What to Expect from Meditation (Part 1)

Talk + Guided Meditation Session 009: Mar 4th, 2020, by Sophia Ojha Ensslin and Cristof Ensslin

Last session, one of our wonderful members of our High Country Meditators meditation group asked us: “what can we expect will happen during meditation?” If I understood her correctly she meant to ask for the different kinds of experiences that will happen to us in meditation as our meditation practice deepens.

Let’s consult the meditation masters and learn from them. In this session we’ll refer to Ajahn Brahm, the British Buddhist monk in Australia for over forty years, Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Buddhist Zen monk residing in France, and last but not least the Buddha. Let’s begin with the latter, as the other two base their explanations on the Buddha’s teaching as well as on their own vast experience.

Buddha’s Teaching on Breath Meditation

The Buddha taught over two and a half thousand years ago how meditation can help us live a happier life and, in the end, reach liberation from worldly suffering. In his sermons, also known as Suttas (in Pali) or Sutras (in Sanskrit), he refers to a total of 40 different meditations. However, the one meditation method he mentions again and again as the most accessible technique, is breath awareness. Anapana in Pali means breathing or literally inhaling and exhaling or breathing in and breathing out. Awareness or mindfulness in Pali means Sati. So, going into one of the scriptures of the early Buddhist texts called the Majjhima Nikaya, we can find Sutta No. 118¹: the famous Anapanasati Sutta. It teaches us all we can expect from breath meditation and what the process is from the beginning stages of meditation all the way to deep meditative absorptions which are necessary to attain full enlightenment.

¹ Majjhima Nikaya from Wisdom Publications. See book here: https://wisdomexperience.org/product/middle-length-discourses-buddha/?attribute_pa_format=ebook
Enlightenment is, by the way, in my opinion, such a wonderful word, as it has the key element “light” in it. Light has two meanings: light as the opposite of darkness and light as the opposite of heavy. Enlightenment brings light into the darkness of our path to make sense of this life. It also makes our whole life experience less heavy, less burdensome, and brings the ease of a feather into our life as we learn how to cope with life’s difficult moments through the experiences and insights of meditation.

**Preparation Stage**

Let’s dive into the word of the Buddha (as translated from Pali by Nyanaponika and quoted in Thich Nhat Hanh’s book *The Miracle of Mindfulness - A Manual on Meditation*, pages 129 and following). I’ll abbreviate it a bit for starters:

> *Mindfulness of Breathing, cultivated and regularly practiced, is of great fruit and great benefit. Mindfulness of Breathing, cultivated and regularly practiced, brings [...] wisdom and deliverance to perfection.*

The Buddha explains in this section basically that by doing breath meditation alone we can progress in our spiritual development bit by bit, step by step, all the way to full insight of how life really works and thus liberation from all suffering. So, we don’t even need the other 39 meditation methods. They are optional for times when we have a hard time focusing on our breath.

How do we practice and gain these fruits? He continues that a monk, nun or lay person such as us goes to a quiet place, conducive to facing their own mind from the inside and ...

> ... sits down cross-legged, keeps his body erect and his mindfulness alert.
> Just mindful he breathes in, mindful he breathes out.

This is the prep work: first we should find a comfortable, sitting posture with our back straight, but without stiffening up. It can be assumed that in those days in India most people knew how to initiate meditation, so the prep instructions are fairly short here. It was customary to sit on the floor and the cross-legged position is the most stable

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2 *Miracle of Mindfulness* See book here: [https://amzn.to/3asNKR8](https://amzn.to/3asNKR8)
position that people were used to. For us Westerners, that means: find a stable and comfortable position sitting down, and that can include using a chair, of course.

Keeping our back from slumping will help us stay focused; science has proven that sitting comfortably with our back straight yet relaxed is the most productive posture for office work and also reading.

Keeping our mindfulness alert simply means, according to Bhikkhu Sujato’s translation, to "establish mindfulness right there". We close our eyes, so to shut off one of the major sensory input channels, and bring our attention from past and future, from memories and ifs and should haves and worries and fantasies to right here right now. We can start by becoming aware of what we are thinking and that these are thoughts happening in the here and now. We can start by noticing sounds, smells or the temperature.

