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“Mindfulness of the Respiration”

Excerpted from

Ārya Asaṅga’s

The Stages of the Listeners

(*Śrāvakaḥūmi*)

Translated from the Sanskrit and Tibetan

by

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[223]ⁱ What is mindfulness of the respiration? [224] Mindfulness of the object of inhalation and exhalation is called mindfulness of the respiration. In that regard, what are the two inhalations? They are inhalation and interim inhalation. What are the two exhalations? They are exhalation and interim exhalation. Now inhalation is the vital energy that is drawn inward to the level of the navel during the in-breath. Interim inhalation occurs during the time when the inhalation has ceased and the exhalation has not yet begun. Vital energy similar to that is drawn in for a short time during the period of relaxation, and that is called interim inhalation. Exhalation and interim exhalation are to be understood in a similar fashion. Here is this distinction: The outwardly directed vital energy moves out from the region of the navel to the upper lip or the tip of the nose, or outward from there.

What are the causes of inhalation and exhalation? They are two: propulsive karma and [225] the space in the region of the navel, and the more extensive space of the body. What are the bases of inhalation and exhalation? They are two: the body and mind. How so? Inhalation and exhalation occur in dependence upon the body and mind. That is in accord with circumstances.

Query: Might they occur solely in dependence upon the body?

Response: In that case they would occur for one engaging in the state of equipoise devoid of discernment, in the equipoise of cessation, and in those who are born among the gods who are sentient beings devoid of discernment.

Query: Might they occur solely in dependence upon the mind?

Response: In that case they would occur for one engaging in formless equipoise and for those born in the formless realm.

Query: Might they occur in dependence upon both the body and mind?

Response: That is not always the case. If that were so, they would occur in those engaged in the equipoise of the fourth dhyāna and in those born in the fourth dhyāna, and in sentient beings in the oval, oblong, and round stages of embryonic development.ⁱⁱ But they do not occur in such cases. Therefore, inhalation and exhalation occur in dependence upon the body and mind [226] according to circumstances.

What are the movements of inhalation and exhalation? They are two: The movement of inhalation is downward and of exhalation, upwards.

What are the locations of inhalation and exhalation? They are two: coarse space and subtle spaces. The coarse space extends from the region of the navel up to the mouth and nose, or from the mouth and nose to the space in the region of the navel. What are the subtle spaces? They are the pores over the entire body.

What is the fourfold enumeration of the names of the inhalation and exhalation? This consists of [1] the vital energies, [2] the in- and out-breaths, [3] inhalations and exhalations, and [4] formations of the body. “Vital energy” is one word that is synonymous with other vital energies, and it is common with the other [three enumerations]; while the other three are unique.

What are the two faults of exertion in inhalation and exhalation? They are overly lax engagement and [227] overly forceful engagement. Due to overly lax engagement, the lazy mind is shrouded with dullness or drowsiness, or it is distracted outward. Excessively forceful engagement inflicts bodily harm or mental harm. How is the body harmed? Inhalation and exhalation are forcefully drawn in and released with difficulty, and imbalanced vital energies enter the body. Right at the start they suffuse the major and minor limbs, and they are called “pervasive.” Moreover, when the pervasive vital energy becomes excessive, this is said to create illness, and they produce physical imbalances in the major and minor limbs. That is called bodily harm.

How is the mind harmed? With too much force, the mind is overwhelmed by becoming distracted, depressed, or agitated. In those ways harm is done to the mind.

In terms of mindfulness of the respiration one should know these five kinds of training: (I) thorough training by counting, (II) thorough training by engaging with the aggregates, (III) thorough training [228] by engaging with dependent origination, (IV) thorough training by engaging with reality, and (V) thorough training by way of sixteen aspects.

I. Thorough Training by Counting

What is thorough training by counting? The training by counting entails four methods: (A) counting individually, (B) counting by pairs, (C) counting forwards, and (D) counting backwards.

A. What is counting individually? When the inhalation has come in, one counts “one” with mindfulness applied to inhalation and exhalation. When the inhalation has ceased and the exhalation has finished, one counts, “two,” counting thus up to ten, so that the number of counts is not too little or too much. This is called counting individually.

