshus* to do. Please continue to study and practice diligently like this, and please stay here in Shravasti for another

month, until the full moon day of the month of Kattika.”

When many bhikshus who had been spending the rainy season retreat scattered about in the countryside heard that the World Honored One would stay at Shravasti until the full moon day of Komudi, they performed the Inviting Ceremony, finished sewing their robes, and without delay took their robes and bowl and left for the town of Shravasti. When they came to the Anathapindika Monastery, they put away their robes and bowl, washed their feet, and went to the place where the Buddha was sitting. They paid their respects to the Buddha and then withdrew a little and sat down to one side. Then the World Honored One taught the Dharma to the monks who had just arrived from the surrounding areas. He instructed them on many topics, enlightening and delighting them. When he finished, he sat in silence. When the monks from the surrounding areas heard the teachings, they were delighted. They stood up and prostrated, and then went to the elders. After they paid their respects to these monks, they withdrew a little and sat down to one side. At this time the elder monks thought to themselves, We should also accept the monks who have just come from the surrounding areas, and each of us can instruct one monk, or two monks, or three monks, or more than three monks. They put this idea into practice immediately. There were elders who taught just one of the newly arrived bhikshus, and there were elders who taught more. There were even elders who instructed up to sixty newly arrived bhikshus. The elders did the work of instructing and encouraging the bhikshus who came from the surrounding regions, teaching them everything in order, putting first what should go first and adding later what should be taught later, in a very skillful fashion.

When the day of the full moon came after the Uposatha observances had been performed, the World Honored One sat before the assembly of monks. After he had cast his gaze over the whole community of bhikshus, he said, “Well done. Well done, bhikshus! I am delighted to see that you have done and are doing the things that are right and fitting for a bhikshu to do. I am very happy when I see that you have done and are doing the things that are necessary for a bhikshu to do. Bhikshus, the Buddhas of the past also had communities of bhikshus who did the things that are right and fitting for a bhikshu to do. The Buddhas of the future will also have communities of bhikshus like this community of bhikshus, and they also will do the things that are right and fitting for a bhikshu to do as you today are doing and have done.

“In this community of bhikshus, there are, among the elders, those who have accomplished the first *dhyana*, the second *dhyana*, the third *dhyana*, and the fourth *dhyana*. There are those who have accomplished the *maitri*

*samadhi* (concentration of loving kindness), the *karuna samadhi* (concentration of compassion), the *mudita samadhi* (concentration of joy), and the *upeksha samadhi* (concentration of equanimity). There are those who have realized the limitless-space concentration, the limitless-consciousness concentration, the concentration of no thing exists, and the concentration of no perception and no non-perception. There are those who are always able to remain in one of these *samadhis*. There are those who have untied the three basic internal knots and have attained the fruit of stream enterer. They have no fear of falling into the paths of great suffering and are firmly on the way to perfect enlightenment. They only need to return seven times more to be born in the worlds of gods and men before being liberated from the suffering of birth and death. There are monks who, after they have untied the three basic internal knots and have nearly transformed the three poisons of craving, hatred, and ignorance, have realized the fruit of once-returned. There are monks who have untied the first five internal knots and have realized the fruit of non-returning. They are able to reach nirvana in this life and do not need to be born again in the world, which is subject to birth and death. There are bhikshus who have realized the immeasurable miraculous intelligence and even in this world are able to use the divine eye, the divine ear, knowing others' minds, recollecting previous births, knowing others' previous births, and ending all the *ashravas* (roots of affliction). There are monks who, thanks to practicing the meditation on impurity, have transformed the energy of attachment; thanks to the meditation on loving kindness, have transformed the energy of hatred; thanks to looking deeply at impermanence, have transformed the energy of pride; and thanks to the practice of conscious breathing, have been able to put an end to the [ignorance and suffering that arise in the fields of] feelings and perceptions.

“Bhikshus, what is the way to practice conscious breathing so that we eliminate the [ignorance and the suffering in the fields of] feelings and perceptions?”

—Samyukta Agama, Sutta No. 815  
translated from the Chinese

## II

“A bhikshu who practices the method of conscious breathing very diligently will realize a state of peace and calm in his body and in his mind. Conscious breathing will lead to right mindfulness, the ability to look deeply, and a clear and single-minded perception, so that he is in a position to realize all the

Dharma doors that give rise to the fruit of nirvana.

