



EVAM ME SUTTAM This is how I heard it

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Week four: Ānāpānasati Sutta

Introduction

We have examined the oral nature of the *dhamma*, seeing how *dhamma* is structured as a sophisticated and complex database held within the mind and expressed in body, speech and mind. This database is held together by a network of conditional relationships - or rather, the database, and the *dhamma*, is a network of conditional relationships. This structure informs both the texts that speak about meditation practices, and the practices themselves.

Last week we looked at how this network helps us to read *suttas* that examine the path of practice. The Nikāyas contain two *suttas* on meditation practice that are generally agreed on within the Theravāda to be foundational, the root (*mūla*) texts of meditation practice. These are Ānāpānasati Sutta and Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. Tonight we will examine Ānāpānasati Sutta, and see how it is read by different communities. We will look at the orthodox Theravāda approach to the *sutta*, as contained in the commentary Papañcasūdanī and the Visuddhimagga, both composed by Bhaddantācariya Buddhaghosa in the fifth century AD. We will also look at two modern approaches to this *sutta*, one by the reformist Theravāda monk Ajahn Buddhadasa, and one by the Mahāyāna monk Thich Nhat Hanh. But first we will examine the *sutta* to see if we can get some sense of it by understanding its oral structure.

Ānāpānasati Sutta Attention to breathing (M118)

Introduction

This is how I heard it (*evam me suttaṃ*). Once the Blessed One was living at Sāvattihī in the Eastern Park, in the Palace of Migāra's Mother, together with many very well-known elder students - Venerable Sāriputta, Venerable Mahā-Moggallāna, Venerable Mahā Kassapa, Venerable Mahā-Kaccāna, Venerable Mahā-Koṭṭhita, Venerable Mahā-Kappina, Venerable Mahā-Cunda, Venerable Anuruddha, Venerable Revata, Venerable Ānanda, and other very well-known elder students.

At that time elder bhikkhus had been teaching and instructing new bhikkhus. Some elder bhikkhus had been teaching and instructing ten new bhikkhus, some elder bhikkhus had been teaching and instructing twenty ... thirty ... forty new bhikkhus. And the new bhikkhus, taught and instructed by the elder bhikkhus, attained successive stages of high distinction.

At that time - the Uposatha day of the fifteenth, on the full-moon night of the Pavāraṇā ceremony - the Blessed One was seated in the open surrounded by the community of bhikkhus. Then, surveying the silent community of bhikkhus, he said to them:

“Bhikkhus, I am content with this progress. My mind is content with this progress. So arouse still more energy to attain the unattained, to achieve the unachieved, to realise the unrealised. I shall wait here at Sāvattḥī for the Komudī full moon of the fourth month.”

The bhikkhus of the countryside heard: “The Blessed One will wait there at Sāvattḥī for the Komudī full moon of the fourth month.” And the bhikkhus of the countryside left in due course for Sāvattḥī to see the Blessed One.

And elder bhikkhus still more intensively taught and instructed new bhikkhus. Some elder bhikkhus taught and instructed ten new bhikkhus, some elder bhikkhus taught and instructed twenty ... thirty ... forty new bhikkhus. And the new bhikkhus, taught and instructed by the elder bhikkhus, attained successive stages of high distinction.

At that time - the Uposatha day of the fifteenth, the full-moon night of the Komudī full moon of the fourth month - the Blessed One was seated in the open surrounded by the community of bhikkhus. Then, surveying the silent community of bhikkhus, he said to them:

“Bhikkhus, this assembly is free from prattle, this assembly is free from chatter. It consists purely of heartwood. Such is this community of bhikkhus, such is this assembly. Such an assembly as is worthy of gifts, worthy of hospitality, worthy of offerings, worthy of respectful greetings, an incomparable field of auspicious action for the world - such is this community of bhikkhus, such is this assembly. Such an assembly that a small gift given to it becomes great and a great gift greater - such is this community of bhikkhus, such is this assembly. Such an assembly as is rare for the world to see - such is this community of bhikkhus, such is this assembly. Such an assembly as would be worth journeying many *yojanas* with a travel-bag to see - such is this community of bhikkhus, such is this assembly.

“In this community there are bhikkhus who are *arahants* with taints destroyed, who have lived the spiritual life, done what had to be done, laid down the burden, reached the true goal, destroyed the shackles of becoming, and are maturely liberated through final knowledge. There are such bhikkhus in this community.

