

How the Steps of Mindfulness of Breathing Decreased from Sixteen to Two

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Introduction

We are indebted to Bhikkhu Dhammajoti for two detailed studies of mindfulness of breathing (2008 and 2009). The first of these surveys a range of texts that present instructions on the sixteen steps of mindfulness of breathing, whereas the second examines in detail approaches to the same meditation object based on counting the breath and associated techniques.

In this chapter, written to honour Bhikkhu Dhammajoti's work, I attempt to relate these two different modalities of practice. A central question in my exploration is whether indications can be found that explain why in later exegesis counting the breath and associated techniques became increasingly prominent, whereas at an earlier time the sixteen steps were apparently seen as sufficient in themselves, without a need for additional tools.¹

Mindfulness of Breathing in Sixteen Steps

My exploration begins and ends with passages from the **Śāriputrābhidharma*, a Dharmaguptaka Abhidharma text (Anālayo 2014a: 88n119) that testifies to a reduction of mindfulness of breathing from sixteen to two steps. In keeping with a general tendency of early Abhidharma texts,² the **Śāriputrābhidharma* contains extracts and quotations from the *Āgamas*. In the present case this is particularly opportune, as the Dharmaguptaka *Dirgha-āgama* extant in Chinese translation does not have an exposition of the sixteen steps. The Dharmaguptaka *Vinaya* does contain such an exposition (to which I will come back in the next section of this article), but unfortunately this is abbreviated. This lacuna could conveniently be filled out with the help of the following discourse quotation in the **Śāriputrābhidharma*:³

The Blessed One spoke thus: “Monastics, cultivate mindfulness of exhalations and inhalations, train to be familiar with it and cultivate it much. Having trained to cultivate it much, you will gain great fruits ... *up to* ... you will gain the deathless.

“How to cultivate mindfulness of exhalations and inhalations, train to be familiar with it and cultivate it much, to gain great fruits ... *up to* ... to gain the deathless?

Thus a monastic stays in a quiet place, in a forest, under a tree, or in an empty place, in a mountain cave, in an open place on a spread of grass, or in a cemetery, on a cliff or on a river bank.

Thus in the morning the monastic approaches the village to beg for food. Having eaten, after noon one stores away robes and bowl and washes the feet. With feet washed, the monastic sits down cross-legged with straight body and mindfulness collected, attending to the abandonment of longings and, practicing with a mind free of longings and greedy attachments, gains purification from longings and greedy attachments. One abandons aversion, practicing with a mind of benevolence, and gains purification by separating the mind from aversion.

One abandons sloth-and torpor and, being without sloth-and-torpor and with right knowing and clarity of perception, gains purification by separating the mind from sloth-and-torpor. One abandons restlessness-and-worry and, practising being without restlessness-and-worry and with the mind stilled within, gains purification by separating [the mind] from restlessness-and-worry. One abandons doubt and, practising being without doubt and with certainty about wholesome states, gains purification by separating the mind from doubt.

Thus a monastic abandons the five hindrances, which are defilements that harm the mind, and with wise understanding is rightly mindful of the exhalations and rightly mindful of the inhalations. Thus breathing out long the monastic knows to be breathing out long, and breathing in long knows to be breathing in long. Breathing out short one knows to be breathing out short, and breathing in short knows to be breathing in short. One trains to experience the whole body on breathing in, and trains to experience the whole body on breathing out.⁴ One trains to calm bodily activity on breathing out,⁵ and trains to calm bodily activity on breathing in.

One trains to experience joy on breathing out, and trains to experience joy on breathing in. One trains to experience happiness on breathing out, and trains to experience happiness on breathing in. One trains to experience mental activity on breathing out, and trains to experience mental activity on breathing in. One trains to calm mental activity on breathing out, and trains to calm mental activity on breathing in.

One trains to experience the mind on breathing out, and trains to experience the mind on breathing in. One trains to gladden the mind on breathing out, and trains to gladden the mind on breathing in. One trains to concentrate the mind on breathing out, and trains to concentrate the mind on breathing in. One trains to liberate the mind on breathing out, and trains to liberate the mind on breathing in.

One trains to contemplate impermanence on breathing out, and trains to contemplate impermanence on breathing in. One trains to contemplate dispassion on breathing out, and trains to contemplate dispassion on breathing in. One trains to contemplate cessation on breathing out, and trains to contemplate cessation on breathing in. One trains to contemplate emergence from the world on breathing out, and trains to contemplate emergence from the world on breathing in.

The presentation in the above passage from the **Śāriputrābhidharma* is in close agreement with its Theravāda counterpart in the *Ānāpānasati-sutta*.⁶ In general, the instructions for the sixteen steps show relatively few variations.⁷ Hence Deleanu (1992: 49) rightly comments that

I think we can agree that the sixteen bases of the mindfulness of breathing are a practice peculiar to Buddhism and that they belong to the earliest Buddhist stratum.

