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Contentment Stillness Bliss Awakening

Stepping Towards Enlightenment

How deep can your meditation go? Thai forest monk Ajahn Brahm traces the path from mindfulness to profound meditative states through the sixteen steps of anapanasati.
- Ajahn Brahm

The essence of Buddhism is the enlightenment of the Buddha. The wandering Gautama remembered a childhood experience of jhana, mental or meditative absorption, and realized that this contented obsorption meditation is indeed the way to awakening.

He went to a quiet stretch of forest on the banks of a great river, sat on a cushion of grass under a shady fig tree, and meditated. The method of meditation that he used is called anapanasati, mindfulness of the in and out breaths. Through this practice, he entered jhana, emerged, and quickly gained the insights of enlightenment. Henceforth he was called the Buddha, the Awakened One.

The Buddha continued to teach anapanasati for the remainder of his life. It was the method that had given him enlightenment, the meditation practice par excellence, and he imparted that same method to all his disciples both in the monastery and in the city. This foremost method of meditation is bequeathed to us today in the original Buddhist texts as part of many suttas, but most notably the Anapanasati Sutta.

The Buddha described the practice of anapanasati as consisting of preliminary preparations followed by sixteen steps. The first twelve of those steps are instructions for entering jhana, and the final four steps are instructions on what to do when you emerge.

Before giving instructions for experiencing the bliss and beauty of jhana, I will briefly cover the preliminary stages of meditation. If you pass through these initial stages too quickly, you may find that the preparatory work has not been completed. It's like trying to build a house on a makeshift foundation—the structure goes up very quickly, but it may come down too soon! You would be wise to spend a lot of time making the groundwork and foundations solid. Then, when you proceed to the higher stories—the ecstatic states of meditation—they will be stable.

Foremost, the Buddha said, go to a quiet place where you will not be disturbed by people, sounds, or things like mosquitoes. Tough guys might want to meditate in mosquito-ridden jungles or in the middle of tiger paths, but this is more likely to build only endurance and not the ease of jhana. The Buddha instead praised pleasant places like orchards or parks similar to Bodh Gaya, where he gained enlightenment. Next, sit on a comfortable seat. You may sit on a cushion, on a bench, or even on a chair as long as it isn't too comfortable. The comfort required for success in breath meditation is that level where your body can be at ease for long periods of time and also alert.

You are now asked to set up mindfulness "in front of you," to give it priority. We establish this preliminary level of mindfulness by practicing present-moment awareness (giving up the baggage of past and future) and then silent present-moment awareness (refining your practice of being with every experience as it happens to the level where you do not have the space for inner speech). When you let go of the past, you will be free in the present moment. As for the future—the anticipations, fears, plans, and expectations—let that go too. Now you should proceed to the even more beautiful and truthful silence of the mind. A useful technique for developing inner silence is recognizing the space between thoughts. Attend closely with sharp mindfulness when one thought ends and before another begins—there! That is silent awareness! It may be only momentary at first, but as you recognize that fleeting silence, you become accustomed to it; the silence lasts longer. You begin to enjoy the silence and that is why it grows. But remember, silence is shy. If silence hears you talking about her, she vanishes immediately.

The mind can do wonderful and unexpected things. Meditators who are having a difficult time achieving a peaceful state of mind sometimes start thinking, "Here we go again, another hour of frustration." But often something strange happens; although they are anticipating failure, they reach a very peaceful meditative state. My first meditation teacher told me that there is no such thing as a bad meditation. He was right. During the difficult meditations you build up your strength, which creates meditation for peace. We may want to spend

much time—months or even years—developing just these first two preliminary stages, because if we can reach this point, we have come a long way indeed in our meditation. In that silent awareness of "just now," we experience much peace, joy, and consequent wisdom.

WHEN YOU ARE SILENTLY AWARE of whatever it is that is happening right now, in front of your mind, then you have established the level of mindfulness required to begin progressing along the sixteen steps of anapanasati. In steps one and two the Buddha says to first experience long breaths and then experience short breaths. You do not need to control your breathing to fulfill the instructions; this will only produce discomfort. Instead, you are meant to simply observe the breath long enough to know whether it is long or short, or, as some practitioners note, deep or shallow, rough or smooth. This gives you more to look at, makes mindfulness of breathing more interesting so that you do not get bored.

The third step is experiencing the whole process of breathing. This is where your mindfulness increases its agility sufficient to observe every sensation involved in the process of breathing. You are aware of the in-breath from the very start when it arises out of the stillness. You see the sensations of in-breathing evolve in every moment, reaching its peak and then gradually fading away until it has completely subsided. You have such a degree of clarity that you even see the space, the pause between the in-breath and the next out-breath. Your mind has the attentiveness of a cat waiting for a mouse, as you wait for the next out-breath to begin. Then you observe the first stirrings of the out-breathing. You watch its sensations evolve, changing with every moment, until it, too, reaches a peak and then enters into its decline before fading into nothingness again. Then you observe the pause, the space between the out-breath and the subsequent in-breath. When the process is repeated breath after breath, you have fulfilled the third step, experiencing the whole breath.

