



Brief Discussion on Ānāpānasati

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Introduction

The Four Noble Truths are the foundations of the Buddha's teachings. Through the practice of The Buddha's teachings, we can attain supreme Nibbāna, Cessation of Suffering. So, if we want to attain supreme Nibbāna, Cessation of Suffering, we must follow The Buddha's teachings. These Noble Truths are:

- [1] The Noble Truth of Suffering
- [2] The Noble Truth of the Origin of Suffering
- [3] The Noble Truth of the Cessation of Suffering
- [4] The Noble Truth of the Path Leading to the Cessation of Suffering

Unless we know and see The Four Noble Truths, we cannot realize The Buddha's Teachings. The Buddha taught the Four Noble Truths for us to realize the Third Noble Truth, Nibbāna. This means that we cannot put a complete end to suffering (we cannot attain the Third Noble Truth, Nibbāna) unless we have first fully realized the First Noble Truth (suffering (dukkha)), and fully realized the Second Noble Truth (the origin of suffering (samudaya)). The aim of the Fourth Noble Truth (the Eightfold Noble Path) is to realize the Third Noble Truth (Nibbāna). The only way to realize the First Noble Truth (suffering (dukkha)) and the Second Noble Truth (the origin of suffering (samudaya)) is to first practise the mundane Fourth Noble Truth, the mundane path truth (lokiya magga-sacca), which is the mundane Noble Eightfold Path.

The First Noble Truth and the Second Noble Truth are mentality, materiality (nāma-rūpa) and their causes (dependent origination). By practising the mundane Noble Eightfold Path systematically (by practising the morality, concentration and wisdom step by step) a meditator can know and see mentality-materiality and their causes, and

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then comprehend their impermanent, suffering, and non-self nature; that is vipassanā meditation by which we are able to realize the supramundane Fourth Noble Truth, the Noble Eightfold Path associated with supramundane Path Truth (Lokuttarā Maggasacca) : the Path (Magga) of Stream-Entry (Sotāpatti), Once-Return (Sakadāgāmi), Non-Return (Anāgāmi), and Arahantship.

Before one can do vipassanā, one must be able to discern ultimate materiality, ultimate mentality and their causes. So, one's path to discernment of materiality is first to develop a samatha subject of meditation that must be one of the forty samatha subjects (such as ānāpānasati practice) up to Right Concentration (Sammā Samādhi) based on morality. The Buddha explains Right Concentration (Sammā Samādhi) in Mahā Sati Paṭṭhāna sutta 'The Great Mindfulness Foundation Sutta' as the first jhāna (absorption), second jhāna, third jhāna, and fourth jhāna. In the Visuddhi Magga, Right Concentration is explained further as the four jhānas (rūpa jhāna), the four immaterial jhānas (arūpa jhāna) and access concentration (upacāra samādhi). Ānāpānasati meditation is one of the very popular meditation subjects. A meditator can develop up to the fourth jhāna in ānāpānasati meditation. A meditator first establishes the fourth ānāpāna jhāna, so the light of wisdom (the light of concentration) is bright, brilliant and radiant at that time. After switching to discernment of materiality meditation (rūpa kammaṭṭhāna) through the four elements meditation (catudhātu vavatthāna) a meditator can see ultimate materiality clearly. Because of the strength and momentum of the fourth-jhana concentration based on ānāpānasati a meditator finds that these four elements meditation and discernment of materiality will become deep and fully established.

In this booklet, we discuss the fundamental principle of ānāpānasati meditation. We also discuss how to focus on the meditation object, and how to overcome some of the obstacles that place on the way. It is not an easy work to

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achieve jhāna with any concentration meditation. “This ānāpānasati is difficult, difficult to develop, a field in which only the minds of The Buddhas, The Pacceka Buddhas, and The Buddha’s sons are at home.” We discuss important and basic rules that meditators have to understand and apply (mainly in the lower phases to concentration). Hopefully the reader will, after reading this discussion, be able to have a deeper understanding on ānāpānasati meditation and be able to apply the fundamental principle of ānāpānasati up to the attainment of ‘Right concentration’, jhāna.

May you succeed in ānāpānasati meditation.

May you attain the highest in The Buddha’s teaching.

Bhikkhu Paññānanda (Intagaw-Pa Auk)

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Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato

Sammasambuddhassa

HOMAGE TO HIM, THE BLESSED, THE WORTHY,
THE PERFECTLY SELF-ENLIGHTENED ONE



I would like to give you some basic instructions on how to develop concentration through practising *ānāpānasati*. This discussion is aimed especially at meditators who have yet to attain concentration and the explanatory notes are intended as **‘the basic course’** in the *ānāpānasati*. Before discussing the *ānāpānasati*, firstly we should know some of the salient points.

Sīla is the first training

In the Buddha’s Teaching there are threefold training: morality (Sīla), concentration (Samādhi), wisdom (Paññā).

“Such is morality; such is concentration; such is wisdom. When morality is fully developed, concentration is of great fruit and benefit; when concentration is fully developed, wisdom is of great fruit and benefit.”¹

Sīla is the first of the threefold training. To develop Samādhi and Paññā, Sīla training is important foundation.

¹ Dīgha-Nikāya.16.2.4 “Mahāparinibbāna Sutta” (“Great Parinibbāna Discourse”)

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Here, in Sdikalang, lay meditators have to undertake the eight precepts. If meditators stain or break their precepts, they can purify them by taking the precepts again. Most of the meditators observe the morality well, but to observe and purify them again, they undertake the precepts every morning.

When we are established in morality, we can practice mental training; here mental training is meditation practice. There are two types of meditation, namely, Samatha (tranquillity meditation) and Vipassanā (insight meditation). Samatha is the development of concentration, whereas Vipassanā is the development of wisdom. Of these two, Samatha is a very important foundation for a Vipassanā.² Strong and deep concentration is the proximate cause for insight. Only strong and deep concentration (access or absorption concentration) can know and see things (objects of Vipassanā) as they really are.³ By practicing Samatha, we can cultivate access or absorption concentration which is Jhāna, and can then proceed to develop wisdom, which is Vipassanā meditation.

What is Samatha?

Before we start to discuss about Samatha practice, we should know first what the concentration is. We can say that it

² It is explained by The Buddha in, for example, the 'Samādhi' Sutta ('The Concentration Sutta') of the 'Sacca-Saṃyutta' ('Section on the Truths'): Develop concentration (samādhi), bhikkhus. Concentrated (samāhito), bhikkhus, a bhikkhu according to reality understands. Saṃyutta-Nikāya.V.XII.i.1; And also see: "samāhito yathābhūtaṃ jānāti passati" (A.3.259, Myanmar edition).

³ The second benefit of jhāna concentration is the benefit of vipassanā. This is called vipassanā-basis-jhāna (vipassanā-pādaka-jjhāna). Visuddhimagga.xi.362

is the mental ability to direct all your effort and attention on one thing without thinking of other things. In texts, it is mentioned as 'mental one-pointedness' (*'onepointedness of the mind – Citasś-ekaggatā'*)⁴. So, *Samatha meditation is to develop strong and deep concentration (one-pointedness) on one object.*

It is because a meditator has to develop deep and stable concentration by focusing on one meditation object that *a meditator should determine to practise one meditation subject only. So, we would normally suggest leaving aside all other old practices while practising the currently chosen meditation subject.*

Ānāpānasati may be your first choice

In the Buddha's teaching there are forty ways of Samatha meditation; a person can develop through any of these to attain concentration. The most venerable Pa-Auk Tawya Sayadaw has many years of useful experience in teaching; to the meditators he taught Samatha as well as Vipassanā practice in strict accordance with the standard Pali Texts and commentaries. Over the years, he concluded from his vast teaching experience that of the forty ways, the *ānāpānasati* practice is very practical for many meditators and they have the potentiality to improve their concentration. Because of this, if a meditator could not decide which meditation subject to develop, Pa-Auk Tawya Sayadaw usually suggests: "You can practice *ānāpānasati*; it may be

⁴ "*Citasś-ekaggatā*" is rendered as 'unification of mind' in the sense of harmony of consciousness and its concomitants in focusing on a single object. It is also rendered as 'one-pointedness of mind' in that sense, or in the sense of the focusing of a searchlight. This term is a synonym for samādhi. (Samatha= samādhi)

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suitable for you". Moreover after the retreat they can continue to practice their meditation (the *ānāpānasati*) themselves at their home /monastery. For many meditators this is an important factor to choose as they cannot stay in the meditation centre for many weeks or months. That is why this practice is suitable for those who like to continue their practice at their own places. But there is no doubt that it is better and wiser to practice under the close guidance of a qualified teacher because meditators often confuse themselves whether their practice is on the right path to concentration and the teacher can help them.