For an appreciation of the dynamics of the meditative progression delineated above, the exegesis provided in the **Śāriputrābhidharma* after this exposition is of further interest. Of particular relevance for my overall exploration is the third step of experiencing the whole body. In its explanation of this step, the **Śāriputrābhidharma* illustrates the relationship between the body becoming void internally and the taking of an inhalation with the example of an empty bag that had earlier been deflated.⁸ In order to let air in, one opens the mouth of that bag. The description clearly takes the reference to the body (*kāya*/身) in this third step to intend the physical body.

This differs from the position taken in Theravāda exegesis. According to the *Visuddhimagga*, executing the instruction to experience the whole body requires clearly discerning the beginning, middle, and end of the breath.⁹ In other words, the “body” is here understood as a reference to the breath only.

The different perspectives that emerge in this way, alongside a basic agreement on the actual instructions in sixteen steps, involve a somewhat different approach to the practice. On following the *Visuddhimagga*, the third step is concerned with the breath only. In contrast, on adopting the perspective offered in the **Śāriputrābhidharma*, the third step involves a broadening of awareness from the length of the breath, observed in the previous two steps, to the whole physical body. This offers a more compelling explanation, as the progression through the entire set of sixteen steps regularly introduce new perspectives. Such is not the case when the third step is considered to be only about the whole breath, as the same has already been the object of the first two steps. Without experiencing the whole breath, it would be impossible to know if it is short or long. As already pointed out by Nhat Hanh (1990: 43):

the practice of being mindful of the whole ‘breath body’ was already dealt with in the ... exercise: ‘breathing in a long breath, he knows, “I am breathing in a long breath.” Breathing out a short breath, he knows, “I am breathing out a short breath.”’ Why then do we need to repeat this exercise?

In this way, it seems fair to conclude that the canonical instructions on mindfulness of breathing involve a focus on the breath only for the first two steps, but not for the ensuing step. Pursuing this suggestion further requires examining the relationship of this particular form of meditation to concentration.

Concentration on Mindfulness of Breathing

The early discourses explicitly indicate that the purpose of the sixteen steps of mindfulness of breathing is to serve as an implementation of the four *satipaṭṭhānas/smṛtyupasthānas* in order to cultivate the seven awakening factors so as to result in knowledge and liberation.¹⁰ In this context, concentration features as the eleventh step in the sixteen-step scheme and as the sixth of the seven awakening factors. Evidently, concentration is an important factor in the meditative cultivation described, but at the same time it is not the central concern of mindfulness of breathing, let alone its final aim.

According to the early discourses, concentration as an awakening factor arises based on happiness.¹¹ The same basic principle obtains for the progression through the sixteen steps. Here joy (step 5) and happiness (step 6) lead to calming mental activity (step 8), which in turn furnishes the foundation for concentrating the mind (step 11). For ease of reference, here is a summary of the first three tetrads and their corresponding steps:

- 1 breathing in/out long
- 2 breathing in/out short
- 3 experiencing the whole body & breathing in/out
- 4 calming bodily activity & breathing in/out
- 5 experiencing joy & breathing in/out
- 6 experiencing happiness & breathing in/out
- 7 experiencing mental activity & breathing in/out
- 8 calming mental activity & breathing in/out
- 9 experiencing the mind & breathing in/out
- 10 gladdening the mind & breathing in/out
- 11 concentrating the mind & breathing in/out
- 12 liberating the mind & breathing in/out

The overall progression up to the eleventh step of concentrating the mind begins with an initial cultivation of focus in the first two steps, when the length of the breath has to be discerned as either long or short. The remainder of the progression, however, no longer involves such an exclusive focus. The steps in the second and third tetrad clearly require combining mindfulness of breathing in and out with other meditative tasks, such as experiencing certain mental conditions or even actively cultivating them.

In this way, the cultivation of the sixteen steps of mindfulness of breathing is not just a matter of focussing. Instead, based on an initial deployment of focus, it rather requires the cultivation of mindfulness. It is through the open and receptive stance of mindfulness that it becomes possible to monitor different things taking place, such as the continuity of breathing and the carrying out of various other tasks. For this reason, the meditation practice described here is called “mindfulness” of breathing in and out.

There is, however, an alternative expression found in several discourses and in later exegesis, which combines “mindfulness of breathing” with “concentration” to form the compound *ānāpānasati-samādhi*. This requires further examination.

The first occurrence of this expression among the collected discourses on mindfulness of breathing, the *Ānāpānasati-saṃyutta*, is of particular relevance for understanding its implications. In this discourse, the Buddha draws the attention of the other monastics to one monastic who sits in meditation quietly and without any fidgeting around. The other monastics confirm that they had also noticed this quality of his. The Buddha then explains that the reason for this quiet behaviour is the *samādhi* this monastic was practising. In this context, the term *samādhi* seems to carry a broader sense than its usual rendering of “concentration” and could perhaps best be captured by translating it as “meditation”. This broader sense of the term *samādhi* is evident also elsewhere in the early discourses.¹²

In what follows I translate the Chinese and Pāli versions of the Buddha’s explanation, beginning with the former, where in each case I employ the term *samādhi* rather than an English translation:¹³

The monastics said to the Buddha: “What is the *samādhi* that [this] monastic has attained, such a *samādhi* that body and mind are immovable and one dwells in the most excellent dwelling?”