“A bhikshu who lives near a small village or a town puts on his *sanghati* robe in the morning, picks up his bowl, and goes into the inhabited area to seek alms. All the time he skillfully guards his six senses and establishes himself in mindfulness. After he has received alms, he returns to his place of abode, takes off his sanghati robe, puts down his bowl, and washes his feet. Then he goes into the forest and sits at the foot of a tree or sits in an empty room or out in the open air. He sits very straight, maintaining mindfulness before him. He lets go of all his cravings. He calms and clarifies his body and mind. He eliminates the five hindrances—craving, anger, dullness, agitation, and suspicion—and all the other afflictions that can weaken his understanding and create obstacles for him in his progress towards nirvana. Then he practices as follows:

1. ‘Breathing in, I know I am breathing in. Breathing out, I know I am breathing out.’
2. ‘Breathing in a long breath or a short breath, I know whether it is a long breath or a short breath. Breathing out a long breath or a short breath, I know whether it is a long breath or a short breath.’
3. ‘Breathing in, I am aware of my whole body. Breathing out, I am aware of my whole body.’
4. ‘Breathing in, I calm my whole body. Breathing out, I calm my whole body.’
5. ‘Breathing in, I experience joy. Breathing out, I experience joy.’
6. ‘Breathing in, I experience happiness. Breathing out, I experience happiness.’
7. ‘Breathing in, I am aware of the feeling [that is present now]. Breathing out, I am aware of the feeling [that is present now].’
8. ‘Breathing in, I calm the feeling [that is present now]. Breathing out, I calm the feeling [that is present now].’
9. ‘Breathing in, I am aware of the activity of mind [that is present now]. Breathing out, I am aware of the activity of mind [that is present now].’
10. ‘Breathing in, I make the activity of my mind happy. Breathing out, I make the activity of my mind happy.’
11. ‘Breathing in, I bring right concentration to bear on the activity of my mind. Breathing out, I bring right concentration to bear on the activity of my mind.’
12. ‘Breathing in, I liberate the activity of my mind. Breathing out, I liberate the activity of my mind.’
13. ‘Breathing in, I observe the impermanent nature of all dharmas.

- Breathing out, I observe the impermanent nature of all dharmas.’
14. ‘Breathing in, I observe the letting go of all dharmas. Breathing out, I observe the letting go of all dharmas.’
15. ‘Breathing in, I observe no craving with regard to all dharmas. Breathing out, I observe no craving with regard to all dharmas.’
16. ‘Breathing in, I observe the nature of cessation of all dharmas. Breathing out, I observe the nature of cessation of all dharmas.’

“Bhikshus, that is the practice of conscious breathing, whose function it is to calm the body and mind, to bring about right mindfulness, looking deeply, and clear and single-minded perception so that the practitioner is in a position to realize all the Dharma doors that lead to the fruit of nirvana.”

—Samyukta Agama, Sutra No. 803  
translated from the Chinese

### III

At that time, the Venerable Ananda was practicing meditation in a deserted place. It occurred to him, Can there be a way of practice if, when it is practiced to fruition, one will realize the ability to remain in the Four Establishments of Mindfulness, the Seven Factors of Awakening, and the two factors of wisdom and liberation? With this in mind, he left his sitting meditation and went to the place where the Buddha was staying, bowed his head, prostrated at the feet of the Buddha, withdrew a little, and sat down to one side. He said, “ World Honored One, I was practicing meditation on my own in a deserted place, when the question suddenly occurred to me, Can there be a way of practice if, when it is practiced to fruition, one will realize the ability to remain in the Four Establishments of Mindfulness, the Seven Factors of Awakening, and the two factors of wisdom and liberation?”

The Buddha instructed Ananda, “There is a way of practice which, if brought to fruition, will enable one to realize remaining in the Four Establishments of Mindfulness and, by remaining in the Four Establishments, the Seven Factors of Awakening will be realized. By realizing the Seven Factors of Awakening, wisdom and liberation will be realized. This way of practice is conscious breathing.

“How is conscious breathing to be practiced? A noble disciple practices as follows: ‘Breathing in, I know I am breathing in. Breathing out, I know I am breathing out. Breathing in and breathing out, I know whether my in-breath and out-breath are short or long. Breathing in and breathing out, I am aware of my whole body.’ While practicing like this, he dwells in the practice of

observing body in the body, whether it be his own body or another body. At this point, the object of the bhikshu's observation that he follows closely is the body.

“A noble disciple practices as follows: ‘Breathing in and out, I am aware of joy. Breathing in and out, I am aware of happiness. Breathing in and out, I am aware of the feeling [that is present]. Breathing in and out, I calm the feeling [that is present].’ As he practices like this, he abides in the practice of observing feelings in the feelings, whether they be his own feelings or the feelings of another. At this point, the object of his observation that he follows is the feelings.

“A noble disciple practices looking deeply as follows: ‘Breathing in and out, I am aware of the activity of mind [that is present]. Breathing in and out, I make the activity of mind happy. Breathing in and out, I bring concentration to bear on the activity of mind. Breathing in and out, I liberate the activity of mind.’ As he does this, he abides in the practice of observing mental activities in mental activities, whether the mental activity is his own or that of someone else. At this point, the object of observation that he follows is mental activities.

“A noble disciple practices as follows: ‘Breathing in and out, I observe the impermanent nature of things. Breathing in and out, I observe the nature of letting go. Breathing in and out, I observe the nature of no more craving. Breathing in and out, I observe the nature of cessation.’ As he practices like this, he abides in the observation of phenomena in phenomena, whether they are phenomena in his own person or outside his own person. At this point, the object of his observation that he follows is phenomena.