Although *ānāpānasati* is very practical, at certain stages of the development, some meditators often misunderstand and confuse their application of the technique to concentrate on the meditation object (herein the breath) and delay in their development of concentration. As I have some meditation teaching experience at Pa-auk Tawya and some other branch centres, based on these teaching experiences and some meditators' experiences, I would like to discuss with the intention for my students to identify the principle of *ānāpānasati* meditation.

Ānāpānasati is not a breathing exercise

A popular translation of *ānāpānasati* is 'mindfulness of breathing'. But according to my understanding breathing means the 'action of taking air into the lungs and sending it out again'. *Ānāpāna means inhaled and exhaled breath and Sati means mindfulness. So, I prefer to translate ānāpānasati as mindfulness of the breath. Herein mindfulness means remembrance. Mindfulness remembers the breath. Wisdom knows the breath clearly. Therefore, if you are practising ānāpānasati, you must establish mindfulness (remembrance)*

towards the breath. In this practice a yogi ⁵ has to train his or her mind to remember or to be mindful of the breath but, not necessary to be mindful of the breathing action too much, if possible not at all. But at the very beginning and early stages of practice (when concentration not developed yet), one of the improper practising ways of some meditators I have noticed is they would keenly aware of their breathing action as deep breathing exercise. We should consider at this point that we are practicing the meditation by focusing and concentrating on the breath, not doing a breathing exercise. Although at the beginning and early stages of the path to concentration (or of a sitting session), the movement or flowing of breath would be noticed to some degree at the focus area. As *ānāpānasati* is not a breathing exercise, one should not be mindful of the breathing action too much, but rather on the breath.

What is breath? What is paññatti?

As a meditator practises *ānāpānasati* (*mindfulness of the breath*) meditation, he should first know clearly what the breath is. Although some meditators may think, "It is simple, we know what breath is", actually it is not so easy to comprehend throughout the course of practice which culminates in the attainment of deep concentration (i.e. absorption; *appanā-jhāna*). By comprehending the meditation object (the breath) meditators could overcome the obstacles that they may often encounter on the way of practice.

What is the object, *the breath*? Breath is the air that you take into your lungs and send out again. Herein the object,

⁵ Yogi : One devoted to mental training.

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the breath means conceptual breath. Again, we should know what the concept (paññatti) is.⁶ The concepts (paññatti) are infinite in number: e.g. men, women, bhikkhu, sayalay, children, dog, cat, cow, mouse, silver, gold, breath, etc. In our mind by knowing the shape, form and color of objects we cognize these object well. For e.g. by knowing such and such color, by knowing such and such shape/form, the mind cognizes them as men, women, bhikkhu, sayalay, etc. You may have seen before, for instance, a cigarette smoker puffing at his cigarette and exhaling his breath through the nostrils together with streams of cigarette smoke. If you have looked at cigarette smoke exhaled deeply through the nose before, you may have thought that it is like a whitish stream of puffs. Therefore, some yogis thought of breath as a column (cord /string) like object. After cognizing the shape, form and colour of an object, you could perceive and memorize the type of an object. But, after perceiving the object vividly it is no longer important to be aware of the such and such shape, form and colour of the object.

Because in ānāpānasati (*mindfulness of the breath*) meditation, meditation object is the conceptual breath⁷ that is not ultimate materiality (paramattha-rūpa), meditators must not pay attention to the individual or natural characteristics (*sabhāva-lakkhaṇa*) and general characteristics (*sāmmaññā-lakkhaṇa*) of the breath. The individual characteristics are the natural characteristics of the four elements in the breath: hardness, roughness, flowing, heat, supporting, pushing, etc. The general characteristics are the impermanent (anicca), suffering (dukkha), or non-self (anatta) characteristics of the breath.

⁶ *Paññatti* comprises names and things. The names are *paññatti* (*sadda paññatti*). Things are also *paññatti* (*attha paññatti*).

⁷ Conceptual breath is conceptual reality (*vijjamāna-paññatti*). It is compactness.

By contrast let us discuss a little bit of ultimate reality that we can apply to overcome some formidable obstacles that would be placed on the path to concentration.

By contrast the ultimate reality (paramattha) is?

Paramattha is the ultimate reality. The *Dhammā*⁸ of ultimate realities is that they never change (their nature or characteristic). It is real forever.

Physical phenomena /materiality (*Rūpa*) is the third ultimate reality.⁹ There are four principal elements in the physical phenomena; namely, the earth element (*Pathavi*), the water element (*Āpo*), the fire element (*Tejo*), the wind element (*Vāyo*).

Touch objects (tangible objects) are composed of three elements only: the earth element (*Pathavi*), the fire element (*Tejo*), the wind element (*Vāyo*). Characteristics of these elements are hardness, roughness, heaviness, heat, coldness, supporting, pushing, etc., and *these characteristics can be cognized as sensations through the body door (and mind door)*. Because they are ultimate materiality, they could not come in particular shape and form; we cannot say, for instance, that heat is rounded, flat, rectangular or of such and such shape. (The operation of sense doors will be discussed later.)

In the beginning and early stages on the path to concentration in ānāpānasati meditation the mind detects the sensations at breath-touching area of around the nostril or upper lip first, before being able to perceive the breath

⁸ Dhamma: thing, phenomenon; state; object solely of the mind.

⁹ There are four ultimate realities: consciousness, mental factors, materiality and permanent peace (Nibbāna).

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object. The mind rests on sensations for some mind moments then cognizes the conceptual breath or solid form of a breath or mass of a breath and when *the skills and concentration improve*, the mind could figure out and focus on the mass of a breath.

Tangible objects are cognized at touching site through body door (and mind door)

→ Conceptual breath

Where is the breath object ?

Whether it is inhaled or exhaled breath, *the breath is present all the time* at the nostril area and along the airway tract (the passage from the nose and throat to the lungs). But for meditators focusing on the breath at the nostril area (between nostril and upper lip) as a meditation object is of great value because by focusing on it concentration can develop deeply. If the object is out of focus (sometimes I say as if taking constant pot-shots focusing on the object), concentration cannot develop. To focus on the breath object (between nostril and upper lip) consistently, it is important to understand clearly that when the in-breath ends, the out-breath starts, also when the out-breath ends, the in-breath starts. There is *no gap (no additional space) between the in and out breath*. One simile I usually use to elaborate this fact is that the breath is like flowing tap water. You have used and run a tap before; when the tap is turned on, tap water flows out continuously, running down at certain speed without any gap in the stream of water. But the tap water flows down in only one direction; breath flows down during out-breath and up during in-breath, thus moving in two directions,

alternating between in-flow and out-flow without any interrupting gap in the stream of breath.

As the breath is present in entire life,¹⁰ the yogi could focus and concentrate on it whether it is very subtle or not. *Clear and strong understanding (wisdom) of this fact makes the yogis feel confident* of cognizing the breath (conceptual breath / mass of breath) vividly when the breath is extremely subtle.

The Focusing Approach — TWO STEPS: The place is the first to be focused and the object is the second

Now let us discuss *the focusing approach (focusing technique) in ānāpānasati meditation*. There are TWO STEPS in the focusing approach.

- ▶ How can we focus on *the place* where the conceptual breath exists?
- ▶ How can we focus on *the conceptual breath*?

Before we discuss the topic on 'how to focus on the conceptual breath', first we should learn the technique by which to focus on the place where the conceptual breath exists: *the focusing technique*. So, we say the place to be focused is the first (focus on the place first).

As the breath that lies between the nostril opening and upper lip is the object to be focused and concentrated, (after detecting the actual moving in-breath and out-breath for a moment or one or two minutes) the meditator should start to be *aware of this place fully* (the immediate vicinity of right or left nostril site between nostril and upper lip) *but not yet to*

¹⁰ Breathing action stops when one is in fourth jhāna or cessation attainment (nirodhasamāpatti) and also may stop in very deep coma.

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the conceptual breath fully and absolutely not to the skin between nostril and upper lip. (Because there are two nostril openings at your nose, we can say that there are two *streams of breath*.) You can start to focus on any site; may be the left or right¹¹. *As if you are an onlooker and were looking at /watching it from somewhere, you can start to focus on your chosen site / place.* It may appear strange to you in the conventional sense. (This technique¹² will be discussed later again under 'The breath object is the second on sensible reflection'.)

During the progress of concentration, usually the breath will become increasingly calm and subtle. 'The higher the phase of concentration, the subtler the breath to be cognized.' The breath becomes so subtle at certain phase that a meditator may become confused about the object. But the breath is still present. During these times, meditators can apply this approach 'The place is the first to be focused and the object is the second' ('Focus on the focus area first and then the meditation object second').

Do you know Material doors and Mental mind door?

To understand fully how you should focus on the site / place (and the breath object at this site), I would like you to learn:

- The sense doors and
- The objects that strike upon the sense doors.

As explained by The Buddha, there are six sense doors:

¹¹ Focusing on any one site (left or right) where breath exists is usually encouraged for beginning yogi and those who have yet to attain the stable counterpart sign of breath.