The Buddha said to the monastics: “Suppose a monastic dwells in dependence on a (hamlet) or town.¹⁴ Having put on the robes in the morning, taken the bowl, and entered the village to beg for food, and having returned to the lodgings, put away robes and bowl, and washed the feet, one enters a forest or an empty hut or [goes to] an open [ground] to sit down and attend with collected mindfulness ... up to ... well trains to contemplate cessation when breathing [out].

“This is called the *samādhi* by which, if a monastic is seated properly with attention to it, body and mind become immovable and one dwells in the most excellent dwelling.”

Here is the Pāli counterpart in the *Saṃyutta-nikāya*, which differs insofar as the Buddha himself poses the questions to which he then provides the replies:¹⁵

Monastics, by the cultivation and making much of what *samādhi* will there be neither moving around and quivering of the body nor moving around and quivering of the mind?

Monastics, by the cultivation and making much of the *samādhi* of mindfulness of breathing there will be neither moving around and quivering of the body nor moving around and quivering of the mind.

Monastics, by what kind of cultivation and making much of the *samādhi* of mindfulness of breathing will there be neither moving around and quivering of the body nor moving around and quivering of the mind?

Here, monastics, gone to a forest or to the root of a tree or to an empty hut, a monastic sits down ... *up to* ... and trains: 'I shall breathe out contemplating letting go'.

Monastics, by the cultivation and making much of the *samādhi* of mindfulness of breathing like this there will be neither moving around and quivering of the body nor moving around and quivering of the mind.

On comparing the two passages, it is noteworthy that in the *Samyukta-āgama* discourse the term *samādhi* occurs each time on its own. This is only the case for the first occurrence in the *Samyutta-nikāya* version, where the remaining three occurrences instead involve the expression *ānāpānasati-samādhi*.

The same expression recurs repeatedly in the remainder of the *Ānāpāna-samyutta*, but only in discourses that follow the present one in the collection, not those that precede it. In each case, the *Samyukta-āgama* does not have such a combination of the term *samādhi* with mindfulness of breathing. This in turn makes it fairly probable that this combination is the result of a development happening during oral transmission. On reciting the above discourse, the probably original formulation would have been a question and answer taking the following forms:

By the cultivation and making much of what *samādhi* will there be neither moving around and quivering of the body nor moving around and quivering of the mind?

By the cultivation and making much of mindfulness of breathing there will be neither moving around and quivering of the body nor moving around and quivering of the mind.

Due to the repetitive nature of the texts, times and again a term found in a previous sentence makes its way into the next, where it originally did not belong. This type of transmission error would have led to "mindfulness of breathing" becoming "*samādhi* of mindfulness of breathing", an expression that, starting from the present occurrence, would then have affected the subsequent discourses in the collection.

One of these subsequent discourses reports the well-known story of a mass suicide by monastics due to developing excessive disgust with their own bodies.¹⁶ On being informed of what had happened, the Buddha is on record for giving instructions on mindfulness of breathing. Besides being found in the *Samyukta-āgama* and *Samyutta-nikāya* collections, this episode is also reported in several *Vinayas*. Among them is also the Dharmaguptaka *Vinaya*, this being the occasion mentioned at the outset of this article where the practice of mindfulness of breathing is presented in abbreviation.

The Dharmaguptaka *Vinaya* agrees with the Theravāda *Vinaya* in qualifying mindfulness of breathing as a *samādhi*.¹⁷ Parallels in the Mahāsāṅghika, Mahīśāsaka, and Sarvāstivāda *Vinayas*, however, just speak of "mindfulness of breathing", without adding the term "concentration".¹⁸ This gives the

impression that the proposed error during oral transmission, which in the Pāli tradition influenced the wording of subsequent discourses in this part of the *Samyutta-nikāya*, would have happened at a time before the oral transmission lineages separated into what we now refer to as the Dharmaguptaka and Theravāda traditions.

Mindfulness of Breathing and Contemplation of the Body

In addition to the standard exposition of sixteen steps, the breath features in a few other contexts as an object of meditation. One usage involves the breath as a means to recollect death.¹⁹ This takes the form of turning awareness to the fact that the present breath could in principle be one's last.