“In this community there are bhikkhus who, with the destruction of the five lower fetters, are due to reappear spontaneously [in the pure abodes] and there attain final *nibbāna*, without ever returning from that world. There are such bhikkhus in this community.

“In this community there are bhikkhus who, with the destruction of three fetters and with the attenuation of lust, hate, and delusion, are once-returners, returning once to this world to make an end of suffering. There are such bhikkhus in this community.

“In this community there are bhikkhus who, with the destruction of the three fetters, are stream-enterers, no longer subject to perdition, bound [for deliverance], headed for awakening. There are such bhikkhus in this community.

“In this community there are bhikkhus who live devoted to the development of the four domains of attention. There are such bhikkhus in this community. In this community there are bhikkhus who live devoted to the development of the four right kinds of striving ... of the four bases for spiritual power ... of the five faculties ... of the five powers ... of the seven factors of awakening ... of the noble eightfold path. There are such bhikkhus in this community.

“In this community there are bhikkhus who live devoted to the cultivation of love ... the cultivation of compassion ... the cultivation of joy ... the cultivation of equanimity ... the meditation on foulness ... the perception of impermanence. There are such bhikkhus in this community. In this community there are bhikkhus who live devoted to the cultivation of attention to breathing.

Attention to breathing

“Bhikkhus, attention to breathing, cultivated and frequently practised, gives great fruit and great benefit. Attention to breathing, cultivated and frequently practised, matures (*paripūreti*) the four domains of attention. The four domains of attention, cultivated and frequently practised, mature the seven factors of awakening. The seven factors of awakening, cultivated and frequently practised, mature knowledge and deliverance (*viññā-vimutti*).

“And how is attention to breathing cultivated and frequently practised, so that it gives great fruit and great benefit?

“Here a bhikkhu goes into a forest, or to the root of a tree, or to an empty place, sits down, crosses his legs, straightens his back, and establishes his attention. Attentively he breathes in, attentively he breathes out.

[First tetrad = body] [1] “Breathing in a *long breath*, he knows (*pañānati*) he is breathing in a long breath; breathing out a long breath, he knows he is breathing out a long breath. [2] Breathing in a *short breath*, he knows he is breathing in a short breath; breathing out a short breath, he knows he is breathing out a short breath. [3] “He trains himself to breathe in *experiencing* (*paṭisaṃvedī*) the *whole body* (*sabba kāya*); he trains himself to breathe out experiencing the whole body. (4) He trains himself to breathe in *calming the body formation* (*kāya-saṅkhāra*); he trains himself to breathe out calming the body formation.

[Second tetrad = feelings] [5] “He trains himself to breathe in *experiencing rapture* (*pīti*); he trains himself to breathe out experiencing rapture. [6] He trains himself to breathe in *experiencing happiness* (*sukha*); he trains himself to breathe out experiencing happiness. [7] He trains himself to breathe in *experiencing the mind formation* (*citta-saṅkhāra*); he trains himself to breathe out experiencing the mind formation. [8] He trains himself to breathe in *calming the mind formation*; he trains himself to breathe out calming the mind formation.

[Third tetrad] [9] “He trains himself to breathe in *experiencing the mind* (*citta*); he trains himself to breathe out experiencing the mind. [10] He trains himself to breathe in *gladdening the mind*; he trains himself to breathe out gladdening the mind. [11] He trains himself to breathe in *concentrating the mind*; he trains himself to breathe out concentrating the mind. [12] He trains himself to breathe in *liberating the mind*; he trains himself to breathe out liberating the mind.

[Fourth tetrad] [13] “He trains himself to breathe in *contemplating impermanence* (*anicca-anupassī*); he trains himself to breathe out contemplating impermanence. [14] He trains himself to breathe in *contemplating fading away* (*virāga-anupassī*); he trains himself to breathe out contemplating fading away. [15] He trains himself to breathe in *contemplating cessation* (*nirodha-anupassī*); he trains himself to breathe out contemplating cessation. [16] He trains himself to breathe in *contemplating letting go* (*paṭinissagga-anupassī*); he trains himself to breathe out contemplating letting go.

“This is how attention to breathing is cultivated and frequently practised, so that it gives great fruit and great benefit.

The four domains of attention

“And how, bhikkhus, does attention to breathing, cultivated and frequently practised, mature the four domains of attention?