¹² Some yogis give it a name as 'gazing approach'.

- 1) Eye door *cakkhudvāra*
- 2) Ear door *sotadvāra*
- 3) Nose door *ghānavdāra*
- 4) Tongue door *jivhādvāra*
- 5) Body door *kāyadvāra*
- 6) Mind door *manodvāra* (life-continuum /bhavaṅga)

The first five sense doors are materiality and the sixth sense door, the mind is mentality. The first five material sense doors take only their respective material objects, whereas the mental mind door takes these previous five objects and its own objects (Dhamma objects). We have thus six types of object.

- 1) Color objects
- 2) Sound objects
- 3) Odour objects
- 4) Flavour objects
- 5) Touch objects (tangible/ tactile objects)¹³
- 6) Dhamma objects (Dhammā-rammaṇa) mind-object.

Colour /visible objects strike upon the eye door; sound objects strike upon ear door; odour objects strike upon the nose door; flavour objects strikes upon tongue door; *touch objects (tangible / tactile objects) strike upon body door and Dhamma objects strike upon the mind door.*

Dhamma objects are all other objects (all objects apart from the previous five material types of objects) in the world (thus including the concepts) which can be cognized only by

¹³ When the material objects strike the material sense doors, they strike the mind door (mano-dvāra) at the same time.

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the mind through the mind door. *For ānāpānasati meditators, it is important that the conceptual breath strikes upon the mind door only (so not upon others at all) as the conceptual breath is one of the infinite numbers of concepts (paññatti). Because of this, conceptual breath can be cognized only by the mind through the mind door (not by sensations through body door).*

When objects strike upon the doors, *only one of the six objects is taken* at one mind moment; no two objects can be taken simultaneously. When a colour object is taken, sound and other objects cannot be taken, also when sound object is taken, colour and other objects cannot be taken. For instance, when you watch the television, you may think that you are listening to the sound and simultaneously seeing the pictures at that time. From the Abhidhamma point of view, however, you cannot do both (seeing and listening) simultaneously (within one mind moment). It is because of our extremely fast mind ¹⁴ that we believe (misunderstand) that seeing and listening occurs at the same time. Actually, when we are seeing, we cannot hear, and vice versa. Likewise, the mind which is taking sense of touch objects cannot take the conceptual breath, and vice versa. *It is because the mind cannot take two objects simultaneously.* This knowledge is important for *ānāpānasati meditators* who feel touching or brushing sensations / senses of touch objects (such as heat, coldness, pulling, pushing, pulsation, hardness, numbness, etc.) easily or knowingly around the nostril and upper lip. Such meditators feel the touching sensations (senses of touch objects) on purpose or unintentionally. *Although it is not easy for beginning yogis to focus on the conceptual breath object only (without being aware of sensations), when their skills*

¹⁴ Mind / consciousness: The Buddha explains that when the mind is alert, then within a snap of the fingers, very many thousand million consciousnesses arise and perish.

and concentration improved later, meditators have to (focus on the place of conceptual breath as well as the conceptual breath/ mass of breath).

A meditator who feels sense of touch objects (touching or brushing of breath) at nostril or upper lip could cognize the quality of breath (whether its gross or subtle breath) and the touching of actual-breath or moving breath. The one who is aware of the moving breath could distinguish between in-breaths and out-breaths. The one who distinguishes and is well aware of the in and out breaths could not perceive the mass of breath (still conceptual breath) at that mind moment.

Herein, the consciousness that has in-breath as its object is one, the consciousness that has out-breath as its object is another, and the consciousness that has the mass of breath (still conceptual breath) as its object is yet another.¹⁵ Also we should understand that the consciousness that has the mass of object (still conceptual breath) as its object is higher than others. This is because concentrating on the mass of breath (the still conceptual breath) can culminate in the attainment of deep concentration (i.e. absorption; appanā-jhāna), whereas concentrating only on the actual breath (moving in and out-breaths) could not develop deep concentration.

Meditators who sit a long time feel pain in their bodies later and they think they would not be able to bear the pain further. At that time it is difficult for meditators to concentrate

¹⁵ This discussion is very similar to (same as) to the facts :

‘Sign, in-breath, out-breath, are not object’ ‘Of a single consciousness’;

‘By one who knows not these three things’ ‘Development is not obtained’.

‘Sign, in-breath, out-breath, are not object’ ‘Of a single consciousness’;

‘By one who does know these three things’

‘Development can be obtained’

(Paṭisambhidāmagga.i.170, Visuddhimagga.viii)

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on the meditation object since the mind cannot take two objects simultaneously. As painful feelings disturb the concentration, the meditator should change his or her posture to relieve the pain. When meditators free their body of pain, could recollect and boost their mindfulness again to focus on the meditation objects.

Can you work out what this means? ► STRONGER THE TOUCH, WEAKER THE BREATH;
WEAKER THE TOUCH, STRONGER THE BREATH

Beginning Yogis ...

Sensations at breath-touching site
(or touch objects) still strong } → (weak) Conceptual breath

Yogis who is developing concentration:

Sensations at breath-touching site (or
touch objects) become less and less } --→ (Strong) Conceptual breath

How do yogis see conceptual objects at the mind door?

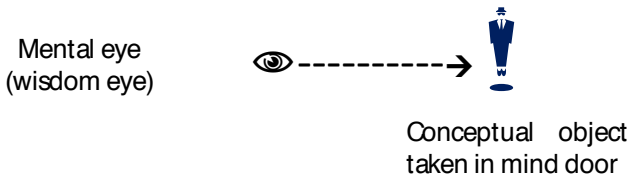
Here, we accept that there is air all around us although we cannot see and grasp it. Without fanning this air to touch and feel upon your skin, you also accept it readily. How do you accept it? Because you have already known that condition well, without any doubt you know/ accept it now. Likewise, as you are breathing all the time you know that your nostril (focus area) is full of breath (mass of breath). Such type of knowing / cognizing the breath at your focus area itself is a strong factor to ignore the sensations (at nostril and upper

lip) and movement of breath. Knowing the presence of object at its area clearly means seeing (cognizing) this object (at mind door). So sometimes I say, 'Knowing is Seeing.'

By using some similes, meditators are often explained to understand how conceptual objects are seen at mind door: 'you sometimes remember your parents, friends or your home'.

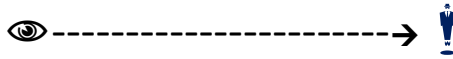
▷ For example, when you remember one of your close friends, his or her image appears in your mind *as if you were looking at him or her from ten, twenty feet or some distance away in one direction*. Usually when your mind is clear and fully alert, these images are more apparent than other times. Images that appear in the mind door are like taking and displaying the objects which are being focused from a closer / further range with the use of a *zoom lens* of a camera.

▷ For example, you may have played and watched computer games or TV series thrillingly for a few hours; so perhaps, later these images may have appeared vividly in your mind (at that night when you closed your eyes just before you fall asleep). Some also say about their experiences of seeing images that night. They experienced as though watching pictures and games in reality. In their mind they could see and watch coloured images (having definite shapes and forms) again in three dimensions with their eyes closed.

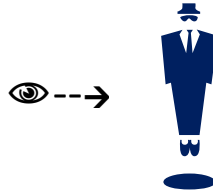


* As a camera does, mind is focusing on the conceptual object in one direction.

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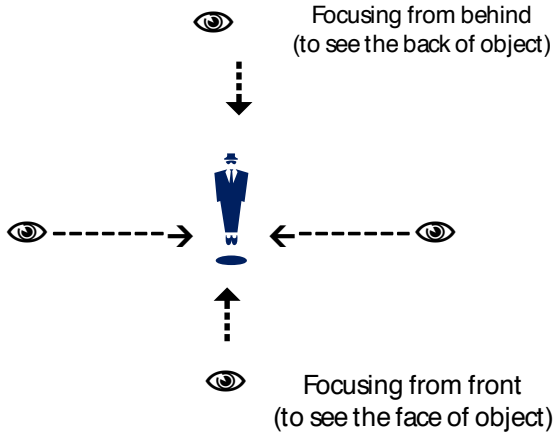


Conceptual object taken at distant range in mind door
Apparent becoming smaller object (Zoom Out)



Conceptual object taken at close range in mind door; Apparent becoming bigger object (Zoom In).

- * You (your mental eye) are focusing on the object that appears nearer to or further away from you (your mental eye).
- * Which one is *appropriate range/distance* by which object (*appropriate-sized image*) is seen / watched in acuity comfortably and consistently?
A skilled meditator can understand it.



Now you are vividly remembering your friend. It is just an example.

- * In your mind, which direction of approach can you achieve most convenient and stable focusing on the image/object?
- * Focusing from left? Focusing from right? Focusing from front? Focusing from behind?
A skilled meditator can understand it.