Another relevant instance involves a monastic who had developed his own individual approach to meditation on the breath. Notably, on hearing him report his practice, the Buddha first of all approved it. After expressing approval, the Buddha then presented the sixteen steps as a preferable mode of meditating on the breath. According to the *Samyukta-āgama* account, the sixteen steps are "more excellent", "go beyond", and are "superior" to what this monastic was doing.²⁰ The *Samyutta-nikāya* parallel qualifies the sixteen steps as "perfect in every detail".²¹ Although employing different expressions, the two versions clearly agree on the superiority of the sixteen steps, which were apparently not seen as requiring any additional tools or props in order to be implemented.

Yet another type of occurrence is in the context of expositions of contemplation of the body, found in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and the *Kāyagatāsati-sutta*, together with their *Madhyama-āgama* parallels. In order to make the most of the potential of comparing parallel discourses, in what follows I will take up the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, which in addition to a *Madhyama-āgama* parallel has another parallel preserved in the *Ekottarika-āgama*.

This *Ekottarika-āgama* parallel is in fact of particular importance, as it does not contain any instructions on mindfulness of breathing. Its survey of the first *satipaṭṭhāna/smṛtyupasthāna* begins with contemplation of the anatomical parts of the body, listing such parts as hairs, nails, teeth, bones, etc. A similar exercise is found also in the two parallels.

Next the *Ekottarika-āgama* discourse presents contemplation of the body as made up of the four elements of earth, water, fire, and wind. These four elements are representative of solidity, cohesion, warmth, and motion. This is another exercise shared with its two parallels. A difference manifests in the *Madhyama-āgama* version, which speaks of six elements, adding space and consciousness to the list. This is in line with a general tendency of this version to go beyond the actual topic of body contemplation, where a reference to consciousness is clearly out of place.

The next exercise in the *Ekottarika-āgama* concerns the impure liquids that come out of the body's orifices. This is not found in the other versions. The last body contemplation in the *Ekottarika-āgama* version describes a corpse in different stages of decay, another exercise common to the three parallels.

Here and elsewhere, exercises found in only one version are probably later additions. From a comparative perspective, contemplation of the anatomical parts, the elements, and of a corpse appear to reflect an early formulation of the first *satipaṭṭhāna/smṛtyupasthāna*.²² In other words, instructions on mindfulness of breathing appear to be a later addition to the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel.

Now the *Ekottarika-āgama* collection in general needs to be handled with care. There is clear evidence of a reworking of the collection in China and the intrusion of extraneous material.²³ As rightly pointed out by Dhammajoti (2015: 27f) in a different context, in the case of the *Ekottarika-āgama*:

It is therefore risky to put too much weight on the content or form of a given *sūtra* in this collection in arguing for its being the "original form" of a canonical discourse, on the basis of its often briefer description or absence of a particular list.

However, in the present case the presentation in the *Ekottarika-āgama* receives support from early Theravāda and Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma works. The *Vibhaṅga* has only contemplation of the anatomical parts for contemplation of the body as a *satipaṭṭhāna/smṛtyupasthāna*, and the *Dharmaskandha* mentions just contemplation of the anatomical parts and the elements.²⁴ This makes it safe to conclude that the presentation in the *Ekottarika-āgama* indeed points to an early description of body contemplation. In terms of the three exercises common to the discourse versions, the main concern is then a deconstructing of perceiving the body as sensually alluring, as a solid entity, and as something that is lasting rather than being mortal.

The *Ekottarika-āgama* discourse appears to have followed this basic trajectory by adding another exercise that also deconstructs the body's attractiveness. The other two versions take a broader approach, including various exercises related to the general theme of the body. In fact the *Madhyama-āgama* version has been expanded to such an extent that some of its exercises no longer have a relationship to the physical body at all, as evident in its inclusion of the sixth element of consciousness under the heading of contemplation of the body. Such contemplations can with a fairly high degree of confidence be considered later accretions.²⁵

The *Madhyama-āgama* version begins with contemplation of the postures of the body (sitting, standing, etc.) and clear comprehension of bodily activities, two exercises also found in the Pāli discourse. Then come two exercises peculiar to the *Madhyama-āgama* discourse. One of these instructs to rectify the mind

when unwholesome thoughts arise by recollecting what is wholesome, whereas the other recommends achieving the same aim by forceful mind control. It is after these practices that the instructions on mindfulness of breathing appear:²⁶

A monastic is mindful of breathing in and knows to be breathing in mindfully; is mindful of breathing out and knows to be breathing out mindfully.

Breathing in long, one knows to be breathing in long; and breathing out long, knows to be breathing out long. Breathing in short, one knows to be breathing in short; and breathing out short, knows to be breathing out short. One trains [in experiencing] the whole body when breathing in; and trains [in experiencing] the whole body when breathing out. One trains in calming bodily activity when breathing in; and trains in calming (bodily) activity when breathing out.²⁷

Next the *Madhyama-āgama* turns to the bodily experience of the four absorptions, followed by a cultivation of the perception of light and of the reviewing sign. None of these are found in the parallels. The last three exercises are those shared with its two discourse parallels, namely contemplation of the anatomical parts, the elements, and a corpse in decay.