“Ananda, the practice of conscious breathing to realize dwelling in the Four Establishments of Mindfulness is like that.”

The Venerable Ananda asked, “World Honored One, the practice of conscious breathing to realize dwelling in the Four Establishments of Mindfulness is as you have described. But how do we practice the Four Establishments of Mindfulness in order to realize the Seven Factors of Awakening?”

The Buddha said, “If a bhikshu is able to maintain mindfulness while he practices observation of the body in the body, if he is able to abide in right mindfulness and bind mindfulness to himself in such a way that it is not lost, then he is practicing the Factor of Awakening called right mindfulness. The factor of right mindfulness is the means that leads to success in the Factor of Awakening called investigation of dharmas. When the factor of investigation of dharmas is fully realized, it is the means that leads to success in the Factor of Awakening called energy. When the factor of energy is fully realized, it is

the means that leads to success in the realization of the Factor of Awakening called joy, because it makes the mind joyful. When the factor of joy is fully realized, it is the means that leads to success in the realization of the Factor of Awakening called ease, because it makes the body and the mind light, peaceful, and happy. When the factor of ease is fully realized, the body and the mind are happy, and that helps us to be successful in the practice of the Factor of Awakening called concentration. When the factor of concentration is fully realized, craving is cut off, and that is the means that leads to success in the practice of the Factor of Awakening called equanimity. Thanks to the continued practice, the factor of equanimity will be realized fully [just as have been the other Factors of Awakening].

“When the noble disciple practices observation of the feelings in the feelings or observation of the activities of mind in the activities of mind or observation of phenomena in phenomena, he is also making it possible for the Seven Factors of Awakening to be fully realized in the same way as he does when he practices observation of the body in the body.

“Ananda, that is called the practice of the Four Establishments of Mindfulness with a view to full realization of the Seven Factors of Awakening.”

The Venerable Ananda addressed the Buddha, “The World Honored One has just taught the practice of the Four Establishments of Mindfulness that brings about the full realization of the Seven Factors of Awakening. But how do we practice the Seven Factors of Awakening in order to bring about the full realization of understanding and liberation? Lord, please teach us.”

The Buddha taught Ananda, “When a bhikshu practices the Awakening Factor of mindfulness relying on putting aside, relying on no more craving, relying on cessation, he goes in the direction of equanimity, and then the strength of the Awakening Factor called mindfulness will help him realize fully the practices of clear understanding and liberation. When a bhikshu practices the other Factors of Awakening: investigation of dharmas, energy, joy, ease, concentration, and equanimity, relying on putting aside, relying on no more craving, relying on cessation and going in the direction of equanimity, the strength of these other Factors of Awakening will also help him to realize fully the practices of clear understanding and liberation. Ananda, we can call it becoming one of the different methods or the mutual nourishment of the different methods. These thirteen methods all advance when one of them advances. One of these methods can be the door through which we enter, and if we continue our journey after that using each of the other methods, we will arrive at the full development of all thirteen methods.”

When the Buddha had finished speaking, Ananda was delighted to put the



teachings into practice.

—*Samyukta Agama*, Sutra No. 810

translated from the Chinese

## APPENDIX TWO

### A Point of View on the Practice

NEITHER THE SUTRA on the Full Awareness of Breathing nor the Sutra on the Four Establishments of Mindfulness mentions the technique of counting the breath. There is also no mention of the Six Wonderful Dharma Doors: counting, following, stopping, observing, returning, and calming. Nor is there any reference to the *kasina* (visualized image) meditation, the Four Jhanas, or the Four Formless Concentrations. These teachings were probably developed somewhat later to serve many levels of students. We need not criticize them for being later teachings, certainly not before we have practiced them and seen for ourselves if they work well.

Counting is an excellent technique for beginners.<sup>25</sup> Breathing in, count “one.” Breathing out, count “one.” Breathing in, count “two.” Breathing out, count “two.” Continue up to ten and then start counting over again. If at any time you forget where you are, begin again with “one.” The method of counting helps us refrain from dwelling on troublesome thoughts; instead we concentrate on our breathing and the number. When we have developed some control over our thinking, counting may become tedious and we can abandon it and just follow the breath itself. This is called “following.”

Well-known commentaries, such as the *Patisambhida Magga* (*Path of No Hesitation*) and the *Visuddhi Magga* (*Path of Purity*), teach that while we breathe, we should be aware of our nostrils, the place where air enters and leaves the body. Just as when we cut a log we keep our eyes on the place where the saw touches the log (rather than looking at the teeth of the saw), we pay attention to the nostrils and not to the air as it enters the body. Many commentators point out that if you follow the breath entering the body, then the object of your attention is not a single object, and thus concentration will be difficult. For this reason, they say that “the whole body” in the third method means the whole body of breath and not the whole body of the practitioner. If we study the sutra, we can see that their explanation is not correct. In the third breathing exercise, the object of attention is not just the breath. It is the whole body of the practitioner, in the same way that the object of the seventh exercise is all feelings and the object of the ninth exercise is the whole mind.