▷ While you are sleeping, you experience some events and *see a series of pictures at a close range or distance* in your dreams as though they were really happening. *Actually you have seen these images/concepts in your mind, or mental vision through the mind doors only.*

In ānāpānasati (mindfulness of the breath) meditation practice, at a certain phase of the path to concentration after abandoning the touching sensations at the nostrils and upper lips (i.e. after abandoning the touching moving-breath), meditators could see the conceptual breath objects

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through their mind door as one object (having a certain shape and form) with any colouring.¹⁶ *The concentrated mind that is associated with wisdom* can see the conceptual breath as any vivid or faint shape / form object with any colouring (i.e. white, yellow, red, dark or any other colouring). Because of this, sometimes I refer such object as 'Wisdom Breath' (as a metaphor). Like a photo camera taking the picture sharply from some distance with the use of a *zoom lens*, you could make your mind focus on and conceptualize the meditation object as the mass of breath / solid form of breath/ a piece of breath-string. *As if you are an onlooker and were looking at it from somewhere, you can focus on and perceive your breath object.* If you could do so, one thing is for sure— it is at that time very clear for the skilled yogis that they could cognize the breath object instantly by wisdom, whether the object is vivid or dim/faint or fuzzy or even no-colouring contourless object.

It is mentioned above (under the topic of 'What is the breath') that after perceiving the object vividly it is no longer important to be aware of the such and such shape and colour of the object. *Having ignored the shape and colour of the conceptual breath object, meditators have to continue focusing and concentrating on it as breath (mass of breath).* But depending upon perception and level of concentration these objects are variable in shape and colour.¹⁷

Just as images are being taken (photographed) by zoom lens (of a camera) appearing nearer to you or further away from you than it really is, *conceptual breath objects could be taken and watched zoom-in / out (from closer /*

¹⁶ In ānāpānasati practice when mind become concentrated any colouring object that appear at nostril and unified with breath could be represented as ānāpāna nimitta. But I seldom use this term 'nimitta' in my teaching.

¹⁷ The Visuddhimagga explains that this is because the nimitta is born of perception. Visuddhimagga.viii. Ānāpānasati Kathā.

further away) whereby in the mind door conceptual objects are seen within a range (apparently becoming bigger object (Zoom In) in close range and apparently becoming smaller object (Zoom Out) in further range). *After focusing on the appropriate size of (mass of) a breath sharply and precisely between the nostril and upper lip, the size of conceptual breath does not need to be analysed, thus ignoring the apparent smaller or bigger size of object.*

As a conclusion, we have to follow the rule: '*Do not pay attention to the shape, size and colour of the conceptual breath /wisdom breath.*'¹⁸

Some have confused before: focusing upon the breath that is at the touching point

"A gate-keeper pays attention only to people who arrive at the gate." In the same way, yogi has to pay attention only to the breath that arrives at the touching point, the gate.¹⁹

This statement sometimes leads some yogis to misunderstand that *to be aware of* the touching sensations at the nostrils or upper lips *continuously* is crucial in preparation for and throughout the practice of *ānāpānasati*, or continual and repeated *strong focusing on* skin sensations (any obvious elements characteristics) at the area around nostril or the upper lip first, and then detecting of the in and out breaths touching these area (in sequence) should be habitual.

I have seen in some cases before that some of the meditators who had the habit of being aware of breath through strong focusing on touching/brushing sensations at

¹⁸ This rule is same as 'Do not pay attention to the colour of the nimitta (the sign of concentration)'.

¹⁹ A gate-keeper : Such simile is given in the Visuddhimagga.

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nostril and lip, led themselves to feel more and more elements characteristics on these parts and their nearby area (such as hardness of the whole nose, hardness, heaviness and tension of the face, strong pushing or pulling sensations inside the nose). Later it was difficult for them to ignore these sensations and elements characteristics during the practice. Since as soon as they start be aware of 'In and out-breath' (paying attention to the movement of breaths) their nose or even their head become tense, hardened and tight, such condition adds a complication to their mental development.

As the statement '*focus upon the breath that is at the touching point*' sometimes serves to confuse the meditators, I usually avoid mentioning the word 'touching point' in my teaching. How do I explain the *ānāpānasati* practice instead without using this word 'touching point'? I explain as such: "*The place is the first to be focused and the object is the second to be reflected*".

The breath object is second on sensible reflection

A yogi should first focus upon the nostril area/place where the conceptual breath exists and then on the breath at this area.

FIRST STEP : *For the early stage of practice just as you focus the images (of your friend) in your mind, you can focus sharply on the place (the immediate vicinity of right or left nostril area between either of nostrils/nostril openings and upper lip) that the actual breath exists.* To impress on yogis the importance of the exact place to be focused, sometimes I refer that place as '*The proper focus area*'.

[It is usually best to take the 'overview of focus breath (mass of breath)' as if you were looking from behind the focus breath about 5-6 inches (12- 15 cm) away to overcome the obstacle of sensing (too much) touch objects and actual moving breath at the nostril. It can also be done as if looking from any other direction. But I do not like meditators focusing from above or below. Because 'focusing from above the breath object' unknowingly makes the physical eyes of yogi look at the breath object, this focusing direction can cause that yogi to suffer eye tension and eye strain later. While focusing on the breath object from below, the sight line of the wisdom eye is parallel with the flowing direction of in-breath. So a yogi cannot stabilize his focus on the proper target (proper focus area) long and easily follows the moving in-breath into the nose.]

SECOND STEP : *After focusing on the place where the actual / conceptual breath exists, you need to reflect the presence of breath / mass of breath for a few times that 'this area is full of breath' or 'this place is occupied by breath' or 'the breath is all the time present here'. When you have detected/ cognized the presence of breath (still conceptual breath) at your focus area, you can continue to focus on it as a whole and concentrate on it (as a mass of breath). Herein, it should be ascertained that your focus object is not an actual moving-breath object. Using the focusing technique even on first discovering (acquaintance) the mass of breath, it is clear that conceptual breath object/wisdom breath (in any shape and colour) is detected (from one direction).*

Herein, we should know that to see the breath object clearly, repeated awareness of feeling through your sense of touch objects (such as calmness, happiness) is also one of the obstacles. *'To fix your mind firmly on the focus object, as much as you can, do not pay attention to the sensations at*

your nostrils, lip and any other parts of your body, as well as your feeling (such as calmness, happiness). It is an important fact to follow when you reflect on the presence of conceptual breath (wisdom breath) at your focused area.

Do you have pure breath ?

'Is your breath dirty or pure?' Sometimes I use these particular terms to question some yogis who are only at beginning and early stages of the path to concentration. Now, you understand that the meditation object is the breath only, not the sensations.

I have noticed some meditators' practising style. This is strong touch and weak breath style: — when they focus on the breath, *'first try to know clearly the sense of touch (touching/ brushing sensations caused by the breath flow) at the nostril or lip area and then try to discover the breath (somewhere around these areas)'*. First they are acutely aware of the touching or brushing sensations, then they cognize the breath. So they recognize the breath through touching sensations at the nostrils and upper lip. Through the repeated sequence of such consecutive actions, they make their mind perceive or recognize the 'touching breath'; I sometimes refer it as *'dirty focusing style'*. This dirty focusing style occasionally can lead to the complication of elements (such as hardness, heaviness and tension of the face) and in chronic cases it is difficult to recover unless they change their focusing-style.

Although I explained this to the meditators, some meditators still could not abandon their dirty focusing style easily. It seems that they do not know what they're doing. *"You still have the touching breath and dirty breath"* I remarked to them. Some meditators who lay emphasis to a certain degree on the touch objects also obtained some

calmness, happiness and sometimes even strong light (light of wisdom) appearing in front of their face or surrounding their body. Although they may think that they are attaining good concentration and even jhāna factors, actually such type of concentration is preparatory concentration (parikamma-samādhī) only²⁰. Without relinquishing such dirty focusing style it is difficult for them to attain deep concentration. How is that so? Because focusing and concentration on the breath is interrupted by a lot of sensations thoughts,²¹ their mind could not fix enough on the conceptual breath object for sufficient period of time to attain deep concentration.

But some yogis who do not lay emphasis on touch objects (sensations) and fix their mind (wisdom eye) on the breath will not meet this obstacle of dirty focusing style with complications of elements. They can focus on the conceptual breath as if they were looking at it with great attention; later they are even able to focus on the conceptual breath without 'touching breath'. *'You have focused on the breath sharply, so you got the pure breath'* I remarked. I use these striking terms sometimes as I want meditators to understand and grasp the significance of *'mere focusing on the conceptual breath'*. When you could obtain the bright and transparent mass of breath / wisdom breath, at that time you have won the purest breath.

²⁰ Preparatory concentration (parikamma-samādhī): it is sometimes called momentary concentration (khaṇika-samādhī).

²¹ As The Buddha explains that within a snap of the fingers, very many thousand million consciousnesses arise and perish, in those who have alternate focus on breath and touching sensations, concentration on breath will be interspersed by countless thousand million mental process (the five door processes and the mind door processes taking one of the objects of tangibles.) and a great many life-continuum consciousnesses arising between such mental processes.

