

Breathing Mindfulness: Text and Practice

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In the *Mahāsaccakasutta*, the Buddha gives some rare autobiographical recollection, describing the turning point of his abandonment of the mortifications as the memory of practising *jhāna* as a boy during the ploughing festival, when left for a while by his father under the shade of a rose-apple tree; the earliest ‘biography’ we have of the Buddha, the *Jātaka-nidāna*, describes the practice he undertook at that time as meditation on the breath (J I 58). Whether or not the attribution of breathing mindfulness is correct to this incident, the fact that such an early source regards the practice as crucial in Gotama’s decision to take food and to put aside fear of ‘the joy that is free from sense desires’ (M I 246–7) in his search for awakening offers testament, even outside extensive *suttanta* sources, to the centrality of this practice in Pali Buddhist meditation and doctrine. Within the *suttas*, the Buddha frequently recommended breathing mindfulness, describing it as a ‘complete method for attaining Nirvana’ (S V 326), praising it as the noble abode (*ariyavihāra*), the divine abode (*brahmavihāra*) and the Buddha abode (*Tathāgatavihāra*). In the famous incident in which a group of monks become severely unbalanced as the result of unwise attention to the foul (*asubha*), the Buddha resorts to breathing mindfulness in its aspect as a *samādhi* practice to restore their health of mind, saying as a preliminary to the basic instructions: ‘It is just as if, monks, in the last month of the hot season, when the dust and dirt fly up, a great rain cloud out of season were to disperse and settle them. In just this way, monks, concentration by means of breathing mindfulness, when cultivated and made much of, is peaceful and choice: it is a sublime and happy abiding too, that disperses and settles harmful states of mind whenever they arise (S V 322).’

The breathing mindfulness discourse, or *Ānāpanasati-sutta* (M III 78–88), describing all sixteen stages of the practice, is one of core texts of the Pāli canon and the subject of extensive commentary by Buddhaghosa and Upatissa; it describes what has become now one of the most popular meditations for modern practitioners, throughout the world.¹ As Buddhism travelled both practice and text remained important: one version of the *sūtra* is the earliest extant Buddhist text we have, introduced to China by An Shigao around 148 CE. Indeed breathing practices appear to have remained popular, though subject to a number of modifications within different doctrinal and ritual frameworks: many schools of Buddhism employ some breathing techniques as part of or as a preliminary to other practices.² Within Southern Buddhism, however, breathing mindfulness techniques, text and practice have retained a centrality at all stages of path, so that the breath itself is explored with a complexity and range of practice not obviously shared by all other forms of Buddhism. This comprehensiveness is perhaps associated with or dependent upon the great breadth and scope both of the original texts, doctrinal and practical explanations of the practice in the commentaries, and, in modern times, in the diversity of modern meditative contexts. This paper will explore briefly some modern variations in technique and orientation in three modern breathing mindfulness schools. It hopes to demonstrate that the spirit and the letter of the text, described within the first

¹ It will be referred to as AS in this paper.

² See, for example, Luk 1964, Donner and Stevenson 1993, Kaplau 2000 and Zahler 2009. The attribution of the influence of early Buddhist breathing mindfulness techniques in each instance is difficult and would need very specific examination of the sources and background in its own context. For instance Taoist practices connected with the breath appear to have been widely cultivated before the arrival of Buddhism (Roth 1999: 110-111, 118, 134, 135-6).

tetrad of the early *sutta*, also given in the (*Mahā*)*satipatthāna-sutta* (M I 56 and D II 291), have accommodated a great deal of variety and diversity, evinced by the range of practices on the breath, not only from this sample, also available now. The focus will just be on the original *sutta*, some early commentarial advice, and some variations in three schools.

