

The Sutra on Mindful Breathing (810)

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Chinese translated from Sanskrit by Gunabhadra, A.D. 435-443 (劉宋 Liu Song period)

Translated from Chinese by Thich Nhat Hanh

This is what I have heard at a time when the Buddha was residing in the Satrari forest, on the bank of the Vajrapakuma river¹. At this time, the Venerable Ananda was staying alone in a quiet place (not far from where the Buddha was). While in meditation, he happened to have this thought:

“There must be a practice which, if applied consistently, will bring the practice of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness to completion; when the practice of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness is brought to completion, it will bring the practice of the Seven Factors of Liberation to completion; and when the practice of the Seven Factors of Liberation is brought to completion, it will in turn bring the practice of Knowledge and Emancipation to completion.”

Having come out of his meditation, the Venerable Ananda went to the Buddha. After having paid respect to the Teacher, the Venerable Ananda told the Buddha:

“World-Honored One, when I was alone in a quiet place practicing meditation, I happened to have this thought: ‘There must be a practice which, if applied consistently, will bring the practice of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness to completion; when the practice of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness is brought to completion, it will bring the practice of the Seven Factors of Liberation to completion; and when the practice of the Seven Factors of Liberation is brought to completion, it will in turn bring the practice of Knowledge and Emancipation to completion.’ World-Honored One, please tell me if such a practice exists.”

The Buddha told Ananda:

“Yes, there is such a practice. This practice, if applied consistently, will bring completion to the practice of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, followed by the practice of the Seven Factors of Liberation and then the practice of Knowledge and Emancipation. What is this practice? It is the practice of Mindful Breathing. If the practice of Mindful Breathing is applied consistently, the practice of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness will be brought to completion; when the practice of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness is brought to completion, the practice of the Seven Factors of Liberation will be brought to completion; and when the practice of the Seven Factors of Liberation is brought to completion, the practice of Knowledge and Emancipation will also be brought to completion. How is this so?

¹ “Satrari” (薩羅梨) and “Vajrapakuma” (金剛跋求摩) are attempts by the translator to restore the Sanskrit place names from the Chinese transcription.

“A Bhikṣu living in a village or a town...²”

“Ananda, this is how a noble disciple should proceed:

1. “While practicing breathing in, he is aware that he is breathing in.
While practicing breathing out, he is aware that he is breathing out.
2. “While practicing breathing in a long or short in-breath, he is aware that he is breathing in a long or short in-breath.
While practicing breathing out a long or short out-breath, he is aware that he is breathing out a long or short out-breath.
3. “While practicing breathing in, he is aware of his whole body.
While practicing breathing out, he is aware of his whole body.
4. “While practicing breathing in, he allows his whole body to relax.
While practicing breathing out, he allows his whole body to relax.

“During this time the noble disciple practices contemplating the body in the body. If the object of contemplation is another body, he will compare it with his own body and practice accordingly.

5. “While practicing breathing in, she experiences the feeling of joy.
While practicing breathing out, she experiences the feeling of joy.
6. “While practicing breathing in, she experiences the feeling of happiness.
While practicing breathing out, she experiences the feeling of happiness.
7. “While practicing breathing in, she is aware of the mental formation (that is there).
“While practicing breathing out, she is aware of the mental formation (that is there).
8. “While practicing breathing in, she calms the mental formation (that is there).
“While practicing breathing out, she calms the mental formation (that is there).

“During this time the noble disciple practices contemplating the feelings in the feelings. If the object of contemplation is a feeling that is not hers, she will compare it with her own feelings and practice accordingly.

9. “While practicing breathing in, he is aware of his mind.
While practicing breathing out, he is aware of his mind.
10. “While practicing breathing in, he gladdens his mind.
While practicing breathing out, he gladdens his mind.
11. “While practicing breathing in, he concentrates his mind.
While practicing breathing out, he concentrates his mind.
12. “While practicing breathing in, he liberates his mind.
While practicing breathing out, he liberates his mind.

“During this time the noble disciple practices contemplating the mind in the mind. If the object of contemplation is a mind other than his, he will compare it with his own mind and practice accordingly.

² See section marked between ** in sutra 803.

13. “While practicing breathing in, she contemplates impermanence.
While practicing breathing out, she contemplates impermanence.
14. “While practicing breathing in, she contemplates letting go.
While practicing breathing out, she contemplates letting go.
15. “While practicing breathing in, she contemplates non-desire.
While practicing breathing out, she contemplates non-desire.
16. “While practicing breathing in, she contemplates cessation.
While practicing breathing out, she contemplates cessation.

“During this time the noble disciple practices contemplating the dharms in the dharms. If the object of contemplation is not an object of her own mind, she will compare it with the object of her own mind and practice accordingly.

“That is how the practice of Mindful Breathing helps bring the practice of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness to completion.”

The Venerable Ananda then asked the Buddha:

“That is how the practice of Mindful Breathing brings about the completion of the practice of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. How then, does the practice of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness bring about the completion of the practice of the Seven Factors of Liberation?”

The Buddha answered:

“While the bhikṣu dwells in the contemplation of the body in the body, always maintaining his mindfulness alive, he skillfully cultivates the factor of liberation called Mindfulness. When the factor of liberation called Mindfulness is brought to completion, the bhikṣu will have the capacity to practice investigating the nature of the dharms. Skillfully, he practices the factor of liberation called Investigation. When the factor of liberation called Investigation is brought to completion, he acquires Energy. Skillfully, he practices the factor of liberation called Energy. When the factor of liberation called Energy is brought to completion, his mind and body become joyful. Skillfully, he practices the factor of liberation called Joy. When the factor of liberation called Joy is brought to completion, his mind and body become tranquil. Skillfully, practicing the factor of liberation called Tranquility, he brings the factor of liberation called Tranquility to completion. When the factor of liberation called Tranquility has come to completion, he acquires Concentration. Skillfully practicing the factor of liberation called Concentration; he brings the factor of liberation called Concentration to completion. When the factor of liberation called Concentration has come to completion, he acquires Equanimity. Skillfully practicing the factor of liberation called Equanimity, he brings the factor of liberation called Equanimity to completion. In very much the same way, a bhikṣu dwells in the contemplation of the feelings in the feelings, the mind in the mind, and the dharms in the dharms. This is how the practice of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness brings to completion the practice of the Seven Factors of Liberation.”

The Venerable Ananda asked:

“World-Honored One, if that is how the practice of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness brings to completion the practice of the Seven Factors of Liberation, then how does the practice of the Seven Factors of Liberation bring to completion the practice of Knowledge and Emancipation?”

The Buddha replied:

“While practicing the factor of liberation called Mindfulness, which brings about non-worldliness, non-desire, cessation, and the orientation toward equanimity, and while practicing the other factors of liberation called Investigation, Energy, Joy, Tranquility, Concentration and Equanimity, which gives rise to non-worldliness, non-desire, cessation, and the orientation toward equanimity and brings them to completion, the bhikṣu acquires Knowledge and Emancipation. Ananda! All practices are linked to each other, all practices rely on each other and all practices interpenetrate one another. Among the thirteen practices mentioned above, one practice serves as the support for another practice; they gradually help bring each other to completion.”

After the Buddha had finished his teaching, the Venerable Ananda, having listened to the Buddha, happily put the teachings into practice.