[Contemplation of body:] “When a bhikkhu, breathing in a long breath, knows he is breathing in a long breath; or breathing out a long breath, knows he is breathing out a long breath; or breathing in a short breath, knows he is breathing in a short breath; or breathing out a short breath, knows

he is breathing out a short breath; or trains himself to breathe in experiencing the whole body; or trains himself to breathe out experiencing the whole body; or trains himself to breathe in calming the body formation; or trains himself to breathe out calming the body formation then, at that time, surrendering desire and grief regarding the world he lives contemplating body as body, ardent, clearly understanding and attentive. *This, I say, is a body among bodies, namely, inhalation and exhalation.* This is why then, at that time, surrendering desire and grief regarding the world, he lives contemplating body as body, ardent, clearly understanding and attentive.

[Contemplation of feelings] “When a bhikkhu trains himself to breathe in experiencing rapture; or trains himself to breathe out experiencing rapture; or trains himself to breathe in experiencing happiness; or trains himself to breathe out experiencing happiness; or trains himself to breathe in experiencing the mind formation; or trains himself to breathe out experiencing the mind formation; or trains himself to breathe in calming the mind formation; or trains himself to breathe out calming the mind formation then, at that time, surrendering desire and grief regarding the world he lives contemplating feelings as feelings, ardent, clearly understanding and attentive. *This, I say, is a feeling among feelings, namely, paying close attention (sādhukaṃ manasikāraṃ) to inhalation and exhalation.* This is why then, at that time, surrendering desire and grief regarding the world, he lives contemplating feelings as feelings, ardent, clearly understanding and attentive.

[Contemplation of mind] “When a bhikkhu trains himself to breathe in experiencing the mind; or trains himself to breathe out experiencing the mind; or trains himself to breathe in gladdening the mind; or trains himself to breathe out gladdening the mind; or trains himself to breathe in concentrating the mind; or trains himself to breathe out concentrating the mind; or trains himself to breathe in liberating the mind; or trains himself to breathe out liberating the mind then, at that time, surrendering desire and grief regarding the world he lives contemplating mind as mind, ardent, clearly understanding and attentive. *I do not say that one who is forgetful, who is not clearly understanding, develops attention to breathing.* This is why then, at that time, surrendering desire and grief regarding the world, he lives contemplating mind as mind, ardent, clearly understanding and attentive.

[Contemplation of phenomena] “When a bhikkhu trains himself to breathe in contemplating impermanence; or trains himself to breathe out contemplating impermanence; or trains himself to breathe in contemplating fading away; or trains himself to breathe out contemplating fading away; or trains himself to breathe in contemplating cessation; or trains himself to breathe out contemplating cessation; or trains himself to breathe in contemplating letting go; or trains himself to breathe out contemplating letting go then, at that time, surrendering desire and grief regarding the world he lives contemplating phenomena as phenomena, ardent, clearly understanding and attentive. *Having seen with wisdom the surrender of desire and grief regarding the world, he examines closely with equanimity (sādhukaṃ ajjhupekkhitā hoti).* This is why then, at that time, surrendering desire and grief regarding the world, he lives contemplating phenomena as phenomena, ardent, clearly understanding and attentive.

“This is how attention to breathing, cultivated and frequently practised, matures the four domains of attention.

The seven factors of awakening

“And how do the four domains of attention, cultivated and frequently practised, mature the seven factors of awakening?

[Awakening factors in contemplation of body] “When a bhikkhu, surrendering desire and grief regarding the world, lives contemplating body as body, ardent, clearly understanding and attentive then, at that time, continuous attention (*asammutṭha sati*) is established within him. When

continuous attention is established in a bhikkhu then, at that time, the attention awakening factor (*sati sambojjhaṅga*) is aroused within him. He cultivates it, and being cultivated it comes to maturity.

“Living thus attentive (*tathā-sata*), he investigates and examines this phenomenon with understanding, undertaking a full investigation into it. When a bhikkhu, living thus attentive, investigates and examines this phenomenon with understanding then, at that time, the investigation-of-phenomena awakening factor (*dhamma-vicaya sambojjhaṅga*) is aroused within him. He cultivates it, and being cultivated it comes to maturity.