The practice of breathing mindfulness

The extent of practices within various Buddhist contexts that relate to or take as their primary focus the breath, the nature of these practices and their possible relationship with early sources, such as AS, would be the subject of an extensive research program in itself: it is outside the scope of this discussion. But as the leading twentieth-century monk and scholar Vajirañāṇa notes, the practice of mindfulness of breathing, the twenty-ninth object selected by Buddhaghosa, is regarded from the early days of the tradition as the “root” (*mūla*) meditation object (Vajirañāṇa 1975: 227), as it could be said to be in modern Southern Buddhism. While all Buddhaghosa’s forty *samatha* subjects are employed for *samatha* practice, many of these are considered less suited to the practice of insight and the recognition of the three marks of *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā* (see also Cousins 1973, 1984b). The *sutta* itself, particularly through the instructions of the last tetrad, often associated specifically with the insight and *vipassanā* stages of meditation, stresses the full salvific possibilities of the practice conducted through all sixteen stages. As argued elsewhere, AS itself suggests a complex interplay, through the integration of the seven factors of awakening, between *samatha* and *vipassanā* (Shaw 2006: 146–153). Indeed its perceived immediacy and availability marks breathing mindfulness out from the other *samatha* objects: it is the only object of the forty that, according to Buddhaghosa, is apprehended in its early stages solely by touch, as the practitioner has to feel the breath as it enters his body, rather than by sight or hearing (*suta*), the means by which other objects are apprehended.³ It is associated from the earliest texts with the suppression of discursive thoughts, and is particularly recommended in the *suttas* (Ud 34–7; A I 449), the *Niddesa* (Nidd I 360) and the manuals (PF 69; Vism III 121) for those prone to excessive or troublesome thinking (*vitakka*) or delusion.

In AS, after a warm address to his followers, the Buddha speaks in praise of mindfulness of breathing, claiming that it is a practice that leads, to the establishment of all four foundations of mindfulness, and then to the seven factors of awakening. He asks the rhetorical question: what are the benefits of mindfulness of breathing? How is it to be cultivated and “made much of” (*bahulikata*)? His instructions begin with some preliminaries and brief physical directions. Curiously, it is the only meditation object of the forty routinely introduced with specific instructions regarding posture and possible location.⁴ This preliminary series of instructions is found throughout the canon (see, for instance, D II 291, M I 59, S V 317). One must find an “empty space,” perhaps at the roots of a tree or in a forest, sit cross-legged, make the body straight.⁵ There is no specific

³ By being ‘heard’ Buddhaghosa probably means that it is brought to mind by attributes that have been heard about through teachings (Vism III 119). The subsequent development of the *nimitta*, the visual sign that works within this practice at a later stage when calm has been established, involves an internal “seeing” of what is in the mind’s eye. Buddhaghosa differentiates [this feature](#) in one passage from other objects (Vism III 119).

⁴ The *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* does not specify a particular object in its instructions for the preliminaries and sitting for the pursuit of *jhāna*.

⁵ The commentary to the *Satipatthāna sutta* that the posture is taken for three reasons: for its firmness, its ease for breathing and for its expediency in apprehending the object (Soma 1981: 46).

More generally, Buddhaghosa gives under the earth *kaṣiṇa*, the paradigm *samatha* practice, some physical instructions concerning guarding the sign, which refers to location, posture and place of practice (Vism IV 34–41) and the list of the ten skills in absorption, that include basic care of the body (Vism IV 43).

instruction to close the eyes, though this is usual for most Southern Buddhist breathing practices; the meditator is asked to “set up mindfulness before [oneself]”.⁶

The practitioner follows sixteen sets of instructions. For the limited space of this discussion, I shall confine this comparison to the first tetrad, mindfulness of body.

1. “Mindful, he breathes in; mindful, he breathes out. As he breathes in a long breath, he knows, ‘I am breathing in a long breath’, or, as he breathes out a long breath, he knows, ‘I am breathing out a long breath’.

2. As he breathes in a short breath, he knows, ‘I am breathing in a short breath’. Or, as he breathes out a short breath, he knows, ‘I am breathing out a short breath’.