In the fourth exercise (“*Breathing in, I calm my whole body*”), the expression “whole body” cannot mean just the whole body of breath either. All four preliminary exercises take the physical body as the object, since the body is the first of the Four Establishments of Mindfulness. Even if in the first two exercises the object is just the breathing, that includes the body, since the breath is a part of our physical organism. In the third and fourth exercises, the entire physical body is the object.

All the commentaries—the *Patisambhida Magga* (*Path of No Hesitation*) by Mahanama, the *Vimutti Magga* (*Path of Liberation*) by Upatissa, and the *Visuddhi Magga* (*Path of Purity*) by Buddhaghosa—recommend that practitioners focus on the tip of the nose rather than follow the breath as it enters the body. If the practitioner follows the breath into the body, they say, the practitioner will be dispersed and unable to enter into the Four Jhanas. The *Vimutti Magga* was written at the end of the fourth century C.E., the *Patisambhida Magga* at the beginning of the fifth, and the *Visuddhi Magga* shortly after that. All of these emphasize the necessity of stopping (*shamatha*) as the prerequisite for observing (*vipashyana*). Here, stopping means the Four Jhanas and the Four Formless Concentrations. Focusing the mind at the tip of the nose and being aware of the first moment of contact of air at its place of entry into the body, just as the carpenter looks only at the place of contact of the saw’s teeth as they enter and leave the wood, gradually the rough, uneven breathing becomes delicate and subtle, and finally all discrimination disappears. At this point, the sign (*kasina*) will appear, like a ball of cotton, giving the practitioner a feeling of lightness and ease like a fresh, cool breeze. If the practitioner follows this sign, he or she enters concentration, the first of the Four Jhanas. The first jhana is the first step, followed by the second, third, and fourth jhanas. In each state of meditative concentration, the five sense organs are inactive, while the mind of the practitioner is lucid and awake. After the Four Jhanas come the Four Formless Concentrations: the realm of limitless space, the realm of limitless consciousness, the realm of no materiality, and the realm where the concepts “perceiving” and “not perceiving” no longer apply.

We must examine the extent to which Buddhist meditation practice was influenced by the Yoga-Upanishadic systems. Before realizing the Way, Shakyamuni Buddha studied with many Brahman yogis, from whom he learned the Four Jhanas and the Four Formless Concentrations. After experiencing these, he said that concentrations like “the realm of no materiality” and “the realm where perceiving and not perceiving do not apply,” taught by the masters Arada Kalama and Udraka Ramaputra, cannot lead to ultimate emancipation. As we have seen, he did not mention the Four

Jhanas or the Four Formless Concentrations in the Anapanasati or the Satipatthana, the two fundamental sutras on meditation. Therefore, we must conclude that the practices of the Four Jhanas and the Four Formless Concentrations are not necessary for arriving at the fruit of practice, the awakened mind. The methods of mindfulness taught by the Buddha in the Sutra on the Four Establishments of Mindfulness can be seen as the incomparable path leading to emancipation. There are meditation students who have practiced for many years and who, having failed to attain the Four Jhanas, think they do not have the capacity to realize awakening. There are others who stray into unhealthy meditation practices and lose all peace of mind, just because they want so much to enter the Four Jhanas. Only by practicing correctly, according to the teachings of the Buddha in the Anapanasati and Satipatthana Suttas, can we be sure we will not stray into practices we may later regret.

In Vietnam at the beginning of the third century C.E., the meditation master Tang Hôï, when writing the preface to the Anapanasati in Chinese, referred to the Four Jhanas, but the Four Jhanas of Tang Hôï were combined with observation—observing the body, sky and earth, prosperity and decline, coming and going, and so on. Tang Hôï also spoke of the Six Wonderful Dharma Doors (counting the breath, following the breath, concentrating the mind, observing to throw light on all that exists, returning to the source of mind, and going beyond the concepts of subject and object). Moreover, Tang Hôï referred to the technique of concentrating the mind at the tip of the nose. The Xiu Hang Dao Di Sutra, in the chapter called “Enumerating,” also refers to the Four Jhanas, the technique of counting the breath, the Six Wonderful Dharma Doors, and the technique of concentrating the mind at the tip of the nose.<sup>26</sup> The Zeng Yi A Han (Ekottara Agama), in the chapter on breathing, also refers to the Four Jhanas and the technique of concentrating the mind at the tip of the nose, but it does not refer to counting the breath or the Six Wonderful Dharma Doors.<sup>27</sup>

We should remember that the sutras were memorized and transmitted orally for hundreds of years before they were written down. Therefore, many sutras must have been at least somewhat altered according to a variety of influences and circumstances during those centuries. The Anapanasati and Satipatthana Suttas can be seen as two precious accounts of early Buddhist meditation practice, since they were handed down by the monks in an especially careful way. It seems to be the case that mistakes and outside additions were very few in these two sutras.

