Getting Started
in Mindfulness With Breathing

Accessible, Beginning Steps for Ordinary People

Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu

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by Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu

Adapted and translated by Santikaro from an article in Thai written on 28 August 1948
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Anumodanā

To all Dhamma Comrades, those helping to spread Dhamma:

Break out the funds to spread Dhamma to let Faithful Trust flow,
Broadcast majestic Dhamma to radiate long-living joy.
Release unexcelled Dhamma to tap the spring of Virtue,
Let safely peaceful delight flow like a cool mountain stream.
Dhamma leaves of many years sprouting anew, reaching out,
To unfold and bloom in the Dhamma Centers of all towns.
To spread lustrous Dhamma and in hearts glorified plant it,
Before long, weeds of sorrow, pain, and affliction will flee.
As Virtue revives and resounds throughout Thai society,
All hearts feel certain love toward those born, aging, and dying.
Congratulations and Blessings to all Dhamma Comrades,
You who share Dhamma to widen the people's prosperous joy.
Heartiest appreciation from Buddhadāsa Indapañño,
Buddhist Science ever shines beams of Bodhi long-lasting.
In grateful service, fruits of merit and wholesome successes,
Are all devoted in honor to Lord Father Buddha.
Thus may the Thai people be renowned for their Virtue,
May perfect success through Buddhist Science awaken their hearts.
May the King and His Family live long in triumphant strength,
May joy long endure throughout this our word upon earth.

from

Buddhadāsa Indapañño

Mokkhabalārāma
Chaiya, 2 November 2530

Getting Started in Mindfulness With Breathing

Accessible, Beginning Steps for Ordinary People

Sit up straight with all the vertebrae of the spine fitting together snugly. Keep the head upright, with the eyes gazing toward the tip of the nose. Whether you see it or not doesn't really matter, just gaze in the direction of the nose or past it. Once you get used to this, the results will be better than closing the eyes, and you won't be inclined to fall asleep so easily. In particular, people who are sleepy will benefit from keeping the eyes open at first rather than closing them. Practice like this steadily and they will close by themselves when the time comes for them to close. However, if you want to practice with your eyes closed from the start, that's fine too.

Lay the hands comfortably in the lap, one on top of the other, or lay them comfortably on your thighs or knees, whichever is most simple and comfortable for you. Overlap or cross the legs in a way that distributes and holds your weight well, so that you can sit comfortably and will not fall over easily. The legs can be overlapped in an ordinary way or crossed — again, whichever you prefer or are able to do. Many people can only cross their legs in what is called the 'diamond posture' or 'lotus posture' with difficulty, but fancy postures are not necessary anyway. Merely sit with the back upright and the legs folded so that weight is evenly

balanced and you cannot tip over easily — that's good enough. The more difficult postures can be left for when one gets serious, like a *yogi*.

In special circumstances — when you are sick, not feeling well, or just tired — you can rest against something, sit on a chair, or use a deck chair, in order to recline a bit. Those who are sick can even lie down to meditate. You can also meditate while standing.

Sit in a place with good air circulation, where you can breathe comfortably. There should be nothing overly disturbing, but don't expect perfect quiet. Loud noises which are steady and have no meaning, such as the sound of waves or a factory, are no problem unless you attach to them as 'a problem.' Sounds with meaning, such as people speaking, are more of a problem for those just learning to practice. However, if you can't find a quiet place, simply pretend there aren't any sounds. Just be determined to practice and it will work out eventually.

Although the eyes gaze inattentively toward the tip of the nose, you can gather your awareness (*sati*,[1] as it's called in our technical language), in order to catch and note your own breathing in and out. Those who like to close their eyes will do so from here on. Those who prefer to leave the eyes open will do so continually until the eyes gradually

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[1] '*Sati*' is a key term in Buddhist meditation. It means 'recall, recollection, full awareness, attention, mindfulness.' It concerns making something clearly present rather than thinking about the future or past. In this article, the activity of sati is conveyed through a number of verbs: to fix, to note, to attend, to pay attention, to be aware, to experience. 'Sati' does not mean 'to concentrate or focus,' which is *samādhi*. Please study these various words and their meaning in each context, then you will have a correct understanding of 'sati,' of what it is and how to use it to get free of *dukkha* (distress, suffering).

close on their own as calmness and collectedness (*samādhi*) increase.

To make it easier to note the breathing, in the beginning — and only at the beginning, say for a few minutes, five or ten at the most — try to breathe as long and deep as you can. Force the breath in and out strongly for a while. Do so in order to know clearly for yourself what the breath rubs against, or touches, as it draws in and out along its path. In a simple way, notice where it appears to end in the belly; take the physical sensations as your measure rather than an anatomical image in your mind. Note the breathing as well as you can, in an easy-going way, that's good enough to fix the inner and outer end points of it. Don't be tense about it; don't be too strict or too precise. Your meditation should always be relaxed and natural.