3. He trains thus: ‘Experiencing the whole body I shall breathe in’; he trains thus: ‘Experiencing the whole body I shall breathe out’.

4. He trains thus: ‘Making tranquil the bodily formation I shall breathe in’; he trains thus: ‘Making tranquil the bodily formation I shall breathe out’.

In AS, where all sixteen instructions are given, the audience is monastic. In the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* these first four instructions are given to an audience the commentaries say was constituted by those from the four assemblies of monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen (Soma 1981: 18). In that *sutta*, the four stages are given after instructions for the practice of mindfulness in daily activities, under mindfulness of body. In that text, though not in AS, the attention of the meditator is compared to a skilled wood-turner, who knows if he is turning a long turn, or a short one (M I 56).

The Commentaries and early manuals

The practice is discussed by early commentaries, texts and manuals (Paṭiṣ 1 163–196; Vism VIII 145–244; PF 156-166; Soma 1981). Some variation is evident even from this time. The commentary to this practice in the *Satipaṭṭhāna sutta* treats this tetrad primarily as a *samatha* practice, a preliminary to insight. It says that through practicing long breaths, the breath becomes finer because of the desire (*chanda*) of the practitioner, until joy (*pīti*) arises in him, and the breath becomes yet finer. At this stage the practitioner turns away from the long breath, with equanimity firm. For the third stage, the practitioner may be less aware at the beginning, the middle, the end of the breath, or at all three. So, this stage marks his resolution to experience the whole of the breath body as it enters and leaves the body (Soma 1981: 47–8). The commentary describes the fourth instruction, the making tranquil of the breath, within the parameters of an entire salvific path. The meditator finds that coarseness of breath is associated with coarseness of mental state. Through calming the breath body, the mind and body become rested. The mental image (*nimitta*) can then arise, and the four *jhānas* undertaken. Emerging from these, he/she makes the breath body or the *jhāna* factors the object, and investigates the coarse physical body on which they depend, for the four elements of earth, water, air and fire. Then, seeing the distinction between *nāma* and *rūpa*, the practitioner takes this for

⁶ The commentaries say that he ‘fixes the attention by directing it towards the breath which is in front’ (Soma 1981: 47). Although there is no canonical text to my knowledge which specifically enjoins that the eyes be closed for breathing mindfulness practice, there are commentarial passages recommending this for the main part of the *kaṣiṇa* practice, as a contrast to the preliminary stage where there is an external visible object, and the eyes are half shut and half open (Vism IV 125).

the development of insight, through the three signs, and investigation into dependent origination, leading to arahantship.

Buddhaghosa's manual (Vism VIII 163–225) takes the practice in this tetrad also firstly a *samatha* exercise, leading then to insight and arahantship. But he in addition describes four stages: counting (*gaṇanā*), following (*anubandhanā*), touching (*phusanā*) and settling (*thapanā*). These stages successively count the breaths, follow the breath in and out of the body, take a point of contact with the nostril or mouth as the practitioner breathes, and settle upon the mental image (*nimitta*) that arises as the basis of *jhāna* practice. For the touching, the attention is compared to a man using a saw, who concentrates upon the point of contact with a tree trunk he is cutting, but is mindful of the movement of the saw itself (Vism VIII 202; Paṭi I 171). In the settling the image is described, and the practice to develop it is compared to awareness of the sound of the gong, that requires more subtle attention as the sound fades away (Vism VIII 206). When the *nimitta* is clear in the mind's eye, the practitioner develops the *jhānas* and then insight, through awareness of name (*nāma*) and form (*rūpa*), and the three marks, overcomes doubts, abandons the ten defilements of insight, and becomes established in the four paths. Upatissa, in a commentary extant only in an early Chinese translation (PF 156–166), also describes the image and the four stages for this tetrad, and terms the 'body' that is experienced in the third instruction as the breath body as the inbreath and the outbreath, along with the body (*kāya*) of mental factors in the mind. He teaches this tetrad solely as a *samatha* practice, showing some variation even in early commentaries. For the fourth instruction of the tetrad, the practitioner is described as calming the bodily formations and progressing through the *jhānas*.