In the history of Buddhism, some classical sutras were affected during their

transmission by outside influences, both in the Southern schools and the Northern schools, but especially in the Northern schools. Studying Mahayana sutras, we must remember to look again and discover the depth of the fundamental “source” sutras. The seeds of all important ideas of the Mahayana are already contained in these source sutras. If we go back to the source, we develop a more clear and unshakable view of the Mahayana sutras. If we merely sit on the two giant wings of the Mahayana bird, we may fly far away and lose all contact with the original abode from which the bird arose.

Although the Anapanasati and Satipatthana Suttas do not refer to the Four Jhanas and the Four Formless Concentrations, we should not conclude that they do not emphasize the importance of concentration. Meditation has two aspects: stopping (shamatha), and observation or looking deeply (vipashyana). Stopping is concentration, and looking deeply is insight. The Full Awareness of the Breath, or of any other object such as the body, the feelings, the mind, the objects of mind, and so forth, all aim at the goal of concentrating the mind on an object so that it is possible to see the object in all its depth. Concentrating the mind is stopping it from running around from one object to another in order to stay with just one object. We stay with one object in order to observe it and look deeply into it. In this way, stopping and observing become one.

Thanks to our ability to stop, we are able to observe. The more deeply we observe, the greater our mental concentration becomes. Stopping and collecting our mind, we naturally become able to see. In observing, the mind becomes increasingly still. We do not need to search for anything more. We only need to practice the simple exercises proposed by the Buddha in these two sutras.

## APPENDIX THREE

### A Brief History

THE SUTRA on the Full Awareness of Breathing presented here is a translation from the Pali of the Anapanasati Sutta. In the Chinese Tripitaka, there is a Da An Ban Shou Yi Jing (Greater Anapanasati Sutta).<sup>28</sup>

This text cites An Shi Gao as translator into Chinese. Master Shi Gao was a Parthian by birth who went to China in the later Han period.<sup>29</sup> There is also a preface to this sutra written by Master Tang Hôî. The Da An Ban Shou Yi Jing seems to be different from the Pali Anapanasati and is probably a commentary on it and not just an expansion or embellishment of it. At the end of the text, the engraver of the wood block says, “Judging from the style of the sutra, it seems the copyist is at fault: the original text and the commentary are so intertwined that it is no longer possible to distinguish between them.”

The original translation by Shi Gao of the Sanskrit (or Prakrit) text into Chinese has probably been lost. The Da An Ban Shou Yi Jing is only the commentary that was originally printed below the text of the sutra. It does not begin with the words that usually begin a sutra, “Thus have I heard.” According to Tang Hôî’s preface, the person responsible for the annotation and commentary was Chen Hui, and Tang Hôî himself only assisted in the work by correcting, altering, and editing it.

Chen Hui was a disciple of Master An Shi Gao, who traveled from Loyang, China to Giao Chi (present-day Tonkin or North Vietnam) with two fellow disciples, Gan Lin and Pi Ye. They may have brought the original translation of the Anapanasati Sutta with them. The commentary and preface were written by Tang Hôî in Vietnam before the year 229 C.E.

Tang Hôî’s parents were traders from Sogdia in central Asia who had settled in Vietnam, and Tang Hôî was born in Vietnam, became a monk in Vietnam, and studied Sanskrit and Chinese there. Before traveling to the kingdom of Wu in southern China in the year 255 to spread the Dharma, he had already taught the Dharma in Vietnam and had composed and translated many works into Chinese. He died in the kingdom of Wu in the year 280.

In the Chinese *Tripitaka*, there are a number of other sutras on the Full Awareness of Breathing: Zeng Yi A Han, Ekottara Agama, chapters seven and eight on the theme “Awareness of Breathing”; the sutra Xiu Hang Dao Di,

Book Five, chapter twenty-three, on “Breath Counting”; and in the Tsa A Han (Samyukta Agama sutra collection), the chapter on Full Awareness of Breathing.<sup>30</sup> If we combine the three sutras 815, 803, and 810 of this collection, we have the equivalent of the Pali *Anapanasati*. A translation of these three sutras from the Chinese can be found in Appendix One.