**Steps 1 and 2: Is the Breathe Long or Short?**

Then, as we arrive in the present moment, we can let the breath arise in our mindfulness, stay there for a short while and then continue the process. The process has sixteen steps, neatly grouped into four sets of four. The first tetrad (meaning set of four) is about contemplating the body and it begins with the first step of breath meditation after the prep work done above:

1. **Breathing in a long breath**, [the meditator] knows, "I breathe in a long breath"; breathing out a long breath, (s)he knows, "I breathe out a long breath."

2. **Breathing in a short breath**, [the meditator] knows, "I breathe in a short breath"; breathing out a short breath, (s)he knows, "I breathe out a short breath."  

These are fast and simple first two steps. But we need to take a quick step back and reflect what is meant here. Remember, this instruction is A) 2,500 years old, B) was

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3 [https://suttacentral.net/mn118/en/sujato](https://suttacentral.net/mn118/en/sujato)
4 *Miracle of Mindfulness* See book here: [https://amzn.to/3asNKR8](https://amzn.to/3asNKR8)
given in different language and had to be translated, and C) we don’t know all that much about cultural implication of time and place as the words that were used may have had notions of meaning that other languages, including English, cannot fully reflect.

In my view, the Buddha could have meant one or both of two things: either to simply pay attention to whether we’re breathing in short or long and just be aware of that without changing our breathing at all. Or he meant to spend some time lengthening the breath a bit to experience how a longer than currently normal breath feels like; then to spend some time shortening the breath a bit in order to see how that feels like.

Since we cannot know for sure which one of the two interpretations are right, we can try out both and see what works better for each of us. For me personally, in my current stage, I like to “manipulate” the breathe just a little bit in this beginning stage of the meditation. This helps me to more deeply arrive in the present moment and be focused on nothing but the breath. Then I let go of control and let the breath come back to its natural state.

**Steps 3 and 4: Experiencing the Whole Breath Calming Down**

Then the Buddha continues with steps three and four, still contemplating the body by paying full attention to the breath. We meditators (written in the “he”-form, but, of course, gender neutral, as the Buddha taught everyone) practice:

3. “Experiencing the whole breath-body I shall breath in,” thus he trains himself; “Experiencing the whole breath-body I shall breath out,” thus he trains himself.

4. “Calming the bodily function of breathing I shall breath in,” thus he trains himself; “Calming the bodily function of breathing I shall breath out,” thus he trains himself.  

As our mindfulness of the breath gets deeper and we’re back with our natural breath, we can feel the whole breath-body. That simply means we observe it from beginning to end without our attention swaying to other things. This trains us to virtually shut off all

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5 *Miracle of Mindfulness* See book here: [https://amzn.to/3asNKR8](https://amzn.to/3asNKR8)
other senses. We start becoming peaceful, which in return calms our breath down. We notice that calming of the breath as well.

Thich Nhat Hanh instructs us on page 10 of his book *Peace Is Every Step - The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life* to experience this fourth step of the meditation process as follows, using his wonderfully poetic way\(^6\):

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\begin{align*}
\text{Breathing in, I calm my body.} \\
\text{Breathing out, I smile.} \\
\text{Dwelling in the present moment,} \\
\text{I know this is a wonderful moment!}
\end{align*}
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The second line instructs us to smile. Let’s try it: smiling immediately relaxes our muscles and calms the whole body. Works for me, let’s try it all.

Ajahn Brahm, in his book *Mindfulness, Bliss, and Beyond - A Meditator's Handbook*\(^7\) on page 17, calls this stage the Beginning of the Beautiful Breath:

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\text{The fourth stage is what I call the “springboard” of meditation, because from it one may dive into the blissful states. When we simply maintain this unity of consciousness by not interfering the breath will begin to disappear. The breath appears to fade away as the mind focuses instead on what is at the center of the experience of breath, which is awesome peace, freedom, and bliss.}
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Not interfering with the process and just letting it go ahead may be a bit difficult at first. We’re so used to wanting to be in control. Letting go of the steering wheel and handing over the reins to life, nature, is a wonderful practice in which we realize that we really have very little control anyway in our whole life.