Some points of debate

As well as these slightly differing slants, there are a number of features, even of the first line of these instructions, which have been the subject of debate since the earliest times. These give some indication of the subtle practical implications involved in the exegesis of just a few lines of texts involving meditational advice. For instance, is *ānā* the in-breath or the out-breath, and *pāna* the out-breath or the in-breath? There was an ancient controversy on this issue, with the *Vinaya* (Monastic Rules) and Upatissa's *Vimuttimaggā* (*Path of Freedom*), placing the outbreath first (see PF 157, 160). Most sources, however, take the inbreath first, on the grounds that it is the first breath taken at human birth (see Vajirañāna 1975, 230-3). Indeed, where it is stated, the practice is usually translated and undertaken with the inbreath as the first breath, as it is in Upatissa's manual when actually described (PF 160). In this regard, all Southern schools this writer has encountered take the inbreath first in their instructions.

Hardly surprisingly, they do vary in some practical interpretations. In this regard, it is worth noting that the language of the instructions, through its rhythms, repeated words and pace, seems to have been composed to support the meditational advice it enjoins: it feels like instructions to be used. The advice for the first two stages is given in the first person, an inevitable byproduct of the Indic languages' means of communicating indirect speech, but an effective one, used elsewhere, for instance, for instructions for the mindfulness of death (A III 303–6). Immediacy is further communicated by the use of the present tense: the practice of loving kindness is sometimes described through employing the optative, for instance, suitable to its 'wish', that the practice is pursued and that there will be well-being for others (Sn 143–152). But the present tense, also sometimes used for loving kindness practice when described in the third person, is descriptive rather than prescriptive (M I 283–4). Does this suggest that these first two stages, where the

practitioner simply notes ‘I breathe in a long breath’ etc, simply observe rather than express intention? Do instructions three and four, and indeed all remaining fourteen stages, where the future is used, and a new verb, ‘he trains’ (*sikkhati*) suggest active choice in length of breath for each instruction?

So to see how modern practitioners apply these instructions for teachings, and other issues connected with the first tetrad, we will look at Buddhādāsa’s instructions for breathing mindfulness, the method taught by Boonman Poonyathiro, an adaptation of traditional Thai practices, and modern *vipassanā* methods, as represented by Nyanaponika Thera’s *Heart of Buddhist Meditation*. It should be stated right first that the teaching of meditation is often privately conducted, and specific schools may not publish all of their instructions, or how they would adapt the practice to individual needs, as the tradition to this day still follows canon and commentary and places much emphasis on suitability, the good friend (*kalyāṇamitta*) and personal contact (see eg. Ud 34–7, Vism III 74–103, PF 54–62; Shaw 2006: 4–20). So information that has been placed in published material in the public domain is used here, on the grounds that it probably indicates a broad underlying approach, which, this paper assumes, may be modified in different situations. All three teachers received extensive training in traditional monastic meditative settings.

1. Buddhādāsa

Buddhādāsa (1906–1993) was one of the great reformist monks of the twentieth century, who, dissatisfied with shortcomings he perceived in monastic meditative practice, set up his own meditation center, Suan Mokkh (literally ‘Garden of Liberation’), that fulfilled his wish for tranquil, rural and simple conditions for the practice of meditation. He taught there until his death. His ideas on many subjects were controversial; his meditation practices, as described in *Mindfulness with Breathing*, follow closely both the letter and the spirit of the earliest texts.

