

## What Is Anapanasati?

*Anapanasati* (or *anapana*) is mindfulness of breathing. It is respiration awareness. One concentrates on a simple object – in this case, the breath. Such mindfulness of breathing develops *one-pointedness*. When practised over a period of time, it will improve concentration and bring tranquillity.

The basic instruction is: Watch the flow of the breath as it enters and leaves the body. Focus on the natural, normal breath as it comes and goes (inhaling and exhaling).

A useful technique (used over the centuries) has been to divide a meditation period into four equal sections. The slight changes in focus can encourage deeper concentration and less distraction. The method is as follows:

- Count exhalations in cycles of 10 (mentally count in the gap after exhaling each breath).
- Count inhalations in cycles of 10 (count in the gap before each in-breath).
- Focus on the breath without counting (continue breathing in a natural, unforced way).
- Focus only on the spot where the breath enters and leaves the nostrils (that is, the nostril and upper lip area).

When you lose the count, simply begin again at one. The breath may be short or long, shallow or deep.

Understand that it is normal for thoughts and distractions to occur in a meditation period. However, gently let any distracting thoughts go, and return to observing the breath.

One caution: Avoid *interpreting* thoughts, feelings, and objects that may arise. When one is interpreting, one is no longer focusing on the breath.

A second point must be stressed: Understand the distinction between thoughts about breathing, and physical awareness of breathing. In other words, observe the reality of the breathing process, and let go of ideas about the process.

Observing the breath has the advantage of always being available. And so, *anapanasati* is based on reality.

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Many people find that they can accommodate longer sessions after some time. Some have suggested that 20 minutes be a minimum. In the final analysis, however, it is one's own choice and will necessarily be determined by one's circumstances.

It is always helpful to choose a time of day when one is most alert – many find early morning and early evening conducive. Maintaining a regular practice is important.

After a meditation period, try to maintain some of the calm and concentration during the rest of the day. Also, try to periodically be aware of the breath during your activities.

Alexander Peck

Notes based on author's personal practice and experiences of mindfulness of breathing meditation. There is a helpful online meditation course entitled *Vipassana Fellowship Meditation Course*, which provides practical instruction in mindfulness meditation as found in the tranquillity (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassana*) traditions of early Buddhism (Theravada tradition) and has been hosted since 1997. Further details may be found at <http://www.vipassana.com/course/>