“In one who investigates and examines a phenomenon with understanding, undertaking a full investigation into it, vigorous energy (*asallīna viriya*) is aroused. When vigorous energy is aroused in a bhikkhu who investigates and examines a phenomenon with understanding, undertaking a full investigation into it then, at that time, the energy awakening factor (*viriya sambojjhaṅga*) is aroused within him. He cultivates it, and being cultivated it comes to maturity.

“In one who has aroused energy, nonsensual rapture (*nirāmisā pīti*) arises. When nonsensual rapture arises in a bhikkhu who has aroused energy then, at that time, the rapture awakening factor (*pīti sambojjhaṅga*) is aroused within him. He cultivates it, and being cultivated it comes to maturity.

“In one who is rapturous, body and mind calm down (*kāyo pi passambhati cittaṃ pi passambhati*). When body and mind calm down in a bhikkhu who is rapturous then, at that time, the tranquillity awakening factor (*passaddhi sambojjhaṅga*) is aroused within him. He cultivates it, and being cultivated it comes to maturity.

“In one whose body is tranquil and who feels pleasure, the mind becomes concentrated. When the mind becomes concentrated in a bhikkhu whose body is tranquil and who feels pleasure then, at that time, the concentration awakening factor (*samādhi sambojjhaṅga*) is aroused within him. He cultivates it, and being cultivated it comes to maturity.

“He examines closely with equanimity the mind thus concentrated. When a bhikkhu examines closely with equanimity the mind thus concentrated then, at that time, the equanimity awakening factor (*upekkhā sambojjhaṅga*) is aroused within him. He cultivates it, and being cultivated it comes to maturity.

[Awakening factors in contemplation of feelings] “Bhikkhus, when a bhikkhu, surrendering desire and grief regarding the world, lives contemplating feelings as feelings, ardent, clearly understanding and attentive then, at that time, the attention awakening factor is aroused within him ... the investigation-of-phenomena awakening factor is aroused within him ... the energy awakening factor is aroused within him ... the rapture awakening factor is aroused within him ... the tranquillity awakening factor is aroused within him ... the concentration awakening factor is aroused within him ... the equanimity awakening factor is aroused within him. He cultivates it, and being cultivated it comes to maturity.

[Awakening factors in contemplation of mind] “Bhikkhus, when a bhikkhu, surrendering desire and grief regarding the world, lives contemplating mind as mind, ardent, clearly understanding and attentive then, at that time, the attention awakening factor is aroused within him ... the investigation-of-phenomena awakening factor is aroused within him ... the energy awakening factor is aroused within him ... the rapture awakening factor is aroused within him ... the tranquillity awakening factor is aroused within him ... the concentration awakening factor is aroused within him ... the equanimity awakening factor is aroused within him. He cultivates it, and being cultivated it comes to maturity.

[Awakening factors in contemplation of phenomena] “Bhikkhus, when a bhikkhu, surrendering desire and grief regarding the world, lives contemplating phenomena as phenomena, ardent, clearly understanding and attentive then, at that time, the attention awakening factor is aroused within him ... the investigation-of-phenomena awakening factor is aroused within him ... the energy awakening factor is aroused within him ... the rapture awakening factor is aroused within him ... the tranquillity awakening factor is aroused within him ... the concentration awakening factor is aroused within him ... the equanimity awakening factor is aroused within him. He cultivates it, and being cultivated it comes to maturity.

“This is how the four domains of attention, cultivated and frequently practised, mature the seven awakening factors.

Maturity of knowledge and deliverance

“And how, bhikkhus, do the seven factors of awakening, cultivated and frequently practised, mature knowledge and deliverance?”

“Here a bhikkhu develops the attention awakening factor, which is supported by seclusion, fading away and cessation, and which ripens in letting go. He develops the investigation-of-phenomena awakening factor ... the energy awakening factor ... the rapture awakening factor ... the tranquillity awakening factor ... the concentration awakening factor ... the equanimity awakening factor, which is supported by seclusion, fading away, and cessation, and ripens in letting go.

“Bhikkhus, that is how the seven factors of awakening, cultivated and frequently practised, mature knowledge and deliverance.”

This is what the Blessed One said. The bhikkhus were satisfied and delighted in the Blessed One’s words.