He treats the tetrad as part of the whole process of the sixteen instructions. He teaches each of the four instructions separately, in line with the recommendations of the *sutta*. He does not list the four stages described by Buddhaghosa and Upatissa, except through allusion, but gives a thorough practical exegesis of them in this indirect manner as part of work on the practice and as contributory to the development of *jhāna* (Buddhādāsa 1988: 40). He differentiates carefully between the two lengths of long and short breath, noting that how the breath lengthens as the mind becomes calm and that the ‘long breath brings a greater sense of peace and well-being’ (Buddhādāsa 1988: 27). He advocates noticing the things that make the breath short or long, fine or coarse, introducing an investigative element. For the short breath he shows how to make the breath finer at each length, which ‘will calm down our bodies. They become cool. When we wish to cool down our bodies, we bring out a fine breath’ (30). Buddhādāsa treats the tetrad as primarily a *samādhi* practice, offering considerable encouragement and explanation on the cultivation of joy and happiness as integral to these initial stages (44–7). In line with Upatissa’s approach and much traditional interpretation, he sees the tetrad as a *samatha* stage leading in the last tetrad to insight, though always emphasizes investigation. Throughout his work he stresses the practice of mindfulness in daily life, consultation, suitability of practice to individual and what he terms the ‘cool’ of ‘*nibbāna* in daily life’, with the development of *samādhi* leading to insight (100–2). The cultivation of mindfulness is emphasized throughout. Mindfulness of the breath in a more general sense than the meditation during the day is taught, a feature that all three schools

described here share and which renders their respective practices perhaps particularly suited to a modern setting.

2. Samatha Trust, UK.

One of the most longstanding groups practicing breathing mindfulness in the United Kingdom is the Samatha Trust. Its honorary president, Boonman Poonyathiro, now in his eightieth year, started teaching after being a monk in Thailand for many years. Unable to obtain a visa to teach meditation in the West, not then a policy of the Thai government, he disobeyed and started teaching in Britain in the early 1960s (Poonyathiro 2004). A Samatha Trust was formed in 1973 and a national centre founded in 1987. As a lay organization the Trust has no formal links to the sangha, but has strong and frequent contacts with the monastic communities of Britain and Southeast Asia, including chant and meditation. A number of practitioners have taken temporary ordination in Thailand and Sri Lanka. The centre was granted relics of the Buddha by the Thai government and its Buddha figure was commissioned and cast in Thailand, generously donated to the Trust.

Boonman Poonyathiro also teaches a graduated, *samatha* breathing mindfulness practice, aimed at *jhāna*, with insight usually as a culmination of this process, although the form of the practice is occasionally adapted with an insight emphasis. The method has sixteen stages, largely corresponding to the four stages of counting, following, touching and settling described by Buddhaghosa. The instructions of the method have not as yet been made publicly available in detail, mainly because of the emphasis accorded by this school to personal teaching, freshness of contact and suitability in teaching stages to individuals. Information for this paper is derived from personal observation, Bluck's *British Buddhism* (Bluck 2006: 49–64) and publications produced by the Samatha Trust. The instructions for this practice make a clear differentiation between a long and a short breath. Employing Buddhaghosa's and Upatissa's terminology of counting, following, touching and settling, the stages are graduated, and changed by the meditator when he/she is ready. The instructions for the practice take six months to a year to learn. The first stages involves 'breathing the longest comfortable breath without straining' to a count of nine, followed in turn by breathing to account of six, then three, then one as 'the shortest comfortable breath'. These four stages, known as the 'longest of counting', the 'longer of counting', the 'shorter of counting' and the 'shortest of counting', in each case involve 'tracing the sensations down as you are breathing in, from the nose down to the navel, and on the outbreath from the navel back to the nose' (Peter Harvey, quoted in Bluck 2006: 51). Care is taken that there should not be strain in this practice, and that the breaths feel natural and comfortable. The school emphasizes joyful alertness as a feature of the practice, and, in line with its intention to develop the meditations, takes care to ensure the practice retains flow and a good feeling at each stage. The meditator allows the breath to become finer and more subtle, with its flow smoother and more even, so that joy and happiness can develop. At the end of the practice a return to the 'normal' breath, usually somewhere between the longer and the shorter stage in most people, is recommended thus establishing a clear distinction between the seclusion of the meditation and daily life. A general awareness of the breath in daily life is encouraged. This is felt to be appropriate for a practice where *jhāna* is being actively cultivated, and it is important for the meditator to be able to put aside the meditation for the return to daily life. This school places great emphasis on personal teaching and adaptation to the individual. Other articles in newsletters, journals and publications of the Samatha Trust explore the movement