Most people will feel the breath striking at the tip of the nose and should take that point as the outer end of the breath's path. In people with flat or upturned noses the breath will strike on the edge of the upper lip, and they should take that as the external end. Now there will be both outer and inner end points — one fixed at the tip of the nose and the other just below the navel. The breath sweeps back and forth between these two points. Make your mind just like something which chases after or stalks the breathing, like a tiger or a spy, unwilling to part with it even for a moment, following every breath for as long as you meditate. This is the first step of our practice. We call it 'constantly chasing after' or 'stalking.'

Earlier we suggested beginning by trying to make the breathing as long as possible, and as strong, vigorous, and

rough as possible, for a number of times. Do so in order to find the end points and the path the breath follows between them. Once mindfulness (*sati*) can catch and fix the breathing in and out — by constantly being aware of how the breath touches and flows, then where it ends, then how it turns back either inside or outside — you can gradually relax the breathing until it becomes normal and natural. There is no longer any need to force or push it in any way. Be careful now: don't force or control the breathing at all! Still, sati fixes on the breathing the whole time, just as it did earlier with the rough and strong breathing but now more calmly.

Sati is able to pay attention to the entire path of the breath from the inner end point (the navel or the base of the abdomen) to the outer end point (the tip of the nose or the upper lip). However fine or soft the breath becomes, sati can clearly note it all the time. If it happens that you cannot note or feel the breath because it is too soft or refined, then breathe more strongly or roughly again, but not as strong or rough as before, just enough to note the breath clearly. Fix attention on the breathing again until sati is aware of it without any gaps. Keep practicing until even the purely ordinary, unforced breathing can be securely observed. However long or short it is, know it. However heavy or light it is, know it. Know it clearly within that very awareness, as sati merely holds closely to it and follows it back and forth the whole time you are meditating.[2] This is success at the level of preparation called 'constantly chasing after.'

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[2] Don't try to push other things out of awareness; that will create tension. Just keep your attention centered on the breathing in a balanced way, one breath at a time. Let go of anything that takes you away from the breathing.

Lack of success is due to the inability of sati (attention) to stay with the breathing the whole time. You don't know when sati lost track of the breathing. You don't know when the mind ran off to home, work, or play. You don't know until it's already gone. You don't know when, how, or why it went. Once you are aware that attention has run off, catch the breathing again, gently bring sati back to the breathing, and train until you are successful on this level. Do this for at least ten minutes each session before going on to the next step.

The next step, the second level of preparation, is called 'waiting in ambush at one spot.' It's best to practice this second step only after the first step can be done well, but anyone who can skip straight to the second won't be scolded. At this stage, sati (immediate recollection) lies in wait at a particular spot and stops chasing after the breathing. To switch to this level, or method, begin by noting the sensation where the breathing enters the body, then remain there as it flows all the way to the navel or thereabouts. When the breath reaches the navel, let go of the outer point and put the mind at this inner point. Remain here until the exhalation contacts the other end point — the tip of the nose — then return there for the rest of the exhalation. Then again let go of this outer end point when the breathing contacts this inner end point. Continue like this without changing anything. In moments of letting go, the mind doesn't run away to home, the fields, the office, or anywhere. This means that sati pays attention at the two end points — both inner and outer — and doesn't pay attention to anything between them.

When you can securely go back and forth between the two end points without paying attention to things in between, leave off with the inner end point and focus only at the outer one, the tip of the nose. This is the third level of preparation. Now sati consistently watches only at the tip of the nose. Whether the breathing strikes while inhaling or while exhaling, know it every time. This is called 'guarding the gate.' There's a sensation as the breathing passes in or out; the rest of the way is left void or quiet. If you have firm awareness at the nose tip, the breathing becomes increasingly calm and quiet. Thus you can't feel movements other than at the nose tip. In the spaces when it's empty or quiet, when you can't feel anything, the mind doesn't run away to home or elsewhere. The ability to do this well is success at the 'guarding the gate' level of preparation.

Lack of success occurs when the mind runs away without sati knowing. It doesn't return to the gate as it should or, after entering the gate, it sneaks all the way inside to the abdomen. Both of these errors happen because the period of emptiness or quiet is incorrect and incomplete. This means that you have not done it properly. Therefore, you ought to practice carefully, solidly, expertly from the very first step in order to lay a good foundation in your practice. Try it again until you get it.

Even the beginning step, 'constantly chasing after,' is not easy for everyone. Yet when one can do it, the results — both physical and mental — are beyond expectations. So you ought to make yourself able to do it and to do it consistently, until it is a game like the sports you like to play. If you have even two minutes, by all means

practice. Breathe forcefully at first. If your bones crack or rattle that's even better. Breathe strongly until it whistles, a little noise won't hurt. Then gradually relax and lighten the breathing until it finds its natural level.

The ordinary breathing of most people is not natural or normal; it's more coarse or shallow than 'normal,' without our being aware.[3] Especially when we do certain activities or are in postures that restrict the breathing, our breathing is more coarse than it ought to be, although we don't know it. So you ought to start with strong, vigorous breathing, then let it relax until it becomes natural. In this way, you'll end up with breathing that is the 'middle way,' or just right. Such breathing makes the body natural, normal, and healthy. And it is fit for use as the object of meditation at the beginning of mindfulness with breathing (*ānāpānasati*). Let us stress once more that this kind of preparation ought to be practiced until it's just a natural game for every one of us in all circumstances. This will bring numerous physical and mental benefits.