Comment

Setting

Looking at this *sutta*, we are immediately struck by the size of the introductory section, where the context for the teaching is set. The Buddha is engaged in teaching a three month retreat, coinciding with the *vassa* or rainy season. His most senior and famous students, themselves teachers in their own right, are attending the retreat, each teaching other students. At the end of the three months he praises his community for their progress in meditation, and extends the retreat for another month. Bhikkhus from the surrounding areas, hearing of this opportunity, come to join in, and numbers swell. Our *sutta* is the teaching given on the final night of the retreat.

A central theme of the *sutta* is that of progress, a process of maturity, fulfilment or completion (*paripunnatā*) in the practice. Everyone is there, from the *arahants* (“worthy ones;” those fully awakened) to the most junior students, and all students are “successively achieving stages of high distinction.” So we can see that the diachronic aspect of the practice - progress over time - is being emphasised. The Buddha begins his discourse by saying that *ānāpānasati* matures (*paripūreti*) the four domains of attention, which in turn mature the seven factors of awakening, which in turn mature knowledge and deliverance, the culmination of the path. The *sutta* seeks to show how different aspects of the practice are developed and interconnected, in a network of both diachronic and synchronic relationships.

The Buddha acknowledges the many practices that people in this assembly are working on - the four domains of attention; the four right kinds of striving; the four bases for spiritual power; the

five faculties; the five powers; the seven factors of awakening; the noble eightfold path; the cultivation of love; the cultivation of compassion; the cultivation of joy; the cultivation of equanimity; the meditation on foulness; and the perception of impermanence. But he singles out attention to breathing (*ānāpānasati*) for special mention. Why? What does this tell us about the relationship of *ānāpānasati* to these other practices? Clearly both Ajahn Buddhadasa and Thich Nhat Hanh see *ānāpānasati* as the central Buddhist practice, the base from which all other practices can be engaged.

The four tetrads

The heart of the discourse is contained in the four tetrads, four groups of four, giving sixteen aspects of *ānāpānasati*. We have a familiar structure of lists, and relationships between lists, and here the lists seem particularly tidy. The Buddha says that *ānāpānasati* matures the four domains of attention (*satipaṭṭhānas*), and the basic structure of the *sutta* seems to be the interconnection between the tetrads of *ānāpānasati* and the four domains of attention. Each tetrad corresponds to one domain of attention; and as the tetrads indicate the meditator's progression over time, so there is an implication that the practice of the four domains of attention also involves a linear progression over time.

The first tetrad, which corresponds to the contemplation of the body in *satipaṭṭhāna* practice, involves: [1] breathing in/out a long breath; [2] breathing in/out a short breath; [3] breathing in/out experiencing the whole body (*sabba kāya*); and [4] breathing in/out calming the body formation (*kāya-saṅkhāra*). The second tetrad, which corresponds to the contemplation of feelings, involves: [5] breathing in/out experiencing rapture (*pīti*) [6] breathing in/out experiencing happiness (*sukha*); [7] breathing in/out experiencing the mind formation (*citta-saṅkhāra*); and [8] breathing in/out calming the mind formation. The third tetrad, which corresponds to the contemplation of mind, involves: [9] breathing in/out experiencing the mind (*citta*); [10] breathing in/out gladdening the mind; [11] breathing in/out concentrating the mind; and [12] breathing in/out liberating the mind. The fourth tetrad, which corresponds to the contemplation of phenomena, involves: [13] breathing in/out contemplating impermanence (*anicca-anupassī*); [14] breathing in/out contemplating fading away (*virāga-anupassī*); [15] breathing in/out contemplating cessation (*nirodha-anupassī*); and [16] breathing in/out contemplating letting go (*paṭinissagga-anupassī*).

This is the heart of the discourse, and it occupies a very small proportion of it. It also contains a familiar structure. An apparently linear, diachronic progression from one to sixteen is cross-sectioned by a synchronic link with the four domains of attention; with the additional implication that, if the sixteen aspects of *ānāpānasati* are diachronic, then perhaps the four domains of attention are also. This structure is continued through the *sutta*, as the sixteen aspects mature the four domains of attention, the four domains of attention mature the seven factors of awakening, and the seven factors of awakening mature knowledge and deliverance. With knowledge and deliverance, the path is complete.