What is natural breathing ?

When concentration improves, breathing rhythm will start to change. During the progress of concentration, usually the breath will become increasingly calm and subtle. But it is not the case necessarily in lower levels of progress. There may be regular (normal) breathing in this session or fast in the next session, or slow the next day —or not change. Sometimes the breath may flow even jerkily. If there are no intentional efforts to change the breathing, these are all natural phenomena happening because of physiological reactions as a reflex response during the concentration progress. During the course of practice, some meditators notice the changes of their breathing rhythm. They make remarks such as 'Oh, my breathing is a little bit fast in this session' or 'my breathing is slow in this session'. After that, some of them comment: 'it is an improper rate', 'it is not a good sign in the practice', 'it is good to get the subtle breath' and so on. And then they *intentionally try to change and control their breathing rhythm* (by using effort) to their previous state or an intended state. It is because they already have some prior information that subtle breath is better than regular breath, gross breath is worse than regular breath, subtle breath can be obtained when the breath becomes long. By using effort, they attempt to obtain the subtle breath or long breath.

It is wrong to intentionally make an attempt to change the breathing (by using effort) as it actually interferes with the natural breathing, thus leading to the disturbance of meditation improvement. After changing and controlling the breathing rate / rhythm by effort, later the breathing rhythm will go back to the previous state (for example, to fast breathing). *Such an attempt to change and control the breathing rhythm impairs the mindfulness on conceptual*

breath (mass of breath), thus disturbance to the improvement of concentration arises. Attempts to change and control the breathing rhythm by using effort make the mind overly aware of the breathing action only or movement of the breath, *which are not the objects of meditation for meditators who can fix (watch /gaze) the conceptual breath objects (wisdom breath) in their mind.*

Although the fundamental principle of *ānāpānasati* practice is to focus and concentrate on the conceptual breath, in the beginning or early stage of practice the breathing actions as well as movement of breath are noticed/ cognized to a greater or lesser degree. While concentration is developing, meditators who are mindful and skilful would ignore the movement of actual breath (touching moving-breath) as well as the breathing actions in order to develop awareness of the conceptual breath (wisdom breath) which is non-moving/ immobile. Therefore, during the course of *ānāpānasati* practice, whatever the unintentional changes of those conditions (such as changes of breathing rhythm to fast, normal or slow, of gross or subtle breath), yogis who have become skillful and mindful could focus on the still conceptual breath (mass of breath).

During the progress of concentration, at a certain time the breath may become very subtle and unclear. Meditators may think that the breath has stopped or got lost. Although they could focus on the place where the breath object exists, it is difficult for them to cognize the breath object after reflecting on the presence of breath. In this case, as touching actual-breath (moving breath) is no longer felt, one has already overcome a hindrance (the sensations at nostril area). And you may need to convince yourself of the presence of conceptual breath (mass of breath) at the focus area with buckets of confidence. Meditators who are focusing *mindfully* with repeated reflection (labelling 'this place is full of breath',

or 'this place is occupied by breath', or 'breath, breath') would overcome this obstacle and obtain the 'wisdom breath' again.

How can you start focusing on the still conceptual breath ?

Here, in this discussion, we would like to discuss briefly the "approach to cognizing the still conceptual breath (mass of breath)". To discuss this approach it is better that meditators have already learned and experienced some basic steps of *ānāpānasati* practice :

'Beginning stage of practice'

- Breathing in mindfully; breathing out mindfully;
- Understanding that breathing in long, breathing out long, breathing in short, breathing out short;²²
- Experiencing the whole breath body (*sabba-kāya*) while breathing in and out.

In this way, The Enlightened One taught ²³ his disciples simply and clearly. His word is profound and should be taken as it is intended, giving due weight. By learning and practising these steps meditators would comprehend that the breath is conceptual, or a mass or solid-like concrete object. It is a 'Beginning stage of practice'— so I remark that there is a 'Beginning stage of concentration'.

We have learnt how the focusing technique (focusing approach) is applied to focus on the conceptual breath during *the early stage of concentration development only*. Please recollect the points mentioned above on how to focus the object by using the focusing technique. Through applying

²² Long breath: the breath that takes long stretch of time to breathe.

Short breath: the breath that takes short stretch of time to breathe.

²³ The Great Mindfulness-Foundation Sutta (Mahā-Sati-Paṭṭhāna Sutta)

this focusing technique, you are taking a decisive and big step towards the still conceptual breath.

‘Early stage of practice’: --- 3 steps.

[1] **‘Preparation step’** (Tool phase): — you should start to be aware of breath movement around your nostril area for a moment. It is the usual way for most yogis because when a yogi tries to start focusing on the conceptual breath object (mass of breath), they do not know *the exact location of this focus object by mind door*. A yogi makes his or her mind aware of breath-movement between the nostril and upper lip for a short moment (a few seconds) beforehand. That is enough— yogis are able *to know the exact location/ place of focus object (mass of breath) by mind door* in this ‘Preparation step’ using the moving-breath, nostril and upper lip as a tool.

[2] **‘First step’** (location phase): —“Place is first”. —

Because there are two nostril openings at your nose, left and right, you can select the side you prefer to focus on. *As if you are an onlooker looking at it from somewhere, you can start to focus on your chosen side and area*. Although it can be done as if looking from any one direction, usually I suggest directing the focusing towards the focus-point from behind, perpendicularly or slightly downwards, as I notice that this direction is very convenient and safe for most meditators.

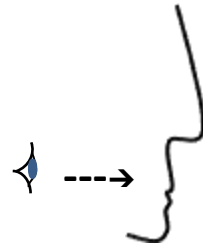
“Focusing approach (technique) appropriate for yogis who are going through ‘early stage’ of concentration development”:-

At ‘this step’, you can start trying to focus on the location of breath object while ignoring the sensations as well as moving-breath (actual breath). This is only a preparations for the next step by which wisdom-breath is the focus object.

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'Place is first': –

Sight-line is perpendicular or slightly downwards towards the target. It is proper to keep the mental eye stable. Within the first few days, it is not easy to get stable sight line for the very beginners.



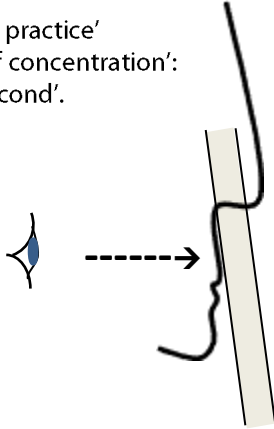
[3] 'Second step' (object phase):—"Object is second".

After focusing at the location where the breath exists, you can then continue to focus on the mass of breath (still conceptual breath) by ignoring the movement of actual breath — you already understand that this focus area is '*full of breath (mass of breath)*'. But if you sometimes concentrate on the actual breath (moving-breath) and sometimes on the still conceptual breath (mass of breath), your focusing and concentration on still conceptual breath is on and off. If you do so, it will be difficult for you to succeed in obtaining the still conceptual breath vividly. Your concentration will not develop any further and your progress will stop as well.

Meditators who cognize the still conceptual breath vividly perceive it as a mass with any colouring (for example, white or yellow or dark). It is the 'Early stage of practice'— so I remark that there is the 'Early stage of concentration'. Actually, before even being able to perceive the conceptual breath as a mass (with any colouring) vividly, meditators can also cognize the still conceptual breath well.²⁴

²⁴ Meditators experience as if their mind stick to the object. This is a very rudimentary/primitive stage of ānāpāna nimitta.

'Early stage of practice'
'Early stage of concentration':
– 'Object is second'.

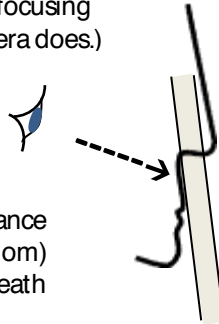


Need to sharpen the focus area (between nostril and upper lip). It is important to have a focusing acuity on the object as a whole. Focusing target must be confined within the proper focus area.

Intend to focus on external appearance of still conceptual breath (wisdom breath) in this stage.

Mental (wisdom) eye focusing from behind (as a camera does.)

Appropriate distance between mental (wisdom) eye and wisdom breath (mass of breath)



Appropriate mass of breath focused; For example, it may be a column of breath (with bold outline) or a portion of it only.

* Appropriate distance between mental (wisdom) eye and wisdom breath (mass of breath) means the distance that mental eye could take an image in acuity comfortably. It is variable, but for beginning yogis, usually about 5-6 inches (12- 15 cm).

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- * Appropriate mass of breath means the mass on which the mental eye could focus and concentrate comfortably. Depending on the phase, it is also variable in size and shape. Usually it should not be too big or too small.
- * Focusing cannot penetrate and observe inside the mass of breath yet. In this early stage even if you try to penetrate and investigate through the superficial or exterior part of focus object, you cannot detect the interior part of the mass vividly.