When you are comfortably at one with the breath, it will calm down automatically. There is so little remaining to disturb your progress that you naturally experience the sensations in each moment becoming softer and smoother, like a piece of rough denim changing into fine satin. Such a refinement of attention is only achieved through a gentle and persistent letting go; it is never attained by the brute force of sheer willpower. At this fourth step you will not know whether it is an in-breath or an out-breath, beginning, middle, or end. As your breath calms down, your attention becomes so refined that all you know is this one moment of breath.

As your unbroken mindfulness watches the breath calming down, joy (step five) and happiness (step six) naturally arise like the golden light of dawn on an eastern horizon. This will happen gradually but automatically because all of your mental energy is now flowing into the knower and not the doer. In fact, you are not doing anything, only watching. The sure sign that you are doing nothing is the tranquility of your breath. Mental energy flowing into the knower makes mindfulness full of power, and energized mindfulness is experienced as happiness and joy. The breath at these fifth and sixth steps appears so tranquil and beautiful—more attractive than a garden in springtime or a sunset in the summer—that you wonder if you will ever want to look at anything else.

As the breath becomes ever more beautiful, as the joy and happiness grow in quiet strength, your breath may seem to completely disappear. This seventh step does not happen when you want it to but when there is enough calm.

A well-known passage from English literature might help clarify the experience of one's breath disappearing. In Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland, Alice is startled to see the Cheshire Cat sitting on a bough of a nearby tree and grinning from ear to ear. Like all the strange creatures in Wonderland, the Cheshire Cat has the eloquence of a politician. Not only does the Cat get the better of Alice in the ensuing conversation, but it also suddenly disappears and then, without warning, just as suddenly reappears.
Energized mindfulness is experienced as happiness and joy.

Alice said, ". . . and I wish you wouldn't keep appearing and vanishing so suddenly: you make one quite giddy!" "All right," said the Cat; and this time it vanished quite slowly, beginning with the end of the tail, and ending with the grin, which remained some time after the rest of it had gone. "Well! I've often seen a cat without a grin," thought Alice; "but a grin without a cat! It's the most curious thing I ever saw in all my life."

This story is an eerily accurate analogy for the meditation experience. Just as the Cheshire Cat disappeared and left only its grin, so the meditator's body and breath disappear, leaving only the beautiful. For Alice, it was the most curious thing she ever saw. For the meditator it is also strange, to clearly experience a free-floating beauty with nothing to embody it, not even a breath.

TWO COMMON OBSTACLES occur after this seventh

step: exhilaration and fear. In exhilaration, the mind becomes excited: “Wow, this is it!” If the mind thinks like this, then the jhana is unlikely to happen. This “wow!” response needs to be subdued in the eighth step of anapanasati in favor of absolute passivity. You can leave all the wows until after emerging from the jhana, where they properly belong.

The more likely obstacle, though, is fear. Fear arises from the recognition of the sheer power and bliss of the jhana, or else at the recognition that to go fully inside the jhana something must be left behind—you! The doer is silent before entering the jhana, but is still there. Inside the jhana, however, the doer is completely gone. Only the knower is still functioning. One is fully aware, but all the controls are now beyond reach. One cannot even form a single thought, let alone make a decision. The will is frozen, and this can be scary for beginners, who have never had the experience of being stripped of control and yet so fully awake. The fear is of surrendering an essential part of one’s identity.

This fear can be overcome in the eighth step through confidence in the Buddha’s teachings, and through recognizing and being drawn to the enticing bliss just ahead. The Buddha often said that the bliss of the jhana should not be feared but should be followed, developed, and practiced often. So before fear arises, offer your full confidence to that bliss, maintain faith in the Buddha’s teachings, and let the jhana warmly embrace you in an effortless, bodiless, ego-less, and blissful experience that will be the most profound of your life. Have the courage to fully relinquish control for a while and experience all of this for yourself. Maintain the causes of this bliss. Remain in the stillness, otherwise the bliss will go away.

Ajahn Chah’s famous simile of the “still forest pool” can help us understand this. When he was wandering in the jungles and forests in Thailand, he’d always try and find a stretch of water when late afternoon came. When he found a pool, stream, or a spring somewhere in the forest, he’d camp nearby overnight.