The orthodox Theravāda reading

The practice of *ānāpānasati* is of central importance to the Theravāda, so much so that the commentary begins by pointing out that this practice "is foremost among the various meditation subjects for all the buddhas." (Ñāṇamoli: 17) Theravāda commentaries take for granted both that this practice is the one cultivated by all the buddhas, and that it involves developing first serenity (*samatha*) by means of the *jhānas* (absorptions), and then insight (*vipassanā*). Further, it assumes (although this is nowhere stated in the *sutta*), that when one attends to breathing, one does so specifically at the point where the breath first enters and last leaves the body - that is, at the rim of

the nostrils and the upper lip. In orthodox Theravāda, to watch the breath means to watch it at that specific place and no other.

The first tetrad involves watching the breath in terms of its length (long or short), but not making any attempt to control its length; just watching it at the nose tip. “Experiencing the whole body” is read as referring to the “body of breath” - focusing on the beginning, middle and end of the breath as it enters and leaves the body. The “body formation” (*kāya-saṅkhāra*) is the breathing itself (see M44), so “calming the body formation” is simply calming the breath. Since the practice is serenity, the breath calms down and becomes so subtle that it seems to disappear; and as *jhāna* develops it becomes progressively still more subtle. This fourth aspect is the entry into *jhāna*. At this point the sign (*nimitta*) arises. The breath disappears and is replaced by a percept, which may be visual or tactile, which then becomes the meditation object.

The second tetrad, which focuses on feelings, assumes the experience of serenity absorption (*samatha jhāna*), and can be read as either pure serenity or insight based on serenity. Reading it as pure serenity, the rapture (*pīti*) and happiness (*sukha*) of aspects five and six are *jhāna* factors, listed in order of subtlety. So a progression through the four *jhānas* is being implied. *Pīti* characterises the first two *jhānas*; *sukha* characterises the third. The “mind formation” (*citta-saṅkhāra*) of aspects seven and eight are perception (*saññā*) and feeling (*vedanā*) (again see M44), and “calming the mind formation” is read as referring to attainment of the fourth *jhāna*. Reading this tetrad as referring to insight (*vipassanā*) based on absorption, the meditation objects here are the *jhāna* factors; making the meditating mind itself the object implies *vipassanā*. But the form of *vipassanā* here is quite specific: it is *vipassanā* based on *jhāna*, not *vipassanā* that bypasses *jhāna*. So this would exclude practices taught by the Mahāsī tradition and the Goenka tradition that claim the one can attain insight without first experiencing *jhāna*.

The third tetrad, which focuses on mind (*citta*), also assumes the experience of serenity absorption, and can be read as either pure serenity or as insight based on serenity. “Experiencing the mind” is read as experiencing the mind in the four *jhānas*; “gladdening the mind” is read as the experience of rapture within the *jhānas*; “concentrating the mind” is read as the *jhānas* themselves; and “liberating the mind” is read as liberating the mind from the hindrances that block *jhāna* attainment, or as liberating the mind from the lower, and therefore grosser, *jhāna* factors, as the practitioner progresses through them. However, as with the second tetrad, this one can also be read as referring to serenity-based insight, as the practitioner turns her attention to the mind which is in *jhāna*. So “concentrating the mind” would refer to the momentary concentration (*khaṇika samādhi*) which characterises insight practice; and “liberating the mind” would refer to liberating the mind from delusion by progressing through the insight knowledges (*vipassanā ñāṇa*).

The tradition sees the fourth tetrad, which focuses on phenomena (*dhammas*), as unambiguously referring to insight - but with the foundation of the *jhānas* already established. “Contemplating impermanence” (*anicca-anupassī*) is pure insight, and entails “contemplating fading away” (*virāga-anupassī*) and “contemplating cessation” (*nirodha-anupassī*), both of which involve seeing the ending or dissolution of phenomena. “Contemplating letting go” (*paṭinissagga-anupassī*) involves abandoning defilements (*kilesa*) and entering *nibbāna*.

The section on the four domains of attention that follows the tetrads reads the domains consistently with this emphasis on insight based on serenity. Regarding the body, the Buddha says: “This, I say, is a body among bodies, namely, inhalation and exhalation.” The breath is an aspect of physical experience, so to contemplate only the breath is to complete or mature the contemplation of body. Regarding feelings, the Buddha says: “This, I say, is a feeling among feelings, namely, paying close attention to inhalation and exhalation.” When the practitioner pays close attention and develops *jhāna*, she experiences rapture and happiness and therefore the pleasant feeling associated with rapture and happiness. Regarding mind, the Buddha says: “I do

not say that one who is forgetful, who is not clearly understanding, develops attention to breathing." Here, the tradition says that the practitioner experiences the mind in terms of the mental factors of attention and clear understanding (*sati-sampajañña*) that are developed in attending to breathing. And regarding phenomena, the Buddha says: "Having seen with wisdom the surrender of desire and grief regarding the world, he examines closely with equanimity." This refers to the insight that has seen and abandoned the hindrances, the perception of permanence, and so on, and lives in the experience of impermanence (*aniccam*), suffering (*dukkham*) and not self (*anattā*).