If it takes some days to cognize the mass of breath vividly in this early stage of practice, there may be some weakness in the practice:

- In mindfulness or understanding of the mass of breath, or
- In understanding and applying the focusing technique. — A meditator should assess if the proper place is focused accurately through focusing technique. — And then meditator may need thorough reflection of mass of breath (for example, column of breath) and focus mindfully on it.

Sometimes I say,

“there are all kinds of thoughts running through the mind. This mind easily wanders. If we pay attention to the movement of object, movement itself will distract or divert this mind easily away from focusing and fixing on the object. Only when you are able to focus and concentrate on a stable object, concentration can develop strongly.”

How could you ignore the movement of the breath?

By using one simile I like to elaborate this. You have seen before a fast-running river or when you crossed a bridge over the river, you might have watched the river water flowing. In the event of you watching the flowing river-water,

you could not maintain your focus long on the flowing water. Do you notice that? It is because the object is moving all the time so you could not stabilize your focusing on it for long. If you really want to, you have to follow this flowing water by a boat. When you watch flowing water from a watching point (e.g. from bridge), only after abandoning focusing on the movement of water, could you stabilize your focusing on one localized area, whereby you could see 'mere water'. Here, to focus on 'mere breath' (still conceptual breath), you have to abandon following the breath flow (up or down) whereby abandoning to distinguish between in and out breath. Without distinguishing in and out breath at this level, meditators could focus on the mass of the breath (for example, column of breath or portion of it) as 'mere breath'.

Yogis who are going through the early stage of concentration development could use this focusing approach (technique). After seeing the object vividly, yogis themselves could understand that straight sitting posture is very supportive, helpful and determinant for their mind to obtain precise focusing and fixity on meditation object. It is because the direction of sight-line to the conceptual breath object (wisdom breath) is stable and appropriate in an upright sitting posture.²⁵ The Buddha recommended meditators who practise *ānāpānasati* to sit down cross-legged and to keep their upper body erect.²⁶

As your skill comes with your practice, still conceptual breath can be cognized instantly. As soon as you could focus this still conceptual breath object (wisdom breath), it is at this

²⁵ Meditators who reached the sinking phases of concentration development can focus on the focus object more skilfully at all body postures.

²⁶ Dīgha-Nikāya.ii.9 'The Great Mindfulness-Foundation Sutta (Mahā-Sati-Paṭṭhāna Sutta).

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phase no longer important for you whether the breath is in or out-breath, long or short breath. Because these basic steps of practice are already obsolete in this phase you will notice that you have already overcome the obstacle of sensations at that time.

So, my suggestions here are summarized thus: —to stabilize your focusing on the still conceptual breath object,

- Please! Don't pay attention to sensations.
- Please! Ignore the movement of breath (Don't follow the moving breath). You need not distinguish between in and out-breath. And you need not assess the quality of breath whether it is gross or subtle as well.
- Please! Sit upright with your back straight naturally; but not too straight and stiff.

We have now discussed some of the rules and conditions under which the focusing technique operates. Although these conditions and techniques seem difficult to follow if you persevere in your attempts to apply this technique, you will find that they are not really difficult once you have got the knack and grasped the principle of *ānāpānasati* practice.

Have you focused on the bright light before? **If you say 'yes', what was all that about?**

There is one condition you should know if you have yet to comprehend the principle of *ānāpānasati* clearly or are still not yet skilled in applying the focusing technique. In the previous topic we discussed the "approach in cognizing the still conceptual breath (mass of breath)" during the early stage of concentration development.

There are 3 steps during the early stage of practice:

- 'Preparation step' (Tool phase),
- 'First step' (—"Place is first") and
- 'Second step' (—"Object is second").

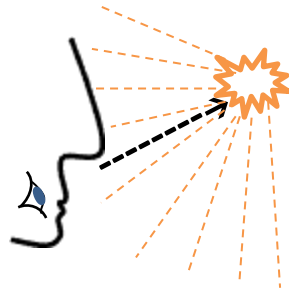
Before starting to apply the focusing technique, to be able *to know the exact location/ place of focusing object (mass of breath)* by mind door, in the 'preparation step' ('Tool phase'), the mind starts to focus on the moving-breath for a short moment. It also conducts a survey to find out where the nostril and upper lip are as landmarks. These are making preparations for the next step.

A meditator who is not yet skilled in applying the focusing technique recognizes the breath through the touching sensations between nostrils and upper lip in many meditation sessions. Such a meditator is unable to apply first and second steps. Although his mind rests on the touch object for a moment, he tries to cognize the breath object longer, so the concentration gradually develops. If the mental eye is too close to the breath object, the mind could not see the external appearance of the breath object (mass of breath) clearly. Almost at the same time the light of wisdom (light of concentration) appears in the meditator's surrounding.²⁷ A meditator starts to notice this dim or bright light that appears usually in front of the meditator's face. Meditator who could not grasp the principle of *ānāpānasati* practice pursues these lights or bright objects and tries to focus on them.

²⁷ Light of wisdom (Light of concentration): — Strong and powerful concentration produces strong and powerful light. It is explained by The Buddha in the 'Ābhā-Vagga' ('Splendour Chapter') of Anguttara-Nikāya .IV.III.v.1-5.

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'Beginning stage of concentration'
or 'Early stage of concentration' or
any other stage of concentration



Oh! There is a light.
That's an amazing
thing.

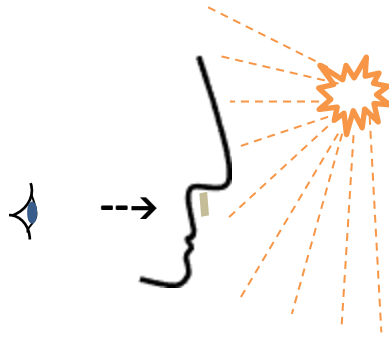
- * Wrong and improper focus object: – Here, meditator is focusing the (bright) light appearing in front of his face. In fact, this light is not at the proper location of focus object. The focus object (mass of breath) is at the place of actual moving-breath between nostril and upper lip. Therefore, meditator's focusing area is not correct. The lights that appear outside the proper focus area should be completely ignored.
- * Meditator is now an easy prey for the allure of mysterious light.
- * Touch and breath style: – Mind rest on touch objects (sensations) of moving breath between nostril and upper lip. And then the mind tries to recognize the moving breath. This mind is still distinguishing between in and out-breath. In most cases, it is still not very difficult for such yogis to focus on the proper focus object (still conceptual breath) by applying the focusing technique.

On the path to concentration, you have to manage to break through each phase of the stages

‘Early stage of practice’:-

In the vivid phase (of early stage) of practice you could see the still conceptual breath object with a bold outline against the background (if you could ignore the light of concentration spreading out around your surroundings). You can focus on the object as if you were looking at it from somewhere. I name this focusing style *‘External Focusing Approach’*. In some yogis’ report, this object is really shining, metallic and luminous in this phase. It is so attractive that meditators anchor their mind upon the bright objects.²⁸

- * Correct and proper object: The focus object is still OK because the object (mass of breath) is stable at its proper place.
- * Focusing is exact and precise on the proper object. The light that appears outside the focus area is completely ignored.



“You are now a sharpshooter!”

²⁸ Meditators who experience such luminous objects (in this phase) are often confused. They think they have obtained the counterpart sign (paṭibhāga-nimitta). Actually it is only a preparatory sign (parikamma-nimitta).

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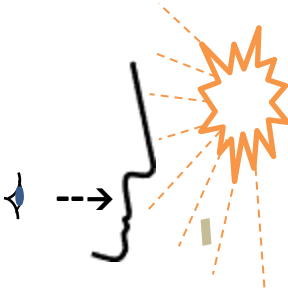
You are now on the path to concentration and there will be a lot of phases and their transitions in each stage on the path to concentration. If you are observant, you can see and notice a lot of mile stones on your path to concentration. Since the practice is a real marathon, it may take even several months to achieve your ultimate goal. The way to develop the concentration is through the dogged perseverance.

During the course of practice, sometimes a meditator may notice dim or strong lights appearing in front of face. The meditator has to ignore them and concentrate only on the meditation object (mass of breath). These are light of wisdom only, not the meditation object. Sometimes they are charming and attractive. Meditators often fall into the trap of trying to concentrate on these lights for many days. So, I say sometimes "You are shooting at wrong target!" "You are caught in a trap!"

Since concentration is sometimes still unstable and focusing skill is also weak in the early stage of concentration development, the still conceptual breath (mass of breath) cannot be confined in its proper place (breath column between the nostril and upper lip) and may be moving somewhere outside its proper place (place of actual breath). At that time, meditators have to abandon that object and should not follow and focus on it or pull it back towards its original place. It is improper to focus on the drifting or shifted object. Such attempt to focus and concentrate on drifting or shifted object is of no avail.