towards a finer appreciation of the breath within the practice, taking joy as the feature that refines the attention and mindfulness. Recent research conducted by Dr Paul Dennison of the Samatha Trust has demonstrated that brainwave patterns of those practicing at certain stages of the meditation, registered on an EEG, undergo dramatic changes (*Samatha* 2011: 23–8).

3. Nyanaponika Thera

Nyanaponika Thera (1901–94) was a German born Southern Buddhist monk, who founded the Buddhist Publication Society in Kandy. He ordained in 1936, and lived at the Island Hermitage, Dodanduwa. Although interned in the war, he worked extensively on translations and practice. Invited by the Burmese council to participate in the sixth Buddhist Council, he decided to do mindfulness training with Ven Mahasi Sayadaw, and subsequently worked extensively on perhaps his most famous book, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*. This has become a standard reference work and authority on mindfulness and practices associated with its cultivation. It emphasizes both the practice of breathing mindfulness and, alongside it, what the author terms ‘the Burmese *Satipaṭṭhāna* method’. This method is increasingly popular today, in varying forms: it would be outside the scope of this discussion to discuss its many varieties, in the popular U Ba Khin and Mahasi Sayadaw schools, so Nyanaponika’s book is taken as one, classic description. It is widely respected, and used, for instance, by those working within the scientific communities to establish definitions of, for instance, mindfulness (eg Brown and Ryan 2003). It describes the practice of breathing mindfulness under the section on body mindfulness, as the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* does, so also employs, as this *sutta* does, the first tetrad, integrating it with other practices the Thera recommends. He does not advise any ‘control’ or intervention in the breath, but says that the movement towards a longer breath will happen naturally:

The length or shortness of the breathing is noticed, but not deliberately regulated. By regular practice, however, a calming equalizing and deepening of the breath will result quite naturally; and the tranquilization and deepening of the breath rhythm will lead to a tranquillization and deepening of the life-rhythm (Nyanaponika 1962: 61).

He says that because of this, the practice is associated with mental and physical health: and that ‘even such a brief and casual application of the mind to the ‘breath-body’ lays the foundation for a very noticeable feeling of well-being, self-sufficient happiness and invulnerable quietude’. (Nyanaponika 1962: 62). He advises an application of a ‘few, conscious, deep and calm respirations before starting any continuous work’. The factors he associates with the practice are concentration and mindfulness, ‘for ordinary as well as higher purposes’. Breath ‘stands on the threshold between the voluntary and the involuntary bodily functions, and thus offers a good opening to extend the scope of conscious control over the body’ (62–3). In accordance with the principles explained in the *Sutta*, he says that it is primarily a *samatha* object, but can be used for insight too, because of its nature of rise and fall. So while he does not teach its *samatha* characteristics, he acknowledges their importance.

In another section he describes how attention to the breathing process is conducted as what he describes as the Burmese *Satipaṭṭhāna* method. After extensive instructions for the sitting posture, moderation in food, and mindfulness practice in daily life, he describes the sitting practice. For this he describes turning one’s attention to the