Sometimes after drinking and bathing and settling in, Ajahn Chah would sit in meditation a few yards away from the pool. He said that sometimes he used to sit so still with his eyes open that he would see many animals coming out of the jungle. They wanted to bathe and drink as well. He said they would only come out if he sat very, very still. When they emerged from the bushes they would look around and sniff to see if it was safe. If they detected him, they would just go away. But if he sat absolutely still, the animals wouldn’t be able to hear him. They wouldn’t even be able to smell him. Then they would come out and drink. Some would drink and play in the water as if he weren’t there. He said sometimes he was so still that, after the ordinary animals came out, some very strange animals emerged, beings whose names he didn’t know. He’d never seen such extraordinary creatures before. His parents had never told him about them. These wonderful creatures came out to drink, but only if he was absolutely still.

This is a well-drawn simile of what happens in deep meditation. The pool or the lake is a symbol for the mind. At this eighth step of anapanasati you are just sitting before it and watching. If you give any orders, you’re not being still. Beautiful creatures, like jhanas, will approach only if you’re absolutely still. The ordinary ones come out first, then the very beautiful ones, and lastly the very strange and wonderful ones. These last are the amazing experiences that you have no names for, the ones you never imagined could exist because they’re so strange, so blissful, so pure. These are the jhanas.

THE NINTH STEP OF the Anapanasati Sutta describes a very important creature that comes to visit the still, silent mind—a nimitta. Pali for “sign,” a nimitta is a reflection of the mind. This step is called citta-patisamvedi, “experiencing the mind,” and is achieved when one lets go of the body, thought, and the five senses (including awareness of the breath) so completely that only a beautiful mental sign, a nimitta, remains. This pure mental object is a real object in the landscape of the mind, and when it appears for the first time it is extremely strange. For most meditators this mental joy, is perceived as a beautiful light. But it is not a light. The eyes are closed, and the sight consciousness has long been turned off. Other meditators choose to describe this first appearance of mind in terms of a physical sensation such as intense tranquility or ecstasy. It is perceived as a light or a feeling because this imperfect description is the best that perception can offer.

Two flaws of the nimitta may hinder further progress: the nimitta appears too dull, or the nimitta is unstable. To address these two common problems, the Buddha taught the tenth and eleventh steps of anapanasati: shining the nimitta and sustaining the nimitta. “Shining” is my expression for the Pali term abhippamodayam cittam, literally, “giving joy to the mind.” The more joy there is in the mind, the more brilliant shines the nimitta. To enter jhana, the nimitta has to be the most brilliant thing that you have ever seen.

When a nimitta has arisen during meditation but appears dull, there are four ways in this tenth step of proceeding. Focus on the center of the nimitta. Even in a dull nimitta, the center is brighter than the periphery. By gently suggesting to yourself to look at the center of the nimitta, the central brightness expands. Then focus on the center of that, and that is brighter still. By going to the center, then the center of the center, and so on, the dull nimitta soon becomes incredibly bright and often continues "exploding" in luminosity all the way into jhana. Sharpen the attention in the present moment. Even though present-moment awareness was part of the preliminaries to anapanasati, it often happens that by this stage the attention is "smeared" around the present moment. Personally, I often find that a gentle reminder to focus more sharply on the present moment brightens the mindfulness and shines up the nimitta, abolishing any dullness. Smile at the nimitta. Remember that the nimitta is a reflection of your mind. So if the mind smiles, then the nimitta smiles back! If you do not understand what I mean by smiling at the nimitta, go and look at yourself in a mirror, smile, and then take the mental part of that activity and repeat it in front of the nimitta. Sometimes it is simply too early to go to the nimita, and it is better to exert a gentle determination to remain with the beautiful breath a bit longer.

The second of the two flaws of the nimitta that hinder a deepening of the meditation experience is instability of the nimitta. It does not stay still but quickly disappears. In order to deal with this problem, the Buddha taught the eleventh step of anapanasati, samadaham cittam, literally "attentively stilling the mind" and here meaning "sustaining the attention on the nimitta."

It is common that the first few times a nimitta appears, it flashes up for a short time and then disappears, or else it moves around in the mental field of vision. Usually, the bright, powerful nimittas remain longer than the dull, weak ones, which is why the Buddha taught the step of shining the nimitta before the step of sustaining the nimitta. Sometimes shining the nimitta is enough to sustain it—the nimitta becomes so beautifully radiant that it grabs the attention for long periods of time. However, even a brilliant nimitta can be unstable, so there are methods to sustain attention on the nimitta.

Once again, it is usually fear or excitement that creates the instability. You are reacting too much rather than passively observing. Experiencing the nimitta in the beginning is like when you first learned how to ride a bicycle. For the first few rides, you probably gripped the handlebars so tightly that, like me, your knuckles went white. And because I wasn't relaxed, I kept falling off. I soon discovered—after many cuts and bruises—that the more relaxed I was, the easier it was to keep my balance. In the same way, you soon learn to stop gripping the nimitta. You relax and discover that the more you ease off controlling, the easier it is to sustain the nimitta. The marks of good nimittas are that they are the most radiant colors you've ever seen. For example, if you see a blue nimitta, the color is no ordinary blue but the deepest, most beautiful, bluest blue you've ever known. The good, or should I say "useful," nimittas are also very stable, almost motionless. When you are experiencing a beautiful, stable nimitta, you are on the edge of the world of jhanas, looking in.