B. What is counting by pairs? When the inhalation has finished coming in, and the exhalation has finished going out, then one counts “one.” One counts up to ten with that method of counting. This is called counting by pairs. Combining the inhalation and exhalation as one, one counts “one,” so this is called counting by pairs.

C. What is counting forwards? By counting individually or by pairs, [229] one counts forwards up to ten. This is called counting forwards.

D. What is counting backwards? One counts in reverse order starting from ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five...down to one. This is called counting backwards.

When one has done the practice of counting forwards and counting backwards by counting individually or by pairs, and one’s mind does not wander in between [counts], and one counts without the mind becoming distracted, then distinctive advanced counting should be explained.

What is distinctive counting? One counts two as one, either by counting individually or by pairs. Now with counting by pairs, four inhalations and exhalations become one. With counting individually, moreover, an inhalation and exhalation become one. In this way one counts up to ten. Thus, one counts higher and higher, increasing up to counting even a hundred [breaths] as one. Then by counting a hundred as one, one counts forwards up to ten. Thus one counts ten of that practice of counting as “one” [230] and goes up to “ten.” And with counting ten as one, if one’s mind does not wander in between [counts], one is thoroughly trained by way of counting.

When applying oneself to counting, if the mind wanders in between [counts], then return to the beginning and start counting either forwards or backwards. When the mind naturally does not stray away but is continually engaged with the object of inhalation and exhalation, without interruption, [such that]

- when the inhalation begins one apprehends that it is beginning,
- when the inhalation ends, one apprehends that it ends and that there is no exhalation,
- when the exhalation begins one apprehends that it begins, and when it stops one apprehends that it has stopped and that there is no inhalation,
- when one engages with the breath with delight, free of wavering, movement, and distraction—with that one advances beyond the stage of counting.

Then one should not count any more, but direct the mind solely to the object of inhalation and exhalation.

During the breaks between inhalation and exhalation, [231] one should be simply comprehend and know the beginning and end of each exhalation and inhalation. That is called thorough training by counting.

Moreover, the practice of counting is taught to those of dull faculties, for it stabilizes their minds, brings delight to their minds, and prevents them from becoming distracted. Otherwise, without counting, their minds would be enveloped with dullness and drowsiness, or their minds would be distracted outward. But by applying themselves to counting, that does not happen to them.

People with sharp faculties and clear minds take no pleasure in the practice of counting. Simply by receiving the instructions on counting, they very quickly comprehend it, and therefore take no delight in it. By closely applying mindfulness to the object of inhalation and exhalation, they closely attend to the place, duration, manner, and time of occurrence of the in- and out-breaths. That is how they train.

II. Thorough Training by Engaging with the Aggregates

By devoting oneself to that practice, cultivating it time and again with continuity, [232] physical pliancy and mental pliancy arise; and upon reaching single-pointedness, one takes delight in the object. One who has thoroughly trained the body like that engages with the aggregates by attending to objective and subjective phenomena.

One who focuses the attention upon the body, which is the basis of inhalations and exhalations, engages with the aggregate of form. One who does so on the feelings that are conjoined with the mindfulness that apprehends inhalations and exhalations engages with the aggregate of feelings. One who does so on thorough understanding engages with the aggregate of recognition. One who does so on mindfulness, volition, and wisdom engages with the aggregate of mental formations. One who does so on the mind, mental engagement, and consciousness engages with the aggregate of consciousness. Those who engage with the aggregates and abide there many times are said to be thoroughly trained by engaging with the aggregates.

III. Thorough Training by Engaging with Dependent Origination

When one sees and thoroughly understands the mere aggregates, mere formations, and mere phenomena, then one engages with the dependent origination of composites. [233] And how does one engage with them? One seeks and inquires as to the basis and the cooperative conditions for the inhalation and exhalation. One considers that the in- and out-breaths depend upon and are conditioned by the body and by the mind. Moreover, by what are the body and mind conditioned? One realizes that the cooperative condition for the body and mind is the life-faculty. {What is the cooperative condition for the life-faculty? One realizes that the cooperative condition for the life-faculty is previous formations. What is the cooperative condition for the previous formations?} ⁱⁱⁱ One realizes that ignorance is the cooperative condition for previous formations. Thus, due to the cooperative condition of ignorance there are previous formations, which condition the life-faculty, which conditions the body and consciousness; and the body and mind condition the in- and out-breath. Now due to the cessation of ignorance, formations cease; due to the cessation of formations, the life-faculty ceases; due to the cessation of the life-faculty, the body and mind cease; due to the cessation of the body and mind, inhalation and exhalation cease. Thus one engages with dependent origination. [234] One who dwells repeatedly on that is said to be thoroughly trained in dependent origination. This is called the thorough training by engaging with dependent origination.