The *Majjhima-nikāya* discourse places mindfulness of breathing right at its outset, followed by the postures, bodily activities, anatomical parts, elements, and the cemetery contemplations. The instructions on mindfulness of breathing are as follows:²⁸

Here gone to a forest or to the root of a tree or to an empty hut, a monastic sits down; having folded the legs crosswise, keeping the body erect, and having established mindfulness to the fore, mindful one breathes in and mindful breathes out.

Breathing in long, one knows: 'I breathe in long', and breathing out long, knows: 'I breathe out long'. Breathing in short, one knows: 'I breathe in short', and breathing out short, knows: 'I breathe out short'. One trains: 'I breathe in experiencing the whole body', and trains: 'I breathe out experiencing the whole body'. One trains: 'I breathe in calming the bodily activity', and trains: 'I breathe out calming the bodily activity'.

These instructions are followed by a simile that describes a turner at work on a lathe. I will examine this simile in relation to other similes for body contemplation in the next section of this article.

From a comparative perspective, it is noteworthy that the *Majjhima-nikāya* discourse has also the preliminary description of retiring to a secluded place, unlike the *Madhyama-āgama* version. Given that these preliminaries are placed at the outset of the descriptions of all the body contemplations in the Pāli version, this can in fact give the misleading impression that it applies to all of them.²⁹ Closer inspection shows that this is not the case. The very next contemplation instructs "when walking, a monastic knows: 'I am walking'; or when standing, knows: 'I am standing'."³⁰ This shows that the

sitting down, described in the preliminaries to mindfulness of breathing, no longer applies. The subsequent contemplation requires that “when wearing the outer robe and [other] robes and [carrying] the bowl, one acts clearly knowing.”³¹ This description is relevant to going to beg alms and not to being in seclusion. In fact the passage from the **Śāriputrābhidharma* translated at the outset of this chapter, in line with other more detailed descriptions of the preliminaries to mindfulness of breathing, explicitly mentions the storing away of the outer robe and bowl before approaching a secluded place to cultivate mindfulness of breathing.

The inclusion of the preliminaries to mindfulness of breathing in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* is unexpected, as according to the *Ānāpānasati-sutta* these are not part of contemplation of the body. The latter discourse provides a correlation of the instructions on the sixteen steps with the four *satipaṭṭhānas/smṛtyupasthānas*, according to which the first four steps, from understanding long breath to calming bodily activity, correspond to the first *satipaṭṭhāna/smṛtyupasthāna* of contemplation of the body.³² It must have been this thematic connection that motivated the inclusion of the first tetrad under the header of contemplation of the body in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and its *Madhyama-āgama* parallel. Yet, in doing so it would have been more natural to take only the first tetrad without the preliminaries, as is indeed the case in the *Madhyama-āgama* version.

As a net result of the development evident in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and its parallels, the first tetrad of mindfulness of breathing features as a form of meditation on its own. This results in a loss of the transition to the next tetrads in the scheme of sixteen steps, in particular to those steps, discussed above, that serve to bring about concentration of the mind.

A further stage of reduction can be seen in two discourses in the *Ekottarika-āgama*, in which only the first three steps of mindfulness of breathing are found.³³ Here, knowing the long and short breaths and experiencing the whole body are the only elements in common with the sixteen steps. These three steps occur in combination with attention given to other aspects of the breath, such as noting its coolness or warmth. Such additional tools are only natural, since with a reduction of mindfulness of breathing to only three steps (or even only four), the actual practice no longer has the same potential to bring about a stilling of distracting thoughts, a potential mentioned in several discourses.³⁴

Similes Illustrating Contemplation of the Body

For appreciating the tendency to reduction, the turner simile in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* is of further relevance. By way of setting a background to this simile, in what follows I survey the other similes employed in the three versions to illustrate various body contemplations. Of particular interest in this survey is the degree to which the respective simile illustrates the whole of the meditative practice or only a part of it.

The only practice illustrated in all three versions with a simile is contemplation of the elements. This simile takes the following forms in the *Ekottarika-āgama*, *Madhyama-āgama*, and *Majjhima-nikāya* respectively:³⁵

This is just like a capable cow butcher or the apprentice of a cow butcher who divides a cow [into pieces by cutting through] its tendons. While dividing it he contemplates and sees for himself that ‘these are the feet’, ‘this is the heart’, ‘these are the tendons’, and ‘this is the head’. It is just as a butcher who, on having slaughtered and skinned a cow, divides it into six parts and spreads them on the ground [for sale].³⁶ Monastics, it is just as a skilled butcher or a butcher’s apprentice who, having killed a cow, were to be seated at a crossroads with it cut up into pieces.

With varying degrees of detail, the parallel versions illustrate the purpose of contemplating the elements of the body. Just like cutting up a cow into different parts, so the body is to be mentally cut up into its material elements. The concern of the exercise is not with only some of the elements, but with all of them together as making up the body.