I sometimes say,

"since your still conceptual breath (mass of breath) has moved outside of your focusing target / (imaginary border of) breath column, it is no longer valid for the practice; it is expired, no more alive."



Glowing, strong or dim light shining on your face or your surroundings: — By paying attention and focusing on these lights, concentration cannot develop any further. Moreover, concentration can be broken and fall away.

Expired object: As still conceptual breath has moved & positioned outside the location of actual breath, it is no longer the focus object.

Meditators should start again to be *aware of the location of breath fully* (the immediate vicinity of right or left nostril site between nostril and upper lip) and then the still conceptual breath (mass of breath) at this location (for example, appropriate size of breath mass, or breath about the size of the tip of a little finger). If the meditator's focusing is skilful, precise and strong enough, the meditator can stabilize his focus on the proper object (still conceptual breath /mass of breath). Even when the focus object shakes, or spins, or trembles, the meditator can maintain his fixity of focusing on a new proper object. The trembling, spinning and drifting object, as soon as it has been recognized, is ignored and the meditator can then instantly set up a proper object anew. If the mass of breath is trembling or spinning at the proper focus place, to overcome this obstacle the meditator has to ignore this object and needs to reflect on the mass of breath as 'non-moving one mass of breath' or 'still conceptual breath'.

'Middle stage of practice':-

In the vivid phase of early stage concentration, external appearance of the object is focused and meditators can see it vividly. At one time a meditator can no longer perceive it vividly and it seems as though the meditation object has been lost. It is the beginning of the 'Middle stage of practice'. This is the transitional period for the next phase, 'Penetrative Phase of middle stage'. When concentration develops gradually, *focusing can penetrate into the object; meditators start to see the inner part of the mass of breath*. In this penetrative phase, meditators may see the breath variable sizes and shapes or separate entities without particular shapes (for example, a stretched out spiders web, cotton wool, drawn out cotton, cloud, mist, fog, thick fog, etc).

To overcome this phase, meditators need comprehension of what is seen and concentrated on. In fact, for the development of concentration in the *ānāpānasati* practice the mass of the breath cannot be viewed as 'a cluster of separate entities'. By cognizing the mass of the breath/ still conceptual breath as '*merely one homogeneous solid thing*' meditators could overcome this phase. Herein, solid means —having no holes or spaces inside (not hollow) and —made completely of the material mentioned (that is, the material is not only on the surface).

'a cluster of separate entities'----- ×
'merely one homogeneous solid thing'---- √

That is why a meditator needs to ignore the separate items, their shapes, sizes, colours and gaps between these items so the meditator can focus on the appropriate area of the mass of breath 'as a whole' from an appropriate distance. It is important to grasp and apply this view 'merely one

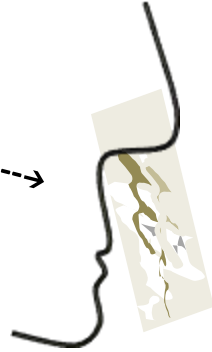
homogeneous solid breath' to overcome some difficulties in higher phases to concentration.

'Middle stage of practice'— Penetrative Phase
'Middle stage of concentration'

'External Focusing Approach'



Oh, the mass is stuffed full of things.



- * 'Penetrative Phase' : Grey or whitish or white lumps like objects or lace like objects with indefinite shapes are seen inside. Actually colours, shapes and sizes are all variable. A meditator needs to reflect upon 'merely one homogeneous solid nature of object' (mass of breath) and can pass this phase without undue delay.
- * [It is important even in the sinking phases to understand and apply this "nature of one homogeneous solid object" liberally throughout the mass of breath (within the imaginary lines of breath column) between the nostril and upper lip to overcome some obstacles (such as changing the shape and form of focus object / paying attention to the shape and form of focus object).]

The one who is in this phase of concentration needs to have this view to overcome some obstacles on the way. Of those, one formidable obstacle we shall discuss. It is not very common, but I have noticed it is sometimes difficult for some

yogis to break through. — After focusing on the mass of breath, the breath object becomes a group of small particles, and those particles arise and perish away quickly.²⁹ So, the meditator cannot find the mass of breath at the whole focus area. In fact, by focusing on these very small particles, the mind cannot develop concentration further. The meditator becomes unclear about how to obtain the focus object. In this case, the one who understands the conceptual breath object as ‘one homogeneous solid thing’, and applies the style of focusing on the conceptual breath (mass of breath) ‘as a whole’ at appropriate distance from it, can gradually overcome this obstacle. It is also important here not to have effort in excess while focusing on the object. If effort is too strong, meditator will be unable to develop his wisdom of focusing on the conceptual breath object in such a way.

What is the ‘Transitional phase’ ?

Do you know it clearly ?

There are still some phases to overcome before attaining the transparent breath-mass. When concentration gradually improves and breath becomes subtler at each higher phase, meditators may sometimes feel difficult to focus on the still conceptual breath as it seems to be missing. It appears that focus place is empty of breath. Although in one session the object (mass of breath) is vividly seen and focused, in the next session it may become faint. And it may even come to the point at which it is no longer manifest. Most meditators think that their progress is no more, or their concentration breaks and falls away. In fact, this is the

²⁹ Breath exists as a group of particles (kalāpas). Each particle is composed of the primary materiality and derived materiality. These materialities are ultimate realities (*paramattha dhammas*).

transitional phase, the transition from one phase to another higher one.

During the period of transition to higher phase, the object becomes unmanifest and the meditator needs to **follow 'The Focusing Approach' anew** — the place is the first to be focused and the object is the second. —

Whenever the breath object at the focus area becomes unmanifest, *the meditator should train his mind to cognize the object without taking too long in the 'preparation step' ('Tool phase')*. There is no need to go back to the 'beginning stage of practice' —labelling in breath and out breath and so on; but a meditator needs to go back to the basics (principle of practice). Because the meditator is still breathing, the mass of breath is not really lost. Because you are not clever yet at applying the principle of *ānāpānasati* practice in these conditions, after focusing the proper place of the mass of breath, the mass of breath is nowhere to be found within the imaginary lines of breath column between the nostril and upper lips. The object seems to hide somewhere and it cannot be seen.

In these transitional phases, some meditators said that the object (mass of the breath) has gone missing. Here, the object (mass of the breath) has not gone missing; actually it is a seemingly lost object. Some meditators felt frustrated or dismayed at the disappearance of their (previous) obvious object and they tried to find the object in the focus area desperately. I usually say them :

- “the object disappears, don't disappoint”;
- “you do not need to wait even a second for a conceptual breath”;
- “no need to search in the focus area for the mass of

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breath”;

“you have to follow ‘The Focusing Approach’ anew”.

Sharp wisdom (for e.g. a few times successive and thorough reflection on the ‘homogeneous nature of a compact mass of breath throughout the breath column’—in transitional phases of the middle stage) and strong faith in the practice (principle of *ānāpānasati* practice) are very important and play major roles in detecting the mass of breath in these conditions.

During the transitional phases, yogis meet the challenge of balancing the controlling faculties.³⁰ In these conditions, some of them who do not know and expect such milestones on their way sometimes get disappointed at their result of practice and yogis often lose confidence. (For example, a meditator obtains very bright mass of breath object in the morning session; but, in the evening session he faces the loss of that object and focus area is full of darkness.) Faith in their practice has declined and yogis will regress from their work in meditation. When yogi wishes to cultivate concentration, it is in any phase good to have strong faith (*Saddhā*) in the practice. In these transitional phases without strong understanding (*Paññā*) on the fundamental principle of practice it is difficult for yogis to restore confidence in the practice. It is important to have strong and firm perception (*Saññā*) of conceptual breath (mass of breath) as it is a proximate cause for mindfulness of the breath (*Sati*). Mindfulness is necessary under all circumstances and protects the mind from forgetting of the object (mass of breath).

Because focusing on the object with excess effort (*Vriya*) causes the mind a state of agitation, mind cannot

³⁰ The controlling faculties are mental powers that control the mind and keep the mind from straying off the path to concentration in *ānāpānasati* practice. They are 1. Faith (*Saddhā*), 2. Effort (*Vriya*), 3. Mindfulness (*Sati*), 4. Concentration (*Samādhi*), 5. Understanding (*Paññā*).

obtain stable concentration on the object. With insufficient effort mind becomes weak and cannot maintain stable focusing on the object; Mind falls away from the object of meditation and mind will be overwhelmed by wandering thoughts. In these two conditions (excessive effort and insufficient effort) mind cannot obtain stable focusing and concentration on the object. Only with optimum effort mind can obtain effective and stable focusing on the object. As mindfulness (*Sati*) keeps the object of meditation from becoming lost, a mindful yogi can cognize and assess the condition quickly as either excessive or insufficient effort. Walking meditation (practising of *ānāpānasati* meditation while walking) is very supportive and helpful to meditators to understand these conditions. For example, while walking, meditator can focus on the vivid object (mass of breath), but while sitting, meditator cannot obtain the vivid object easily. How's that? Perhaps meditator may have used the effort in excess during the sitting session, and he is eager to obtain the previous object. So his mind is a little bit agitated at that time and has not balanced this controlling effort faculty well.