rise and fall of the abdomen as the breathing is going on, attending to the ‘slight sensation of pressure’ of the breath, not visually observing it. This makes this point of contact the primary object (*mūl’ arammaṇa*) of the practice. Insight then arises naturally, he says, as a result of this attention. But this is not, he says, a variety of mindfulness of breathing: the attention is on the abdomen, and the sensations there. Elaborating on this method as an insight practice, he describes the process of labeling touching-sitting for this purpose, instructions associated with what he terms ‘Bare Insight’ (*sukkha vipassanā*), a method he says develops both concentration and mindfulness, though not *jhāna*. He recommends that for some many, the *jhānas* and calm should be cultivated first, through a method such as *Ānāpānasati*. For others, practicing insight methods, momentary concentration is still needed for the insight to be developed. This can lead afterwards to *jhāna*. So he recommends this ‘insight’ method as being suitable for many: it may produce more immediate results, it arouses confidence, renders the practice of *samatha* more accessible, and is a practical way of developing insight for people with busy lives. It is noteworthy that he does not reject the practice of breathing mindfulness as described in the *sutta*, and indeed recommends it. He rather suggests that the Burmese method he describes and favors may be more suitable for busy people or those discouraged by initial failure in *jhāna* practice. In the section associated with breathing mindfulness itself, and in this one, he carefully notes the need for the development of *jhāna*, which he translates as ‘absorption’, for a full salvific path.

As has been demonstrated, all these approaches, although slightly varied in practicalities, feature developments validated within the context of the initial instructions and commentarial advice. These breathing mindfulness schools are adaptive in practice: the word ‘suitable’ is often found in instructions in all these traditions, a reflection of the sense of flexibility to individual need that still characterizes the tradition to this day. All recommend some awareness of the breath and body in a generalized sense during daily activities. In traditionally based Buddhist schools, chanting, and other practices, such as loving kindness, are also recommended, as supports and accompaniments to the practice of breathing mindfulness. This multiplicity has, of course, canonical precedent (see eg Ud 34–7).

Indeed despite distinct variation within the first tetrad, the three methods share more affinities than differences. As indicated, the first three tetrads of the practice, concerned with body, feelings and *citta*, are sometimes associated with *samatha* and the last, of *dhammas*, with *vipassanā*. The interplay between the seven factors of awakening, however, that include both investigation of *dhammas*, associated with wisdom, and joy and tranquility, associated with calm, validates a potential slant towards either approach for any instruction within the *sutta*. Diversity of orientation may be seen. Buddhadhāsa proposes simply exploring closely the difference between the long and short breaths, advising changing to a shorter breath for the second instruction and introducing investigation into his calm meditation. The primarily *samatha* based school, taught by Boonman Poonyathiro, perhaps more formally differentiates between ‘long’ and the ‘short’ breaths within the practice, as described in the *sutta*. As seen through its instruction to return to ‘normal’ breathing at the end, the normal or ‘middle’ length breath is taken as the basis for daily life outside practice. It should be noted a sense of good humor and joy is also felt to be particularly important within this tradition for the practice to develop well and without strain. Background awareness of the breath in the day is encouraged. Nyanaponika Thera, in contrast to these two, makes no overt recommendation to influence the length of the breath through conscious decision, and indeed appears to discourage it at first, a feature perhaps vindicated by the use of the present tense rather than the future in the first two instructions as given in the canon,

though Buddhadhāsa, in teaching his method, notes that the breath becomes longer as the mind relaxes. The simile of the wood-turner is interesting in the light of these approaches: does the wood turner choose whether to do a long or a short turn? The complexity of the question in a practice context, where slightly different aims color different approaches, is worth bearing in mind. It should be noted that most breathing mindfulness schools emphasize contact with the teacher, as implied by the great detail with which the context of the practice is given in AS, and suitability to individual, also in line with canonical and commentarial recommendations. Most such teachers advocate a great deal about awareness of the breath, and the body, in daily life (Dhammasami 1999).