Ajahn Buddhadāsa's reading

Buddhadāsa explains that *ānāpānasati* involves taking one aspect of reality - the breath - and using it to investigate other aspects of reality - of *dhamma* - using our relationship to the breath as our central reference point. He goes so far as to say that *ānāpānasati* means "to recollect with *sati* (attention) anything at all while breathing in and breathing out." (Buddhadāsa: 7-8) Hence he translates *ānāpānasati* as "mindfulness with breathing," not "mindfulness of breathing."

Buddhadāsa explains the practice briefly as follows: First we know the breath, in all its activities. Then we relax the body by relaxing the breath - as breath conditions body. Then we understand feelings (*vedanā*) and how they condition the mind by stirring up thoughts and actions - just as breath conditions the body. What conditions body and mind must be understood. By understanding feelings we calm the mind. Then we understand the mind (*citta*) through the thoughts that arise within it, and whether these are wholesome or unwholesome. We then make the mind glad, calm, and are then able to let go of its attachments. Finally we study *dhamma*, truth, and specifically the truth of impermanence (*aniccam*), suffering (*dukkham*), not-self (*anattā*), emptiness (*suññatā*) and suchness (*tathatā*). Then the mind begins to let go of its attachments. This ends with "throwing back," giving everything back to nature.

Buddhadāsa's reading emphasises role of understanding dependent arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) within the practice. So in the first tetrad, we see how the breath conditions the body (and so is the "body formation") and the mind (and so is the "mind formation"). The quality of our breathing conditions the quality of our experience of the body and mind. If the breathing is harsh and rough, the body/mind is disturbed; if the breathing is soft and subtle, the body/mind is peaceful.

Nevertheless, he follows the tradition in using the breath at the nose tip as the meditation object, and seeing the first tetrad entailing an entry into *jhāna* - or, at least sufficient concentration for rapture and happiness to arise. He also insists on the need to do the practice in strict linear order. No matter how far one progresses along the sixteen "steps," each time one begins a practice session one must start at the first step and progress through them all.

The fourth tetrad is pure insight, and insight has a synchronic dimension in that any stage of the practice - from one to sixteen - can be seen with insight. So in the orthodox reading, insight begins with the second tetrad, once the foundation of serenity absorption has been constructed. For Buddhadāsa, insight into impermanence can be applied even to the first tetrad. Nevertheless, it seems clear that for Buddhadāsa, the attainment of serenity absorption is an essential aspect of the practice.

Thich Nhat Hanh's reading

Thich Nhat Hanh's reading is contained in his *Breathe! You are alive*, where he presents a distinctive interpretation of the discourse. He is part of the Mahāyāna tradition, and justifies his interest in an apparently Theravāda *sutta* by arguing that studying the *Ānāpānasati* and

Satipaṭṭhāna Suttas allows for a deeper understanding of Mahāyāna Buddhism, “just as after we see the roots and the trunk of a tree, we can appreciate its leaves and branches more deeply.” (Nhat Hanh: 16) Like the Buddhologists, Nhat Hanh appeals to history, assuming that the earliest layer of texts provide the authentic teaching, and provide the standard against which subsequent developments must be judged. He points out that the Ānāpānasati and Satipaṭṭhāna Suttas make no mention of the *jhānas*, and concludes that this shows *jhāna* practice entered into Buddhism after the death of the Buddha, probably due to Hindu influences. The Buddha practised these absorptions before his awakening, but saw that they did not lead to liberation from suffering. Here, Nhat Hanh rejects both the Theravāda orthodoxy, and casts doubt on the practices of his own Zen school. He argues that meditation practices invented after the time of the Buddha - like the *koan* study of his own tradition - may be useful, but they should be cultivated only after one has practised the foundation practices taught by the Buddha. And he clearly sees *ānāpānasati* as the foundational practice.