The sutra already presented here in English is a translation from the original *Anapanasati Sutta* in the Pali Tipitaka (Sanskrit: Tripitaka). In many countries of the Mahayana tradition, the *Anapanasati Sutta* (Full Awareness of Breathing) and the *Satipatthana Sutta* (Four Establishments of Mindfulness) are not considered important and, in some cases, are not even available for study.<sup>31</sup> There are Buddhist centers where practitioners are considered to have learned all there is to know about the Four Establishments of Mindfulness when they can repeat that the body is impure, the feelings are painful, the mind is impermanent, and the objects of mind are without self. There is even one book on Buddhist meditation that says that the practice of meditation does not need Full Awareness of Breathing or the Four Establishments of Mindfulness. The Four Establishments of Mindfulness are a daily practice, described in great detail in the *Anapanasati* and *Satipatthana Suttas*. These two texts, along with the *Bhaddekaratta Sutta* (Sutra on Knowing the Better Way to Live Alone), are fundamental to the practice of meditation, and I feel that it’s very important to reestablish the importance of these three texts in all places of study and meditation.<sup>32</sup>

In the Southern traditions of Buddhism, the Full Awareness of Breathing and the Four Establishments of Mindfulness are still regarded as the most important texts on meditation. Many monks learn these sutras by heart and give them their greatest attention. Even though the spirit of these sutras is very much present and observable in the Mahayana meditation sutras, we would do well to become familiar with the sutra literature fundamental to meditation that was studied and practiced at the time of the Buddha. I hope that these texts will again be put into wide circulation in the Northern traditions of Buddhism. If we understand the essence of these two sutras, we will have a deeper vision and more comprehensive grasp of the scriptures classified as Mahayana, just as after we see the roots and the trunk of a tree, we can appreciate its leaves and branches more deeply.

From these sutras, we observe that practitioners of meditation at the time of the Buddha did not consider the Four Jhanas, the Four Formless Concentrations, and the Nine Concentration Attainments to be essential to the practice.<sup>33</sup> The Four Jhanas are mental states in which the practitioner abandons the desire realm and enters the realm of form, and although his or

her mind remains perfectly awake, the five sense perceptions no longer arise. These four successive states (also called Four Absorptions) are followed by the Four Formless Concentrations, which are states of meditation in which the practitioner, having already abandoned the realms of form, enters four successive formless realms: [1] The Realm of Limitless Space, [2] The Realm of Limitless Consciousness, [3] The Realm Where Nothing Exists, and [4] The Realm Where the Concepts “Perceiving” and “Not Perceiving” No Longer Apply. The Nine Concentration Attainments are composed of the Four Jhanas and the Four Formless Concentrations, plus the attainment of cessation (*nirodha samapatti*), a concentration in which there is the absence of feeling and perception. There are many references in other sutras of the Southern traditions as well as in those of the Northern traditions to the Four Jhanas, the Four Formless Concentrations, and the Nine Concentration Attainments, but in these two basic sutras (Full Awareness of Breathing and Four Establishments of Mindfulness), there are no such references. Thus we can infer that the Four Jhanas, the Four Formless Concentrations, and the Nine Concentration Attainments became a part of Buddhist practice after the death of the Buddha, probably due to the influence of the Vedic and other Yogic meditation schools outside of Buddhism. The teachers who introduced them gave them a Buddhist flavor and adapted them so they would fit with a Buddhist way of practice.

In the oldest Buddhist scriptures: the Dhammapada, the Suttanipata, the Theragatha, the Therigatha, the Itivuttaka, and the Udana, as well as in some of the most important of the other sutras: The Turning of the Dharma Wheel, the Anapanasati, and the Satipatthana, there is no mention of the Four Jhanas. But because they are mentioned in so many other sutras, we generally think they were a method of practice taught by the Buddha. However, from my research, it seems to me that the Four Jhanas, the Four Formless Concentrations, and the Nine Concentration Attainments were not introduced into Buddhism as Buddhist practices until one hundred years after the Buddha’s passing. When we read the life story of the Buddha in the sutras, in the *Vinaya*, and in the account by Ashvagosha, we learn that before the Buddha was enlightened, he practiced meditation under the guidance of two teachers, Arada Kalama and Udraka Ramaputra. He practiced the Four Formless Concentrations with great success, but he expressed clearly that this practice did not lead to final liberation from suffering, and therefore he abandoned it. One of the reasons the Nine Concentration Attainments were made a part of Buddhist practice might have been that people feel the need for a practice marked by stages of progress, and here there is a progression from the first jhana, through the Four Formless Concentrations, to the cessation



attainment.

Therefore, we may conclude that according to the Anapanasati and Satipatthana Suttas, the realization of the Four Jhanas and the Four Formless Concentrations is dispensable. Future generations of scholars should distinguish as much as possible between the essential, fundamental meditation practices of Buddhism (whether Northern or Southern) and elements that were incorporated later from other traditions. Throughout the history of Buddhism, new elements have always been added. This is the only way Buddhism can grow and stay alive. In the eighth century and afterwards, *kung an (koan)* practice developed. Some new methods have been very successful, and some have failed. Before we study and practice methods of meditation practice that were developed after the time of the Buddha, we should first firmly grasp the ways of meditation that the Buddha taught and practiced with his disciples after his enlightenment.

