

Ānāpānasati: The Core Practice of Samatha and Vipassanā

(Dharma Talk on 2025-03-09 during a One-Day Meditation Retreat)

Meaning and Transmission of Ānāpānasati

Ānāpānasati (mindfulness of breathing) is a fundamental Buddhist practice integrating samatha and vipassana. The term "ānāpāna" refers to breathing, while "sati" means mindfulness. This method was personally taught by the Buddha and has been transmitted through generations, making it one of the most well-known and accessible meditation practices. In the Pāli tradition, the Buddha taught 38 to 40 meditation techniques, which are also mentioned in the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā Śāstra*.

Etymology of Meditation and the Essence of Samatha-Vipassanā

The term *chán xiū* (禪修) originated in Chinese Buddhism, whereas Japanese Buddhism refers to it as *Zen*. However, in Indian Buddhism, the corresponding term is *bhāvanā*, which means generation or cultivation/development. Specific practices like *huàtóu* meditation (話頭禪) or *cān huàtóu* (參話頭) were uniquely developed in Chinese Buddhism by Master Dàhui Zōnggǎo (大慧宗杲) during the Song Dynasty.

Early Buddhist teachings did not use the term *Chan* but emphasized samatha and vipassanā, which correspond to *samādhi* and *paññā* within the Threefold Training (*sīla*, *samādhi*, *paññā*) and *right view*, *right thought*, and *right concentration* within the Noble Eightfold Path. Genuine Buddhist practice must integrate both samatha and vipassanā, without favoring one and neglect the other.

Practice and Benefits of Ānāpānasati

Ānāpānasati was first recorded in the *Samyutta Nikāya*, where the Buddha's discourse on mindfulness of breathing was documented during the First Council. The Buddha stated that practicing this method brings great benefits, preventing physical and eye fatigue. He affirmed that he himself practiced this method before attaining enlightenment and strongly encouraged monks to cultivate it. Past, present, and future Buddhas, along with their

disciples, have all engaged in samatha and vipassanā, with ānāpānasati being one of the core methods. Other significant methods include the Four Brahmavihāras (loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity).

Universal Applicability of Ānāpānasati

This practice requires no external tools—anyone with breath can cultivate it at any time, up until their final breath. Through breath, practitioners develop both samatha and vipassanā, ultimately leading to liberation. In early Buddhist scriptures, ānāpānasati is often paired with the Seven Factors of Enlightenment, which will lead to true knowledge and liberation.

The Sixteen Stages of Ānāpānasati

There are differing views on whether ānāpānasati is purely a samatha practice. The *Mahāvibhāṣā Śāstra* classifies it as samatha, while the *Visuddhimagga* also describes it with an emphasis on samatha. However, the *Abhidharmakośa* disagrees, arguing that if it were solely samatha, it would not lead to ultimate liberation. A complete ānāpānasati practice follows sixteen progressive steps, known in Chinese Buddhism as the “Sixteen Superior Stages” (十六特勝):

- Contemplation of the Body (kāyānupassanā) – Four steps
- Contemplation of Feelings (vedanānupassanā) – Four steps
- Contemplation of Mind (cittānupassanā) – Four steps
- Contemplation of Mental Objects (dhammānupassanā) – Four steps

The first four steps emphasize samatha, the middle eight steps integrate both samatha and vipassanā, and the final four steps focus primarily on vipassanā, leading to path and fruition.

Merits of Practicing Ānāpānasati

Even without attaining liberation, ānāpānasati yields great benefits:

1. **Attaining Access Concentration in the Sensual Realm** – Reduces afflictions, cultivates wholesome states, and quickly recognizes the rise of unwholesome states, and enhances joy. Such achievements create favorable conditions for rebirth in the human or heavenly realms.
2. **Attaining Form and Formless Realm Absorptions** – This generates superior weighty wholesome kamma, ensuring rebirth in the higher two realms, unaffected by end-of-life disturbances.
3. **Progressing through the Sixteen Stages** – Advancing through the *vedanā*, *citta*, and *dhamma* contemplations strengthens vipassanā, ensuring a favorable rebirth. As stated in the *Dhammapada*:

“ One who firmly upholds right view, even across a hundred thousand lifetimes, will never fall into the lower realms.”

The Method of Practicing Ānāpānasati

Meditation objects can be grasped through three means: sight, hearing, and touch. Examples include:

- *Hearing the cries of suffering beings*—practicing compassion through auditory awareness.
- *Observing the body as composed of the four elements*—cultivating insight through tactile sensations.
- *Practicing foulness contemplation*—seeing corpses to reduce attachment to the physical body.

Since breath is neither seen nor heard, ānāpānasati primarily relies on tactile awareness. Practitioners should focus on the sensation of breath at the area between the upper lip and the nostrils, rather than analyzing the movement of air within the nasal cavity. The correct approach involves:

1. **Determining the Contact Area** – Identifying the overlapping area where inhalation and exhalation are felt, and avoid paying attention to other details, such as the changes in the four elements.
2. **Training in Mindfulness (Sati) and Clear Comprehension (Sampajañña):**
 - *Mindfulness (Sati)* – Maintaining continuous awareness of the meditation object.
 - *Clear Comprehension (Sampajañña)* – Knowing each breath distinctly, from start to finish.

Counting the Breath

Once settled in the meditation object, breath counting can be introduced:

- Count from 1 to 7, 8, or 10 (depending on the tradition). The key is to maintain uninterrupted mindfulness.
- Firmly resolve not to let mindfulness lapse. The resolution will enhance alertness. The continuous mindfulness naturally leads to concentration.

Addressing Drowsiness in Practice

If drowsiness occurs during meditation, two factors should be examined:

1. **Unclear Understanding of the Method** – Practitioners should review whether they correctly understand the method.
2. **Physical Fatigue** – Adequate rest is necessary before intensive meditation retreats to prevent exhaustion.