Contemplation of the anatomical parts comes with a simile in the *Madhyama-āgama* and *Majjhima-nikāya* versions:³⁷

It is just as a clear-sighted person who, on seeing a vessel full of various seeds, clearly distinguishes them all, that is: ‘rice, millet seed, turnip seed, or mustard seed’.

Monastics, it is just as a person with good eyes who has opened a double-mouthed bag full of different sorts of grain, such as hill rice, red rice, beans, peas, millet, and white rice, which he would examine: ‘This is hill rice, this is red rice, these are beans, these are peas, this is millet, and this is white rice’.

Just as the practitioner is aware of hair, nails, teeth, bones, etc., so in this simile the person is aware of different grains. Here, too, the simile illustrates the whole of the exercise. It is the vision of all the grains together that conveys the practice, not of a single grain to the exclusion of others.

The remaining similes occur only in one of the three versions. In the case of the *Ekottarika-āgama* discourse, the contemplation of the bodily orifices comes with the following illustration:

It is just as a person who, contemplating a bamboo garden, contemplates clumps of reeds.³⁸

The illustration conveys the gist of the whole exercise.

The *Madhyama-āgama* has two separate similes that I present here together. These illustrate overcoming unwholesome states by recollecting what is wholesome or else by forceful mind control:³⁹

It is just as a carpenter or a carpenter's apprentice who might apply an inked string to a piece of wood [to mark a straight line] and then cut the wood with a sharp adze to make it straight ...

It is just as two strong men who might grab a weak man and, turning him this way and that way, might beat him up as they wish.

Both similes serve to convey the sense of the whole contemplation. The same *Madhyama-āgama* version also has four similes to illustrate the experience of each of the four absorptions:⁴⁰

It is just as a bath attendant who, having filled a vessel with bathing powder, mixes it with water and kneads it, so that there is no part [of the powder] that is not completely drenched and pervaded with water ...

It is just as a mountain spring that is full and overflowing with clear and clean water, so that water coming from any of the four directions cannot enter it, with the spring water welling up from the bottom on its own, flowing out and flooding the surroundings, completely drenching every part of the mountain so that there is no part that is not pervaded by it

It is just as a blue, red, or white lotus, being born in the water and having come to growth in the water, remains submerged in water, with every part of its roots, stem, flower, and leaves completely drenched and pervaded [by water], so that there is no part that is not pervaded by it ...

It is just as a person who covers himself from head to foot with a cloth measuring seven or eight units, so that no part of his body is not covered.

Each of these depictions illustrates the experience of the corresponding level of absorption; none concerns just a part of such experience. Yet another simile occurs in the *Madhyama-āgama* discourse in relation to the reviewing sign:⁴¹

It is just as a person who is seated and contemplates another person who is lying down, or while lying down contemplates another person who is seated.

In line with all of the similes surveyed so far, the above depiction also illustrates the whole exercise.

A simile found only in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* illustrates mindfulness of breathing:⁴²

Monastics, it is just as a skilled turner or a turner's apprentice who knows, when making a long turn: 'I make a long turn'; knows, when making a short turn: 'I make a short turn'.

The turner simile only illustrates the first two of the four steps given in the actual instructions. It corresponds to knowing that one is breathing in or out long and breathing in or out short. It has no evident relation to training in the third step of experiencing the whole body or to the fourth step of calming bodily activity.

Working on a lathe requires a strong focus, as the turner has to observe very carefully what is happening in order to make sure that just the right amount of material is being taken off at exactly the right place. In this way, with the turner simile the need for focus on the breath receives additional emphasis.

This points to a nascent tendency towards further reduction of the instructions on mindfulness of breathing. Even though the discourse still gives the four steps, the simile conveys an interest in the first two of these only and conveys an emphasis on exclusive focus.

In evaluating this incipient stage of further reduction, it is significant that the turner simile is found only in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*. It does not occur in the *Kāyagatāsati-sutta*, which otherwise has all the similes that are found in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*. This in turn implies that the turner simile would have become part of the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* only at a relatively advanced stage in the transmission of the *Majjhima-nikāya* collection, otherwise it would have been added also to the *Kāyagatāsati-sutta* in the same collection, which otherwise contains identical instructions on mindfulness of breathing.⁴³

Mindfulness of Breathing in Two Steps

The tendency towards reduction, evident in the passages surveyed so far, becomes fully manifest with the exposition of *smṛtyupasthāna* in the **Śāriputrābhidharma*. For the case of mindfulness of breathing, one of the practices given in this work under the rubric of contemplations of the body, this takes the following form:⁴⁴

Again, breathing out long a monastic knows it to be long, and breathing in long knows it to be long. Breathing out short one knows it to be short, and breathing in short knows it to be short.

It is like a master turner who pulls the cord, pulling it long [the master turner] knows it to be long and pulling it short knows it to be short ... *up to* ... this is called practicing contemplation of the body in relation to the internal body.