During the transitional phases, meditator should first ponder on the principle of practice for a moment, and start to apply 'The Focusing Approach' anew. A meditator has to determine to tackle the difficulty head on. After cognizing the mass of breath, the meditator focuses on the object, intending to see the object clearly. The meditator mindfully reflects on the nature of conceptual breath object (mass of breath) and then cognizes the object. By the mindful and repetitive process of cognizing the object (the sequence of reflection and cognizance of the object— the sequence of *sati* and *Paññā*), the object (mass of breath) would become increasingly identified. At the same time mindfulness could adjust the strength of effort (*Vriya*) to attain the optimum by

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which mass of breath is clearly cognized and concentrated (Samādhi).

Herein, we should consider one fact that the higher the phase to concentration, the softer and subtler the breath. Softer and subtler breath (actual breath) makes meditator's mind needed more mindfulness, stronger understanding, better focusing skills and buckets of confidence to perceive the conceptual breath (mass of breath) vividly.

Conclusion

'Although any meditation subject, no matter what, is successful only in one who is mindful and fully aware, yet any meditation subject other than this one gets more evident as he goes on giving it his attention.'³¹ In this condition, *ānāpānasati* practice is significantly different from other meditation subjects.

But, as the skills (and concentration) improve, meditator can cognize the still conceptual breath object (mass of breath) without delay, even as breathing gets a little fast or gross while walking. To focus on the still conceptual breath (wisdom breath), a meditator needs not wait for the breath to become very subtle. By applying the technique skilfully and following the rules, a meditator can manage to maintain the still conceptual breath throughout the practice of *ānāpānasati* although there may be changes of colour as well as brightness of the breath object (mass of breath).

As concentration becomes developed and deepened gradually, this external focusing style sometimes seems not consistent in detail from phase to phase. Especially when the still conceptual breath object (mass of breath) becomes transparent and three dimensions, sense of direction will

³¹ Visuddhimagga viii.

become weaker — the sense of distance between mental eye and object will be (almost) lost. The external focusing approach (used in the early stage and middle stage (penetrative phase) of practice) is no longer applicable when the meditator can focus and concentrate on the transparent mass of breath. How's that? The meditator's mind (wisdom eye) can focus somewhere within the transparent mass of breath. Thereafter, they feel as if sinking into this clear homogeneous object and the previous focusing style (focusing direction and distance) is no longer obvious. Sometimes I refer to such type of focusing within the transparent mass of breath as 'Internal Focusing Approach'.

Concentration on the mass of breath through the internal focusing approach will become stronger and deeper, thereby lessening the distracting thoughts.³² With continued practice, it soon becomes apparent to meditator that he or she could discern the jhāna factors.³³

Now we would like to stop our discussion on *ānāpānasati* practice. Before we finish this discussion, I would like to remind you again that the technique mentioned is only intended for beginning meditators who have yet to attain concentration. In fact, as we have already discussed the principle, some of the rules and conditions of *ānāpānasati* practice, by learning these well, not only will be really helpful for yogis to understand 'the lower phases of concentration (beginning stage of practice, early stage of practice and

³² The mass of breath is herein used to refer to the counterpart sign of concentration (*paṭibhāga-nimitta*).

³³ In the case of *ānāpānasati*, the five jhāna factors are: 1) Application (*vitakka*) : directing and placing the mind on the counterpart sign of concentration. 2) Sustainment (*vicāra*) : maintaining the mind on the counterpart sign of concentration. 3) Joy (*pīti*) : liking for the counterpart sign of concentration. 4) Bliss (*sukhā*) : happiness about the counterpart sign of concentration. 5) One-pointedness (*ekaggatā*) : one-pointedness of mind on the counterpart sign of concentration.

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middle stage of practice –penetrative phase)’ but also it will provide a foundation for breaking through the each phase in higher stages to concentration.

Now at the end of this discussion you already understand that it is not easy for trivial persons to grasp the principle of *ānāpānasati* throughout the course of practice. Herein, I would like to quote some notes mentioned in the texts.

“This *ānāpānasati* as a meditation subject—is foremost among the various meditation subjects of all Buddhas, (some) Pacceka Buddhas and (some) Buddhas’ disciples as a basis for attaining distinction and abiding in bliss here and now.”³⁴

“But this *ānāpānasati* is difficult, difficult to develop, a field in which only the minds of Buddhas, Pacceka Buddhas, and Buddhas’ sons are at home. It is no trivial matter, nor can it be cultivated by trivial persons. In proportion as continued attention is given to it, it becomes more peaceful and subtler. So, strong mindfulness and understanding are necessary here.”³⁵

The numerous obstacles that are on your way can be understood using one key: — The principle of *ānāpānasati* practice— “Focus on the nostril area and then on the mass of breath. And cognize it.” Anyway, it is better for meditators who are developing concentration to practise under the close guidance of a competent teacher.

May you succeed in *ānāpānasati* meditation.

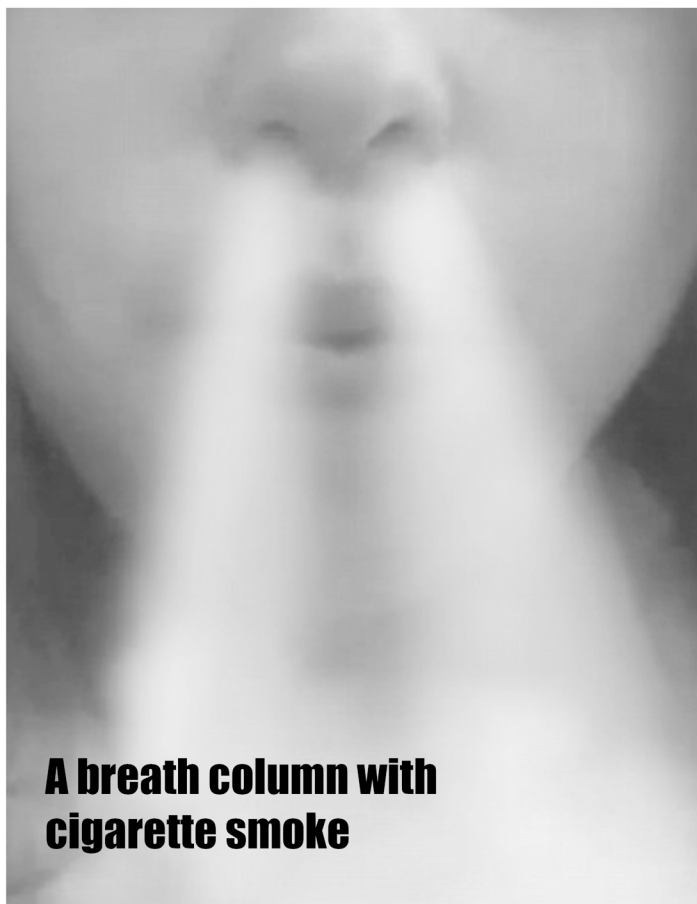
May you be well and happy.

Bhikkhu Paññānanda (Intagaw-Pa Auk)
Meditation Retreat, May – October 2011
Sidikalang, Indonesia

³⁴ Aṅguttara-Nikāya.v, 135 and Visuddhimagga.viii.

³⁵ Visuddhimagga.viii.

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**A breath column with
cigarette smoke**

A black and white photograph showing the profile of a person's face on the right side, exhaling a thick, white plume of smoke that extends towards the left. The background is dark and out of focus, with some faint, blurry shapes that could be other people or objects. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the contours of the face and the texture of the smoke.

**A breath column
with cigarette smoke**

“Wherever the Buddha’s teachings have flourished,

either in cities or countrysides,

people would gain inconceivable benefits.

The land and people would be enveloped in peace.

The sun and moon will shine clear and bright.

Wind and rain would appear accordingly,

and there will be no disasters.

Nations would be prosperous

and there would be no use for soldiers or weapons.

People would abide by morality and accord with laws.

They would be courteous and humble,

and everyone would be content without injustices.

There would be no thefts or violence.

The strong would not dominate the weak

and everyone would get their fair share.”

* THE BUDDHA SPEAKS OF
THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA OF
ADORNMENT, PURITY, EQUALITY
AND ENLIGHTENMENT OF
THE MAHAYANA SCHOOL*

DEDICATION OF MERIT

May the merit and virtue
accrued from this work
adorn Amitabha Buddha's Pure Land,
repay the four great kindnesses above,
and relieve the suffering of
those on the three paths below.

May those who see or hear of these efforts
generate Bodhi-mind,
spend their lives devoted to the Buddha Dharma,
and finally be reborn together in
the Land of Ultimate Bliss.
Homage to Amita Buddha!

NAMO AMITABHA

南無阿彌陀佛

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