As Ajahn Brahm writes, the breath begins to disappear in this stage. This opens the door to let go of the first set of four steps as described by the Buddha, the

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\(^6\) *Peace Is Every Step*. See book here: [https://amzn.to/3crLz2a](https://amzn.to/3crLz2a)

\(^7\) *Mindfulness, Bliss, And Beyond* See book here: [https://amzn.to/39bDEDO](https://amzn.to/39bDEDO)
contemplation of the body. We really have to let go of all control in order to move on deeper.

We then move on to the contemplation of feelings, then on to the contemplation of the mind, then on tho the contemplation of contents of the mind. All of those practices and stages of meditation are said to be very blissful, deeply peaceful, and insightful. Hence the term beautiful breath.

We’ll get to that in part 2 of our session talks “What to Expect from Meditation” next time.

Let’s Practice What We’ve Learned So Far

Now, let’s first practice the prep work as well as the first four steps. Let’s meditate.

Resources

Besides the books listed in the footnotes, here are some more usefull links both for reading and retreats.

Readings

Buddhist Publication Society is a non-profit publication soceity in Sri Lanka that has many articles and books on Buddhist literature available online:  
http://www.bps.lk/library.php Go to this link and then look in the right hand side a link to search. You can search based on titles, authors or topics. You will find PDFs to download. Bhikkhu Bodhi was once an editor there.


Retreats

Leigh Brasington’s retreats across North America: 
Check out Leigh Brasington’s meditation retreats on his website: 
http://www.leighb.com/meditate.htm
**North Carolina Retreat in October:**
To learn jhana meditation from Ayya Khema’s student Leigh Brasington (also the only one in America teaching jhanas) It does say in the description that it is open to those who have participated in two one week meditation retreats.


**Vipassana meditation retreats for 3 days, 5 days, or 10 days:**
We did a day retreat in Delaware and several 10 day retreats in Jesup, Georgia. You can go to the link below and look under tab “Locations” to see all different locations across the globe, then find a center you’d like to visit from Hawaii to Massachusetts to around the world. Or look under ”Courses“ for a certain time period of the year and see what locations pop-up in the list:

www.dhamma.org

**Theravadan/Tibetan/Zen Buddhist Monasteries**

England, UK: Amaravati Retreat Center
https://www.amaravati.org/retreat-centre/

Perth, Australia: Bodhinyana Monastery, Dhammasara Nuns’ Monastery and Jhana Grove Retreat Center
https://bswa.org/ (Ajahn Brahm’s monastery has a new retreat center with 10 day meditation and teachings led by various monks at Jhana Grove with private rooms and private baths)

Redwood Valley, California, USA: Abhayagiri Monastery
https://www.abhayagiri.org/visiting/overnight-stays (Monastery that offers one week or longer overnight stays.

Lafayette, NJ, USA: Bodhi Monastery
https://bodhimonastery.org/about-us
Carmel, NY, USA: Buddhist Association of USA/Chaung Yen Monastery
Bhikkhu Bodhi resides here and they have retreats and teachings.
https://www.baus.org/en/

High View, West Virginaia, USA: Bhavana Society
Bhante Gunaratana (aka Bhante G) author of Mindfulness of Plain English resides and teaches here.
https://bhavanasociety.org/

Newport, Washington, USA: Sravasti Abbey, a Buddhist Monastery (Nuns)
https://sravastiabbey.org/ Home of Venerable Thubten Chodron

Creston, Colorado, USA: Crestone Mountain Zen Center
https://www.dharmasangha.org/

Mount Tremper, New York, USA: Zen Mountain Monastery
Several different retreats
https://zmm.org/zmm-retreats/

Hot Springs, North Carolina, USA: Southern Dharma Retreat Center
Not a monastery but a place where various teachers come to teach and conduct retreats.
http://www.southerndharma.org/retreat-schedule/

Links to Lists of Buddhist And Christian Meditation Retreats in North America
https://tricycle.org/magazine/meditation-getaways/
https://www.theologydegrees.org/features/best-monasteries-to-visit/