In line with his rejection of the Theravāda commentaries, Nhat Hanh rejects the notion that one should focus on the point where air enters and leaves the body, and for him, when the *sutta* says one “experiences the whole body,” this means what it apparently says. The object of meditation here *is* the whole body of the practitioner. Similarly, “calming the body formation” means calming the whole body, not just the breath.

Nhat Hanh’s freer use of the text extends to his translation. He translates *kāya-saṅkhāra* as “whole body,” not “body formation.” This is doubtful, as he is presenting both *sabba kāya* and *kāya-saṅkhāra* as the same thing in English, when they are clearly different in the Pāli. But he goes further than that, and leaves out sections of the *sutta*. In the section on the domains of attention, there are four key sentences where the Buddha links the domains with the tetrads. Nhat Hanh quietly drops three of them, and mistranslates the fourth.

Regarding contemplation of body, the Buddha says: “This, I say, is a body among bodies, namely, inhalation and exhalation. That is why then at that time a bhikkhu, surrendering desire and grief regarding the world, lives contemplating body as body, ardent, clearly understanding and attentive.” Nhat Hanh drops the first sentence and “translates” the second as: “These exercises of breathing with Full Awareness belong to the first Establishment of Mindfulness, the body.” Similarly, the key sentences for contemplation of feelings (“This, I say, is a feeling among feelings, namely, paying close attention to inhalation and exhalation”); for contemplation of mind (“I do not say that one who is forgetful, who is not clearly understanding, develops attention to breathing”); and for contemplation of phenomena (“Having seen with wisdom the surrender of desire and grief regarding the world, he examines closely with equanimity”) are dropped. On top of that, Nhat Hanh inserts a substitute for the key sentence in contemplation of mind. He has: “These exercises of breathing with Full Awareness belong to the third Establishment of Mindfulness, the mind. Without Full Awareness of Breathing, there can be no development of meditative stability and understanding.” (Nhat Hanh: 8) It is hard to see how these changes add to his reading, and therefore it is difficult to understand his motivation here.

Like Buddhadāsa, Nhat Hanh sees the essence of the practice as the investigation of reality using the breath as one’s central reference point. But as he rejects the notion that *jhāna* plays a role in this, he is much more free in his reading of the text. He sees what Buddhadāsa calls sixteen “steps,” that must be practised in strict linear order, as sixteen “methods” or “exercises,” which can be practised in any order. Indeed, once one eliminates the need to cultivate the serenity absorptions, which, because they are progressively deeper levels of concentration entail a linear and diachronic approach to the practice, then one can be much freer in the links between the lists.

The seven factors of awakening

When we reach the section on the seven factors of awakening, we are definitely in synchronic territory. The basic structure here is a “when - then” construction, which reminds us of the fundamental structural principle of the Buddha’s teaching, dependent arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda*). This teaching is summed up in the verse:

When this is, that is; because this arises, that arises.
When this is not, that is not; because this ceases, that ceases.

Here we have a “when-then” structure which may or may not imply time. Similarly, in this section we have a situation that *when* a practitioner contemplates x as x (the basic *satipaṭṭhāna* formula), *then* awakening factor a is aroused within him. And *when* a practitioner cultivates and matures this factor, *then* awakening factor b is aroused within him. And so on. The when-then formula links synchronically; the cultivation and maturity formula links diachronically. Even the Theravāda orthodoxy agrees that in this section of the *sutta*, what is being explained is “a single conscious moment characterised by various essentials.” (Ñāṇamoli: 53)

Conclusion

At the end of this analysis, what can we say? The *Ānāpānasati Sutta* is not an easy read, although the language itself is quite simple. But its structure is complex and dense, and this complexity raises serious questions about interpretation. The complexity of the structure creates ambiguity. Even the orthodox commentary sees certain passages as capable of different but simultaneous readings, referring to either serenity or insight practice depending on what approach to the practice the practitioner is taking. We can see how Thich Nhat Hanh can take liberties with the text, but he does so to make the practice explained within it more accessible to ordinary lay people. Are we to assume that this was *not* the intention of the original compilers? Or can we see the complexity of the *sutta* as evidence of an attempt to create a discourse that different communities of practitioners could, quite legitimately, read in different ways?

In any event, if we are to make sense of this *sutta*, and extract from it what it has to offer in terms of guidance on the practice, we need to read the structure of the text. It is not just the surface words that convey meaning, but the underlying networks that link the words.