IV. Thorough Training by Engaging with Reality

One who is thoroughly trained thus in dependent origination realizes that formations, being dependently related events, are impermanent. Since they are impermanent, they {occur upon not having occurred previously, and upon occurring,} they disappear. Moreover, those phenomena that occur upon not having occurred previously and, having occurred, disappear are subject to birth, aging, sickness, and death. Those phenomena that are subject to birth, aging, sickness, and death are unsatisfying. Those phenomena that are unsatisfying are identityless, not independent, and without an owner. Thus, by means of impermanent, unsatisfying, empty, and identityless properties, one engages with the reality of suffering. Such a person thinks, “Everything that is suffering, illness, and a boil, resulting from formations, is conditioned by craving. [235] Moreover, the eradication of all craving, which produces suffering, is tranquil and excellent—that I know. If one dwells thus repeatedly, there will be a complete eradication of craving.” Thus one engages with the reality of the source, the reality of cessation, and the reality of the path. When one dwells on that repeatedly, one comprehends the [Four] Realities [for Āryas]. That is called the practice of engaging with reality.

V. Thorough Training by Way of Sixteen Aspects

When one who is thoroughly trained in the [four] realities has eradicated the attributes that are to be dispelled by [the Path of] Seeing, those that are to be dispelled by [the Path of] Meditation still remain. In order to eradicate them, one thoroughly trains by way of the sixteen aspects. What are the sixteen aspects?

One practices mindfully inhaling, mindfully noting the breath being inhaled. One practices mindfully exhaling, mindfully noting the breath being exhaled.

Inhaling, one authentically experiences (1a) long and (2a) short breaths and (3a) the entire body; and authentically experiencing the entire body, one practices noting the breath being inhaled.

[236] Exhaling, one authentically experiences (1b) long and (2b) short breaths and (3b) the entire body; and authentically experiencing the entire body, one practices noting the breath being exhaled.

Inhaling, upon (4a) really refining the bodily formation, one practices noting the inhalation upon really refining the bodily formation.

Exhaling, upon (4b) really refining the bodily formation, one practices noting the exhalation upon really refining the bodily formation.

Inhaling, (5a) authentically experiencing joy, (6a) authentically experiencing wellbeing, (7a) authentically experiencing the formations of the mind, and upon (8a) really refining the formations of the mind, one practices noting the inhalation upon really refining the formations of the mind.

Exhaling, (5b) authentically experiencing joy, (6b) authentically experiencing wellbeing, (7b) authentically experiencing the formations of the mind, and upon (8b) really refining the formations of the mind, one practices noting the exhalation upon really refining the formations of the mind.

Inhaling, (9a) authentically experiencing the mind, (10a) bringing exceptional joy to the mind, (11a) concentrating the mind and (12a) liberating the mind, one practices noting the mind's liberation and the inhalation.

Exhaling, (9b) authentically experiencing the mind, (10b) bringing exceptional joy to the mind, [237] (11b) concentrating the mind and (12b) liberating the mind, one practices noting the mind's liberation and the exhalation.

Inhaling, (13a) beholding impermanence, (14a) beholding the eradication [of obscurations], (15a) beholding freedom from attachment and (16a) beholding the cessation [of the aggregates], one practices noting the occurrence of cessation and the inhalation.

Exhaling, (13b) beholding impermanence, (14b) beholding the eradication [of obscurations], (15b) beholding freedom from attachment and (16b) beholding the cessation [of the aggregates], one practices noting the occurrence of cessation and the exhalation.

What is the classification of those [sixteen] points? If one observes the four practices, one achieves the four applications of mindfulness. In order to eradicate the remaining fetters, one begins to focus the attention on the object of the inhalation and exhalation. Thus it is said: "One practices mindfully inhaling, mindfully noting the inhalation."