The meditation, in various forms, has proved particularly popular in non-Buddhist areas, such as the North Atlantic regions, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Its adaptations cannot be considered in detail here and are far-ranging. On one side are the esoteric teachings on the exploration of the breath through *yantra* and traditional Cambodian/Siamese methods (Dennison 1996, 1997). In these, the practice has become aligned with local alchemical ritual, chant and narrative, with a rich mythology of the five-branched fig tree and its crystal spheres. This is linked to the experience of the breath 'in the body' and devotion to the Triple Gem (see Bizot 1976; Dennison 1996, 1997, Harris 2005: 100ff). Another teacher, Ajahn Lee Dhammadhāro (1907–61), also used mantra, with the syllables 'bu' and 'ddho', employed alongside consciously varied long and short breaths. This, of course, links the first two instructions of AS to recollection of the Buddha practices, other traditional meditations (Dhammadhāro 2006). At the other end of the spectrum, a modified form of the practice features prominently in clinical therapeutic contexts in the West. Instructions based on those of early breathing mindfulness techniques are expressly used, in the case, for instance, of Mark Williams' Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy program in Oxford, initially closely aligned to the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies (Williams and Penman 2011). MBCT exponents acknowledged their debt to Buddhism and indeed have derived the word 'mindfulness' from Southern Buddhist contexts. But yet another development can be seen in, for instance, the popularity of the secular ten-minute 'mindfulness' exercise given on a British Mental Health Foundation's podcast, which, without any reference to Buddhism, draws heavily on Buddhist technique and doctrine in its instructions. The practitioner is asked to sit comfortably, with a self supporting spine, so that the posture 'embodies a sense of dignity, of taking a stand, of being awake, aware, and in touch with this moment'. The breath is examined, though without any sense of its length, moving throughout the body. The exercises explore the nature of sensations present 'in this moment' and awareness of 'the body as a whole'. Then a more generalized awareness is encouraged. The words 'Buddhism' or 'Buddhist' are not used, but the tenor of the instructions, the initial recommendations for posture, closely kin to those given in AS, the encouragement of questioning of features of the breath, and the continuing emphasis on awareness, up to the final bell that ends the podcast, follow the pattern of much Buddhist teaching, both in text and in practice.⁷

So why is the practice so popular? The paper has considered factors that may have contributed to this, and indicated the strength of the commentarial and canonical textual tradition, as supports to a perhaps inherent adaptability and susceptibility to variation evident from the earliest times in breathing mindfulness methods. The breath can be an object of calm and/or insight, can be used to arouse mindfulness in daily life, and needs

⁷ Mental Health Foundation:

<http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/content/assets/audio/mindfulness-10-mins.mp3>

no prior knowledge of any particular tradition or an object to carry around. Buddhaghosa emphasizes that it is the only object requiring touch, rather than sight or sound, in the early stages, perhaps also an inherently ‘transportable’ feature. It is taught by the schools discussed here with a continuation of the Southern Buddhist emphasis on teacher contact, suitability to the individual and a friendly basis in communal practice. It is perhaps these last features that have sustained the continued popularity of the practice in the three methods in Southeast Asia, and, in recent times, in the West. An inherent capacity to accommodate elements of both *vipassanā* and *samatha*, at each stage of path, articulated within AS and subsequent commentarial and explanatory material, have contributed to a great richness of technique, theory and teaching in modern breathing mindfulness based schools. From the practitioner’s point of view, the friendly atmosphere in which the Buddha gives the basic instructions in AS, the centrality of personal contact with the teacher (*kalyāṇimitta*), and a sense of a carefully graduated path, are perhaps just as important.

Abbreviations:

AS = *Ānāpānasati Sutta* M: *sutta* 118.

A *Aṅguttaranikāya*.

D *Dīghanikāya*.

DhS *Dhammasaṅgani*.

M *Majjhimanikāya*.

Nidd *Niddesa*.

Patis *Paṭisambhidāmagga*.

PF *Path to Freedom*. Translation of *Vimuttimaggā* by Ehara et al., an early commentary on meditation.

S *Samyuttanikāya*.

Sn *Suttanipāta*.

Ud *Udāna*.

Vism *Visuddhimaggā*. Cited according to the method used in the translation by Ñānamoli.

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