THE TWELFTH STEP in anapanasati is called vimocayam cittam, "freeing the mind." Here, you have an experience that you might describe afterward in two different ways, depending on your perspective. Either you find yourself sinking or diving into the nimitta, or the nimitta with its brilliant light and ecstatic feeling completely envelops you. You don't do this. It just happens as a natural result of letting go of all doing.

You enter the jhana through liberating the mind. The jhanas, the Buddha said, are stages of freedom. The mind is now free. That is, free from the body and the five senses. You're unable to hear anything, unable to say anything, yet fully mindful, still, stable as a rock.

A jhana will last a long time. It does not deserve to be called a jhana if it lasts only a few minutes. The higher jhanas usually persist for many hours. Once inside, there is no choice. One will emerge from the jhana only when the mind is ready to come out. Each jhana is such a still and satisfying state of consciousness that its very nature is to persist for a very long time. This is not a trance but a heightened state of awareness. I say this so that you may know for yourself whether what you take to be a jhana is real or imaginary.

A lot of people, after getting a few of these jhanas, want to become a monk or a nun. The world becomes less attractive. Relationships, the arts, music and movies, sex, fame, wealth, and so on, all seem so unimportant and unattractive when compared to the freed mind. But there is much more than just bliss. There is also the philosophical profundity of the experience. The Buddha called it uttari-manussa-dhamma, something that surpasses ordinary experience. He also considered the happiness of jhana so similar to enlightenment happiness that he named it sambodhi sukha, bliss of enlightenment.

So if you develop these stages, the first twelve steps of anapanasati, they will lead you into jhana.

THE LAST FOUR STEPS in the Anapanasati Sutta relate to the meditator who has just emerged from a jhana. After you emerge from your first experience of

jhana, you can't help but think, "Wow, what was that?" So the first thing you should do is review the jhana. Investigate that experience, though you will struggle to give it words. Ask yourself, How did it arise? What special thing did I do? What did it feel like in jhana? Why did it feel like that? How do I feel now? Why is it so blissful? All of these reflections will give rise to deep insight.

You'll find that the best words to describe why jhana happened are "letting go." You've really let go for the first time. Not letting go of what you're attached to, but letting go of the thing doing the attaching. You've let go of the doer. You've let go of the self. It's a difficult thing for the self to let go of the self, but through these methodological stages you've actually done it. And it's bliss.

The first of these last four steps, the thirteenth step, is reflecting on anicca, usually translated as "impermanence." What's important to reflect upon after deep experiences of meditation is that previously there had been something that was so constant that you never noticed it—this thing we call a "self." In jhana, it disappeared! Notice that. Noticing it will convince you of the truth of no-self (anatta) so deeply that it's very likely to put you on a direct path to enlightenment.

If reflections on anicca fail to work, there is viraga, the fading away of things (step fourteen). This is when things just disappear. You've seen many things disappear when you enter jhana—some which were so close to you that you assumed that they were an essential part of your identity. They are all gone in jhana. You're experiencing the fading away of yourself. The third reflection after emerging from a jhana, step fifteen, should be on nirodha, or cessation. Something that was once there has now completely disappeared. It has ended, gone, and its place is now empty! Such emptiness can be known only in deep meditation. So much of the universe that you thought was essential has ceased, and you're in a completely different space.

The last of the reflections described in the Anapanasati Sutta is on the wonderful word patinissagga, "letting go, abandoning." In this context patinissagga is giving away not what's "out there" but what's "in here." Many times people regard Buddhism as being unworldly, giving away what's out there. But patinissagga is the letting go of the inner world, the letting go of the doer and even the knower. If you look very carefully, you'll see what has been happening in jhana is not only letting go of the external world but also letting go of the internal world, especially letting go of the doer, the will, the controller. This insight gives rise to so much happiness, so much purity, so much freedom, so much bliss. You've found the path to the end of suffering.

THIS IS HOW THE BUDDHA described anapanasati. It's a complete practice that starts with just sitting down in a quiet place, on a comfortable seat, mindful of what's in front of you and just watching the breath. Step by step—in steps that you know are within your ability—you can reach these profound and blissful states called jhana.

When you emerge from them, you have all of these four things to contemplate: the impermanence or uncertainty of things, the fading away of things, cessation of self, and letting go of all that's "in here." And if you reflect upon these things after the experience of jhana, then something is going to happen. I often say that jhana is the gunpowder and reflection is the match. If you put the two together, then there's going to be a bang somewhere. It's only a matter of time.