1. When focusing on the inhalation or exhalation, if a long inhalation occurs, one practices noting that a long breath is inhaled; if a long exhalation occurs, [238] one practices noting that a long breath is exhaled.

2. When focusing on the interim inhalation or exhalation, if a short breath is inhaled, one practices noting the short inhalation; if a short breath is exhaled, one practices noting the short exhalation.

3. Inhalation and exhalation are of long duration, while interim inhalation and exhalation are of short duration. One observes and recognizes them in the manner in which they occur. When one is intently focused upon the entrance of inhalation and exhalation into the minute cavities of the pores of the body, one authentically experiences the entire body; and when a breath is inhaled, one practices authentically experiencing the entire body and noting the inhalation. If a breath is exhaled while authentically experiencing the entire body, one practices authentically experiencing the entire body and noting the exhalation.

4. When the inhalation and interim inhalation have ceased, there is an absence of inhalation and exhalation, and one is focused on this circumstance of the absence of inhalation and exhalation. When the exhalation and interim exhalation have ceased, [239] and when the inhalation and interim inhalation have not occurred, there is an absence of exhalation and inhalation. When one is focused on the vacuous circumstance of their cessation due to their absence—if a breath is inhaled upon really refining the bodily formation, one practices noting the inhalation upon really refining the bodily formation. If a breath is exhaled upon really refining the bodily formation, one practices noting the exhalation upon really refining the bodily formation. Moreover, as a result of devotion to [this practice], cultivation of it, and frequent repetition, there occur rough inhalations and exhalations whose contact is painful for one who is not thoroughly trained. On the other hand, for those who are thoroughly trained, there occur gentle [breaths] whose contact is pleasant. Thus, it is said that when one exhales upon really refining the bodily formation, one practices noting that one exhales upon really refining the bodily formation.

5. Thus, if one who diligently practices mindfulness of the inhalation and exhalation, [240] attains the first or second dhyāna, at that time, inhaling while authentically experiencing joy, one practices noting the inhalation while authentically experiencing joy. If one authentically experiences joy while exhaling, one practices noting that one authentically experiences joy while exhaling.

6. If one attains the third dhyāna, which is devoid of joy, at that time, {inhaling, authentically experiencing wellbeing, one practices noting the inhalation while} authentically experiencing wellbeing. If one authentically experiences wellbeing while exhaling, one practices noting that one authentically experiences wellbeing while exhaling.

7-8. Beyond the third dhyāna there is no practice of mindfulness of breathing. Thus, [such states are] declared and identified as being beyond the third dhyāna. Now if, while authentically experiencing joy or wellbeing, due to a lapse of mindfulness there arise such thoughts as “I exist,” “This is my self,” “I will exist,” “I will not exist,” “I will have form,” “I will not have form,” “I will or will not have discernment,” [241] or “I will neither have nor lack discernment”—then the volitional discerning factor has been agitated by confusion, and one’s agitated [thoughts] manifest and are formed together with the arising of craving. Immediately upon their arising, one ascertains them with intelligence, and not dwelling in them, one abandons them, dispels them, and removes them. Then one authentically experiences mental formations and inhaling, upon really refining mental formations, one practices noting the inhalation upon refining mental formations. Then one authentically experiences mental formations and exhaling, upon really refining mental formations, one practices noting the exhalation upon refining mental formations.

9. {Even if} one does {not} attain the actual first, second and third dhyānas, one certainly attains the adequate access to the first dhyāna. Relying upon that, one examines what arises in terms of one’s own mind: the presence or absence of attachment, of hatred, or of delusion, [242]{collected or} scattered [attention], depression or elation, excited or unexcited, calmed or uncalmed, evenly settled or unsettled, well cultivated or poorly cultivated [attention], the mind liberated or the mind unliberated. One knows it as it is, and one authentically experiences it. Thus it is said: “One authentically experiences the mind, and when one inhales, one practices noting that one authentically experiences the mind and the inhalation. One authentically experiences the mind, and when one exhales, one practices noting that one authentically experiences the mind and the exhalation.”