In this way, the **Śāriputrābhidharma* confirms what the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* hints at: a reduction of the practice to the first two steps.

The *Visuddhimagga* in fact achieves basically the same result with its interpretation of the third step of experiencing the whole body as intending the whole breath. Given that the Pāli commentarial tradition understands the fourth step of calming bodily activity to imply a progression up to the attainment of the fourth absorption,⁴⁵ all that is available now for reaching such lofty attainment is focussing on the breath.

From the perspective of an increasing emphasis on just focussing on the breath, it is of further interest that the *Visuddhimagga*, as well as the *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, no longer mention the turner simile. Instead they present

a simile of a saw, which in the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* is the only metaphor employed for illustrating the practice of mindfulness of breathing.⁴⁶ The simile of the saw compares proper cultivation of mindfulness of breathing to cutting a piece of wood, where the worker's attention is continuously at the point where the teeth of the saw cuts the wood, without attending to other parts of the saw as they move forward and backward. In the same way the practitioner should focus exclusively on the point where the breath touches, without attending to the remainder of the breaths as they move inward and outward.

This points to a further degree of focussing. Whereas the turner needs to pay attention to the length of each turn in order to execute his work with precision, avoiding that neither too little nor too much is cut off from the piece, for the worker cutting wood the length of the motion of the saw is no longer of any importance, all that counts is to cut as deep as possible into the wood at the point of contact. In the same way, with the development under discussion eventually even the length of the breaths becomes less important and is replaced by an all-out focus on the touch sensation of the breaths as the most important aspect of the practice.

The tendency to emphasize focussing on the breath and a reductionism to the first tetrad continues in the present, evident in the fact that at times publications on mindfulness of breathing only cover the first four steps.⁴⁷ The general attitude can be conveniently illustrated with a statement by Ledi Sayādaw (1999/2011: 40), according to which “the first tetrad is the main and essential stage.”

This shows the degree to which the whole practice of the sixteen steps can come to be subsumed under its first four steps. As is plainly evident in the **Śāriputrābhidharma*, such a tendency to reduction holds sway even though there is clear awareness of the existence of the sixteen-step scheme.

As a result of such reduction, it is not surprising that other techniques had to be relied on in order to enable meditators to stay with the breath. An obvious example is the method of counting the breaths in order to avoid distraction. Among the different approaches to mindfulness of breathing prominent in later texts, counting is in fact the one factor common to all approaches surveyed by Dhammajoti (2009). This suggests that counting would have been their common starting point. In fact Cousins (2015: 4) reasons that “one may suspect that from an early date some kind of counting was employed in the initial two stages.” The gradual reduction of the sixteen steps to the first tetrad and eventually to only the first two steps, concerned only with the length of the breath, must indeed have set the stage for the need to employ counting and eventually other related techniques in an attempt to recover the potential of mindfulness of breathing to counter distraction.

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Abbreviations

AN	<i>Aniguttara-nikāya</i>
EĀ	<i>Ekottarika-āgama</i>
MĀ	<i>Madhyama-āgama</i>
MN	<i>Majjhima-nikāya</i>
Paṭis	<i>Paṭisambhidāmagga</i>
Ps	<i>Papañcasūdanī</i>
SĀ	<i>Saṃyukta-āgama</i>
SN	<i>Saṃyutta-nikāya</i>
T	Taishō edition (CBETA)
Vin	<i>Vinaya</i>
Vism	<i>Visuddhimagga</i>
< >	emendation
[]	supplementation