Analyzing their content, we can see that the Anapanasati and Satipatthana Suttas are perfectly compatible with one another. Throughout 2,600 years of Buddhist history, all generations of the Buddha's disciples have respected these works and have not embellished them (as they have so many other scriptures). Although the Anapanasati Sutta was in circulation in Vietnam as early as the beginning of the third century C.E., from the time Vietnamese Buddhists devoted themselves primarily to the study of great and beautiful Mahayana sutras like the Avatamsaka, the Lotus, and the Vimalakirti Nirdeśa, this sutra ceased to be regarded as essential. It is time for us to restore the Sutra on the Full Awareness of Breathing to its proper place in the tradition of meditation practice. We can begin to practice mindfulness of breathing as soon as we enter a Buddhist meditation center.

## Notes

**1** Savatthi (Sanskrit: Shravasti): The capital of the Kosala kingdom, about seventy-five miles west of Kapilavatthu (Sanskrit: Kapilavastu), the birthplace of the Buddha.

**2** *bhikkhu* (Sanskrit: *bhikshu*): monk.

**3** The Pavarana Ceremony was held at the end of each rainy season retreat, the annual three-month retreat for Buddhist monks. During the ceremony, each monk present invited the assembly to point out the weaknesses he exhibited during the retreat, in order to improve his practice and his character. The full moon marked the end of the lunar month. Normally Pavarana was held at the end of the month of Assayuja (around October), but during the year in which this sutra was delivered, the Buddha extended the retreat to four months, and the ceremony was held at the end of the month of Kattika (around November).

**4** The full moon day of the retreat's fourth month (Kattika) was called *Komudi*, or White Lotus Day, so named because komudi is a species of white lotus which flowers in late autumn.

**5** Field of merit: Supporting a good community, like planting seeds in fertile soil, is a good investment.

**6** *Arahat* (Sanskrit: *arhat*): The highest realization according to the early Buddhist traditions. Arahat means worthy of respect, deserving. An arahat is one who has rooted out all the causes of affliction and is no longer subject to the cycle of death and birth.

The root of affliction (Sanskrit: *klesha*, Pali: *kilesa*): The ropes that bind the mind, like greed, anger, ignorance, scorn, suspicion, and wrong views. It is the equivalent to *asava* (Pali): suffering, pain, the poisons of the mind, the causes that subject us to birth and death, like craving, wrong views, ignorance.

**7** The first five of the Ten Internal Formations (Sanskrit: *samyojana*) are: [1] caught in the wrong view of self, [2] hesitation, [3] caught in superstitious prohibitions and rituals, [4] craving, [5] hatred and anger, [6] desire for the worlds of form, [7] desire for the formless worlds, [8] pride, [9] agitation, and [10] ignorance. These are the knots that tie us and hold us prisoners in our worldly situation. In the Mahayana, the Ten Internal Formations are listed in the following order: desire, hatred, ignorance, pride, hesitation, belief in a real

self, extreme views, wrong views, perverted views, views advocating unnecessary prohibitions. The first five are called “dull,” and the second five are called “sharp.”

The fruit of never returning (Pali: *anagamiphala*): The fruit, or attainment, second only to the fruit of arahatship. Those who realize the fruit of never returning do not return after this life to the cycle of birth and death.

[8](#) The fruit of returning once more (Pali: *sakadagami-phala*): The fruit, or attainment, just below the fruit of never returning. Those who realize the fruit of returning once more will return to the cycle of birth and death just one more time.

[9](#) The fruit of stream enterer (Pali: *sotapatti-phala*): The fourth highest fruit, or attainment. Those who attain the fruit of stream enterer are considered to have entered the stream of awakened mind, which always flows into the ocean of emancipation.

[10](#) The Four Establishments of Mindfulness (Pali: *satipatthana*): [1] Awareness of the body in the body, [2] Awareness of the feelings in the feelings, [3] Awareness of the mind in the mind, [4] Awareness of the objects of the mind in the objects of the mind. For further explication, see Thich Nhat Hanh, *Transformation and Healing: The Sutra on the Four Establishments of Mindfulness* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1990).

[11](#) The Four Right Efforts (Pali: *padhana*): [1] Not to allow any occasion for wrongdoing to arise, [2] Once it has arisen, to find a means to put an end to it, [3] To cause right action to arise when it has not already arisen, [4] To find ways to develop right action and make it lasting once it has arisen.

The Four Bases of Success (*iddhi-pada*): Four roads that lead to realizing a strong mind: diligence, energy, full awareness, and penetration.

[12](#) The Five Faculties (*indriya*): Five capacities, or abilities: [1] confidence, [2] energy, [3] meditative stability, [4] meditative concentration, and [5] true understanding.

The Five Powers (Pali: *bala*): the same as the Five Faculties, but seen as strengths rather than abilities.

The Seven Factors of Awakening (*bojjhanga*): [1] full attention, [2] investigating dharmas, [3] energy, [4] joy (see note 20), [5] ease, [6] concentration, [7] letting go. These are discussed in Section Four of the sutra.