10. When, upon authentically gaining inner calm, the mind is veiled by obscurations of dullness and drowsiness, one presents it with one or another uplifting object, causes [the mind] to apprehend it, and inspires

and gladdens [the mind]. Thus it is said: “When one gladdens the mind and [243] breathes in, one practices noting that one gladdens the mind and the inhalation. When one gladdens the mind and [243] breathes out, one practices noting that one gladdens the mind and the exhalation.”

11. When one clearly sees that the mind has been veiled by the obscuration of either excitement and or anxiety when one forcefully grasps [the object], (one presents it with one or another uplifting object)^{iv} one solely draws the mind inward, calms it, and concentrates it. Thus it is said: “When one concentrates the mind and breathes in, one practices noting that one concentrates the mind and the inhalation. When one concentrates the mind and breathes out, one practices noting that one concentrates the mind and the exhalation.”

12. When one has fully devoted the mind [to this practice], cultivated it and engaged in it repeatedly, as a result, the obscuration of the source [of suffering] is removed, and [the mind is] purified of obscurations. Thus it is said: “When the mind is liberated when one breathes in, one practices noting the mind’s liberation and the inhalation. When the mind is liberated and one breathes out, one practices noting the mind’s liberation and the exhalation. [244]

13. One must eliminate the remaining propensities of obstacles to the path of liberation from obscurations. In order to do so, one accurately recognizes the impermanence of formations and by realizing the path. Thus it is said: “When one observes impermanence and breathes in, one practices noting that one observes impermanence and the inhalation. When one observes impermanence and breathes out, one practices noting that one observes impermanence and the exhalation.”

Thus, on the basis of the first, second or third dhyāna or adequate dhyāna one engages in śamatha. Now by observing impermanence one engages in vipaśyanā. Such a person’s mind, being thoroughly cultivated in śamatha and vipaśyanā, is liberated from [afflictive] propensities in the domains.

14-16. What are the domains? They are the domains of elimination, of detachment, and of cessation. Due to the elimination of obscurations to be overcome by the Path of Seeing in terms of all formations, there is the domain of elimination. Due to the elimination of obscurations to be overcome by the Path of Meditation [245] in terms of all mental formations, there is the domain of detachment. Due to the cessation of all aggregates, there is the domain of cessation. Focusing one’s attention on the three domains in peace, wellbeing,

and freedom from illness, one cultivates *śamatha* and *vipaśyanā*. By devotion to such practice, by its cultivation and repeated practice, the mind is liberated from the remaining obscurations to be overcome on the Path of Meditation. Thus it is said: “When one observes elimination, detachment, and cessation and breathes in, one practices noting the observation of cessation and the inhalation. When one observes elimination, detachment and cessation and breathes out, one practices noting the observation of cessation and the exhalation.”

Thus, upon dispelling the mental afflictions to be eliminated on the Paths of Seeing and of Meditation, one becomes an arhat, whose defilements have been exhausted. Now there is nothing further to do. One has completed the various aspects of the practice. Such a person is said to be thoroughly trained by way of the sixteen aspects. Whatever is included in these five thorough trainings is called “mindfulness of the in- and out-breath.”

If an individual who tends to rumination, who is totally involved in that, caught up in his internal issues, and is distracted, really applies himself to this practice, that person’s disturbing ruminations will cease, very swiftly his mind will totally remain on the object, and true delight will authentically arise in the mind. This is the fivefold, purifying meditative object for individuals who tend to rumination.

ⁱ The Tibetan version of this text is found on pp. 223 – 246 of the *gser bris ma* version of the *bstan ‘gyur*, which is the pagination shown in this translation. This corresponds to the text in the Narthang edition of the *bstan ‘gyur*, pp. 175-191, both of which are available from the Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center. As for the Sanskrit version of this text: Karunesha Shukla, Editor (Patna: K. P. Jayaswal Research Institute, 1973).

ⁱⁱ **These stages occur** during the second through fourth weeks after conception.

ⁱⁱⁱ Material in curly brackets is missing in the Sanskrit version but present in the Tibetan.

^{iv} This passage in parentheses is missing in the Tibetan version, and its content suggests that the Sanskrit may be faulty here. The sentence makes better sense if this is omitted.