Actually, the difference between 'constantly chasing after' and 'waiting in ambush at one place' is not so great. The latter is a little more relaxed and subtle, that is, the area noted by sati decreases. To make this easier to understand, we'll use the simile of the mother rocking the baby's hammock.[4] At first, when the child has just been put in the hammock, it isn't sleepy and will try to get out. At this stage, the mother must watch the hammock carefully. As it swings

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[3] In fact, our breathing tends to be unhealthy, which contributes to many physical and mental problems. Please learn to breathe freely and naturally. It may require time and patience, but the nature of us all is to breathe and live freely, naturally, peacefully.

[4] In India and Thailand small hammocks are used rather than cradles.

from side to side, her head turns from left to right so that the child won't be out of sight for a moment. Once the baby begins to calm down and doesn't try to get out anymore, the mother need not turn her head from left to right, back and forth, as the hammock swings. The mother only watches when the hammock passes in front of her face, which is good enough. If she watches only at the point where the hammock is directly in front of her, the baby won't have a chance to get out of the hammock just the same, because the child is ready to fall asleep. (Although the baby may fall asleep, the meditator should not!)

The first stage of preparation in noting the breathing, 'constantly chasing after,' is like when the mother must turn her head from side to side with the swinging hammock so that it isn't out of sight for a moment. The second stage, 'waiting in ambush at one point,' where the breathing is noted at its inner and outer points, is like when the baby is ready to sleep and the mother watches the hammock only when it passes right in front of her.

When you have practiced and trained fully in the second step, you can train further by making the area noted by sati even more subtle and gentle until there is secure, stable concentration there. Then concentration can be deepened step by step until one of the *jhānas*[5] is attained. This is beyond the rather easy concentration of the first steps and is rather difficult for most people. The *jhānas* are a refined and precise matter with strict requirements and subtle principles. One must have strong interest and commitment to practice

[5] The *jhānas* are states of undistracted absorption (unification-integration) which result from highly developed concentration that is only aware of a single inward object and certain related mental factors.

at that level. For now, just be consistently interested in the basic steps until they become familiar and ordinary. Then you might be able to gather in the higher levels later.

Meditation is for everyone, not just for special people. May you all make the most of your opportunities to meditate in ways that will bring many physical and mental benefits. First satisfy the basic needs of your practice before going on to more difficult things. These first steps outlined above will support you in developing sufficient *sīla* (morality), *samādhi* (concentration), and *paññā* (wisdom) so that you will be grounded in the noble eightfold path.

Even if this is only a start, it is better than not even trying. Your body will become more healthy and peaceful as you train in successively higher levels of *samādhi*. You will discover something that everyone should find in order to not waste this opportunity of having been born.

About the Author

Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu was born in 1906, the son of a southern Thai mother and an ethnic Chinese father. He followed Thai custom by entering a local monastery in 1926, studied for a couple years in Bangkok, and then founded his own refuge for study and practice in 1932. Since then, he has had a profound influence on not only Thai Buddhism but other religions in Siam and Buddhism in the West. Among his more important accomplishments, he:

- Challenged the hegemony of later commentarial texts with the primacy of the Buddha's original discourses.
- Integrated serious Dhamma study, intellectual creativity, and rigorous practice.
- Explained Buddha-Dhamma with an emphasis on this life, including the possibility of experiencing Nibbāna ourselves.
- Softened the dichotomy between householder and monastic practice, stressing that the noble eightfold path is available to everyone.
- Offered doctrinal support for addressing social and environmental issues, helping to foster socially engaged Buddhism in Siam.
- Shaped his forest monastery as an innovative teaching environment and Garden of Liberation.

After a series of illnesses, including strokes, he died in 1993. He was cremated without the usual pomp and expense.

Recommended Reading

For more extensive and detailed instruction on *ānāpānasati* by Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu:

Mindfulness With Breathing: A Manual for Serious Beginners

Available from:

Silkworm Books, Chiang Mai (for Thailand);
Wisdom Publications, Boston (for all other countries);
&
The Buddhadāsa Indapañño Archives bookstore,
Suan Rot Fai Park, Chatuchak, Bangkok.

Online Resources

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Buddhadāsa Foundation

Established in 1994, the Buddhadāsa Foundation aims to promote the study and practice of Buddha-Dhamma according to Ven. Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu's teachings. It encourages compilation and translation of his works from Thai into foreign languages, as well as supports publication of translated teachings for free distribution.

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Liberation Park is a Dhamma refuge in the USA's Midwest inspired by Suan Mokkh. Here, Santikaro and friends work to nurture a garden of liberation along the lines taught by Ajahn Buddhadāsa, where followers of the Buddha-Dhamma Way can explore Dhamma as Nature and in the Pāli suttas.

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Established in 2010, the Buddhadāsa Indapañño Archives collect, maintain, and present the original works of Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu. Also known as Suan Mokkh Bangkok, it is an innovative place for fostering mutual understanding between traditions, studying and practicing Dhamma.

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