The Noble Eightfold Path (*atthangika-magga*): The right way of practicing, containing eight elements: [1] Right View, [2] Right Intention, [3] Right Speech, [4] Right Action, [5] Right Livelihood, [6] Right Effort on the Path, [7] Right Mindfulness, [8] Right Meditative Concentration.

The above practices, from the Four Establishments of Mindfulness through the Noble Eightfold Path, total 37, and are called *bodhipakkhiya dhamma*, the Components of Awakening.

[13](#) Loving kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity (Pali: *brahmavihara*): Four beautiful, precious states of mind that are not subject to any limitation, often called the Four Limitless Meditations. Loving kindness is to give joy. Compassion is to remove suffering. Joy is happiness that nourishes ourselves and others and does not lead to future suffering. Equanimity is relinquishing, with no calculation of gain or loss, no clinging to beliefs as the truth, and no anger or sorrow.

[14](#) The Nine Contemplations: The practice of contemplation on the nine stages of disintegration of a corpse, from the time it swells up to the time it becomes dust.

[15](#) Joy and Happiness: The word *piti* is usually translated “joy,” and the word *sukha* is usually translated “happiness.” The following example is often used to compare *piti* with *sukha*: Someone traveling in the desert who sees a stream of cool water experiences *piti* (joy), and on drinking the water experiences *sukha* (happiness).

[16](#) *dharmas*: things, phenomena.

[17](#) Disappearance, or fading (Pali: *viraga*): A fading of the color and taste of each dharma, and its gradual dissolution, and at the same time a fading and gradual dissolution of the color and taste of desire. *Raga* means a color, or dye; here it is also used to mean desire. *Viraga* is thus the fading both of color and of craving.

[18](#) Cessation, or emancipation, here means the ending of all notions, concepts, and wrong views as well as the suffering that is caused by these things.

[19](#) Letting go, or relinquishing, here means giving up any idea or any thing that we see to be illusory and empty of substance.

[20](#) “Joy” is the translation of *niramisa*. This is the great joy that is not to be found in the realm of sensual desire.

[21](#) Discriminating and comparing: That is to say, discriminating subject from object, comparing what is dear to us with what we dislike, what is gained with what is lost.

[22](#) Equanimity, or letting go (Pali: *upekkha*, Sanskrit: *upeksha*): The notion of giving up discriminating and comparing subject/object, like/dislike, gain/ loss is fundamental. The Buddhism of the Mahayana school has fully developed

this concept.

[23](#) See note 10 above.

[24](#) See note 17 above.

[25](#) The method of counting the breath has been widely accepted and has found its way into the sutras and commentaries. The *Ekottara Agama* (*Zeng Yi A Han*) (Sutra number 125 in the *Taisho Revised Tripitaka*, An Ban chapter, books 7 and 8) does not mention the technique of counting the breath, but it does mention the method of combining the breathing with the Four Meditative States. Chapter 23 of the *Xiu Hang Dao Di* (Sutra number 606 in the *Taisho Revised Tripitaka*, book 5), called “The Breath Counting Chapter,” identifies the method of Full Awareness of Breathing with the method of counting the breaths. This sutra also refers to the Four Meditations.

[26](#) Sutra 606 in the *Taisho Revised Tripitaka*, chapter 23.

[27](#) Sutra 125 in the *Taisho Revised Tripitaka*.

[28](#) Sutra 602 in the *Taisho Revised Tripitaka*.

[29](#) Parthia: Ancient country in Southwest Asia (northeast modern Iran).

[30](#) Sutra 125 in the *Taisho Revised Tripitaka*. Sutra 606 in the *Taisho Revised Tripitaka*. *Tsa A Han*, or *The Samyukta Agama*, is Sutra collection number 99 in the *Taisho*.

[31](#) See note 10 above.

[32](#) Thich Nhat Hanh, *Our Appointment with Life: Discourse on Living Happily in the Present Moment* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1990).

[33](#) The Four Jhanas or Meditative States (Sanskrit: *rupa dhyana*, Pali: *rupa jhana*).

The Four Formless Concentrations (Sanskrit: *arupa dhyana*, Pali: *arupa jhana*).



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A Note on the Translation The word for a Buddhist scripture, the teachings of the Buddha, is *sutta* in Pali and *sutra* in Sanskrit. This text, the Anapanasati Sutta, is of Pali origin, so it would be natural to use the Pali word “sutta” throughout the text. However, due to historical circumstance, Mahayana Sanskrit scriptures have become better known in the West, so we have decided to use the word “sutra” as if it were an English word. We use the word “sutta” only when it is part of the proper name of a Pali sutta, such as Anapanasati Sutta or Satipatthana Sutta. Otherwise, the word “sutra” is used to refer even to Pali texts. Secondly, there are no diacritical marks used in this translation. Finally, we translate the term *sati* differently in the words Anapanasati and Satipatthana. In the former, we use “full awareness,” and in the latter “mindfulness.”

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