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Notes

- 1 As already noted by Dhammadīpa 2009: 574: “now the question arises why there is no factor system [i.e. counting and related methods] mentioned in the early canon and early Abhidhamma/Abhidharma, but then later it becomes so important for the technique of *ānāpānasati/smṛti*? This is another complicated issue that would require a detailed study before it could be answered fully.” Since to the best of my knowledge this question has so far not been taken up for further research, my presentation here and in Anālayo 2019a is meant to serve as a step towards a better understanding of the problem identified by Bhikkhu Dhammadīpa.
- 2 On the evolution of early Abhidharma in close interrelation with *Āgama* texts see Anālayo 2014a.
- 3 T 1548 at T XXVIII 705a28.
- 4 As already pointed out by Dhammajoti 2008: 285 note 32, here the sequence is reversed and the inhalation is mentioned first. The difference seems negligible from a practical perspective.
- 5 T 1548 at T XXVIII 705b15 uses the verb 除 here, which has as its primary meaning “to eliminate”. As already noted by Dhammajoti 2008: 255, however, the same character can also serve as a rendering of *pratīprasrambhayati*, as indicated by Hirakawa 1997: 1212. This is clearly the appropriate sense here.
- 6 MN 118 at MN III 82,24.
- 7 This can be seen quite well from the detailed survey in Dhammajoti 2008; see also Anālayo 2013a: 231–233.
- 8 T 1548 at T XXVIII 706a22; the explanation given here has already been translated by Dhammajoti 2008: 268.
- 9 Vism 273,23: *sabbakāyapaṭiṣamvedī ... sakalassa assāsakāyassa ādimajjhapariyosānaṃ viditaṃ karonto*.
- 10 For example, SN 54.13 at SN V 329,1 and its parallel SĀ 810 at T II 208a11.
- 11 SN 54.13 at SN V 332,20: *sukhino cittaṃ samādhiyati*; and its parallel SĀ 810 at T II 208b25: 身心樂已, 得三昧 (with the slight difference that SĀ 810 explicitly indicates that such happiness extends to body and mind).
- 12 On different nuances of *samādhi* in its usage in the early discourses see Anālayo 2006.
- 13 SĀ 806 at T II 206c29.
- 14 The translation “hamlet” is based on an emendation of an obvious copyist’s error.
- 15 SN 54.7 at SN V 316,8.
- 16 For a comparative study of this episode see Anālayo 2014b.
- 17 T 1428 at T XXII 576b7: 阿那般那三昧 and Vin III 70,19: *ānāpānasatisamādhi*.
- 18 The Mahāśāṅghika *Vinaya*, T 1425 at T XXII 254c7: 阿那般那念, (which is preceded by a question after the type of *samādhi*, 何等三昧?, here in the original sense of “meditation” also relevant in SĀ 806), the Mahīśāsaka *Vinaya*, T 1421 at T XXII 7c6: 安般念, and the Sarvāstivāda *Vinaya*, T 1435 at T XXIII 8a13: 阿那般那念. The Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya* does not relate the mass suicide to instructions on mindfulness of breathing.
- 19 AN 6.19 at AN III 306,7 and AN 8.73 at AN IV 319,24, with a parallel in EĀ 40.8 at T II 742a25; see also Anālayo 2016: 200–207.
- 20 SĀ 805 at T II 206c8: 勝妙, 過其, 上者.
- 21 SN 54.6 at SN V 315,9: *vitthārena paripuṇṇā*.
- 22 Anālayo 2013a: 39–62.
- 23 For the addition of an entire discourse that must have happened in China see Anālayo 2013b; on several cases testifying to an apparent tendency to rework early discourse material see Anālayo 2014/2015 and 2015.
- 24 Vibh 193,17 and T 1537 at T XXVI 476a7.
- 25 Pace Kuan 2008.
- 26 MĀ 98 at T I 582c13.
- 27 The present passage actually speaks of the ‘verbal activity’ when breathing out, which is clearly a textual error.
- 28 MN 10 at MN I 56,12.
- 29 In a discussion of internal and external *satipaṭṭhāna*, Ditrich 2016: 136f comments that “in the *Satipaṭṭhānasutta* it is said: ‘having gone to the forest or to the foot of a tree, or to an empty place’, which indicates that there would be no other people to observe.” Apparently, she takes this specification to qualify the practice of all four *satipaṭṭhānas* described in the discourse and to imply that these are invariably practiced in total seclusion and the absence of any other people. This is, of course, not the case.

- 30 MN 10 at MN I 56,36.
 31 MN 10 at MN I 57,7.
 32 MN 118 at MN III 83,21. Although the same correlation in the *Samyukta-āgama* includes the previously mentioned practice of just being aware of inhalations and exhalations, it also does not include the preliminaries of withdrawing into seclusion; see SĀ 810 at T II 208a23 and Anālayo 2019b: 199.
 33 EĀ 3.8 at T II 556b1 (a discourse for which no parallel is known) and EĀ 17.1 at T II 582a15, parallel to an exposition of the whole scheme of sixteen steps in MN 62 at MN I 425,3.
 34 For example, AN 9.3 at AN IV 358,16 and its parallel MĀ 56 at T I 491c16; similar indications in other *Āgamas* can be found, e.g., in SĀ 804 at T II 206b16 or EĀ 2.8 at T II 553b8.
 35 EĀ 12.1 at T II 568a26, MĀ 98 at T I 583b19, and MN 10 at MN I 58,1.
 36 In line with its presentation of six elements instead of four, the *Madhyama-āgama* speaks of six parts of the cow.
 37 MĀ 98 at T I 583b9 and MN 10 at MN I 57,20.
 38 EĀ 12.1 at T II 568b2.
 39 MĀ 98 at T I 582c2.
 40 MĀ 98 at T I 582c22.
 41 MĀ 98 at T I 583a29.
 42 MN 10 at MN I 56,22.
 43 MN 119 at MN III 89,9.
 44 T 1548 at T XXVIII 613b7.
 45 Ps I 249,1.
 46 Paṭi I 171,7, quoted in Vism 281,25; see also the 解脫道論 (*Vimuttimaggā*), T 1648 at T XXXII 430a13, and Anālayo 2019a.
 47 Examples are Gñānārāma 1989, Ariyadhamma 1995/2014, and Johnson 2012.

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