

A collection of texts and comments on Ānāpāna sati.

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Using the corona free time, I collected here the most relevant texts on Ānāpāna sati to draw my own conclusions. Kindly see the references right here in the beginning, so you may quickly judge how I proceed.

This text is prepared mainly for own use in order to have a systematic approach. But I am happy if others (whether beginner or advanced) have some benefit from this. To be as correct as possible I will give some Pāli translation - however if you like, you can ignore them. The quotations follow the numbers 1 to 14 below and after that the page number is given. These sources I have available in my own private collection either as electronic source or printed as a book, and in most cases, in both formats.

They are:

1. Ānāpānasati Sutta, Majjhima Nikāya, Vol. III, 118, translated by I.B. Horner, PTS, 1977
2. Vibhaṅga, Abhidhamma Piṭaka, translated from the Pali by Ashin Thiṭṭila PTS, 2010
3. The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga) by Bhaddantācariya Buddhaghosa, BPS, 2010
4. Mahāthera Ledi Sayadaw; A Manual of Respiration, Ānāpāna Dīpanī, BPS, 1999
5. Bhikkhu Ñānamoli; Mindfulness of Breathing (Ānāpāna sati), BPS, 1981
6. The Essence of Buddha Dhamma; The Words of Wisdom always enunciated by the Venerable Webu Sayadaw ,1978
<http://www.myanmarnet.net/nibbana/webu02.htm>
7. Selected Discourses of Webu Sayadaw; translated from the Burmese by Roger Bischoff, 2003
8. Sayagi U Chit Tin; Knowing Anicca and the Way to Nibbāna, 1997
9. Sayagi U Ba Khin The Essentials of Buddha Dhamma in Meditative Practice, BPS, 1976
10. Parimukhaṃ, no author given, <https://www.buddha-vacana.org/voc/parimukham.html>
11. M 118/3:78-88, Ānāpānasati Sutta, The breath meditation in practical detail, translated and annotated by Piya Tan ©2003
<http://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/7.13-Anapanasati-S-m118-piya.pdf>
12. Vimuttimagga, The Path of Freedom, Arahat Upatissa, BPS, 1977
13. Sayagi U Ba Khin; A comparative study in the field of samadhi, 1952, (to be read with lecture no.2 in „What Buddhism is“)
14. Paravahera Vajiranāna Mahāthera, Buddhist Meditation in Theory and Practice, 1975

„The Ānāpānasati Sutta describes the method used by the Buddha himself to win awakening. The best way of understanding the Ānāpānasati Sutta is to cultivate the mindfulness of the in-and-out-breath from a living master or an experienced teacher. The purpose of this Sutta is a practical one: the experience of calm and insight through mindfulness of the breath... (11).“

The text in the **Ānāpānasatisutta in the Sutta Piṭaka** goes like this: “(The meditator) sits down cross-legged, holding his back erect, arousing mindfulness in front of him”. (1,124) *nisīdati pallāṅkaṃ ābhujitvā ujum kāyaṃ pañidhāya parimukhaṃ satim upaṭṭhapetvā.*

Parimukhaṃ can be translated in this way: around the mouth, around the nostrils, around the entrance by which the air enters the body. *Parimukhaṃ* literally means “around the mouth,” here used as an adverb, meaning “in front.” *Parimukhaṃ* is of great importance for understanding the instructions regarding the practice of *ānāpānassati*.

The *Ānāpānasatisutta* contains of course many other instructions valuable for the practise. ¹

The ***Vibhaṅga of the Abhidamma Piṭaka*** confirms the explanation of *parimukhaṃ* like this: „This mindfulness is set-up, well set-up at the tip of the nose or at the centre of the upper lip. (*nāsik-agge vā mukhanimitte vā*) Therefore, this is called ‘setting up mindfulness in front. (2,328).” „Here *nāsikagge* (the tip of the nose) and *mukhanimitte* (the mouth as an object) both clearly refer to the same area around the mouth, at the entrance of the nostrils (10).”

The most respected commentary in the *Theravāda* tradition ***Visuddhimagga***, says the same: „He then sits down, etc., indicating a posture that is peaceful and tends neither to idleness nor to agitation.” (3,290) „Established mindfulness in front of him (*parimukhaṃ satim upaṭṭhapetvā*) = having placed (*ṭhapayitvā*) mindfulness (*satim*) facing the meditation subject (*kammaṭṭhānābhimukhaṃ*)“ (3,291) „So too, the bhikkhu should not look for the in-breaths and outbreaths anywhere else than the place normally touched by them.” (3,306).

The following quotes are from ***Mahāthera Ledi Sayadaw, A Manual of Respiration, Ānāpāna Dīpanī***.

“Even though one is unable to undertake the higher work of tranquillity and insight, the Buddha said that if one can firmly control one’s mind and succeed in keeping it at will within one’s body, one enjoys the taste of *nibbāna* (4,8).” „The Buddha extolled mindfulness of respiration more than he did the other meditation exercises. The commentators also called mindfulness of respiration “the realm of the great” (*mahāpūrisa bhūmi*) (4,11).” „(But) any of the four postures diligently adopted will suffice (4,14).” (The four postures are: sitting, walking standing and lying down.) „While thus following the out and in-breath from beginning to end, the attention must continue to be fixed at the *point of touch*. The breath must not be followed from beginning to end by allowing the attention to leave the *point of touch*” (4,25). „One may proceed to insight while still adhering to the work of keeping the attention on the out-breath and in-breath, or one may regard mindfulness of respiration as access concentration and proceed to insight by taking any of the five aggregates as the object of attention” (4,38). „It is only after the mind has been concentrated and tranquillised that one must practice, observing whatever part of the body that one wishes to observe “. (4,46)

The following explanation and quotes are from ***Bhikkhu Ñānamoli; Mindfulness of Breathing (Ānāpāna sati)***.

„Ñānamoli’s translation, Mindfulness of Breathing (*Ānāpānasati*): Buddhist texts from the Pali Canon and Extracts from the Pali Commentary is invaluable for the serious student and

¹ The *Ānāpānasatisutta* mentions: „The four applications of mindfulness, when developed thus, made much of thus, bring to fulfilment the seven links of awakening.” These four applications and seven links are all included in the 37 factors of Awakening. (For this: please see my summary of *Bodhipakkhiyādhammādīpanī of the Mahāthera Ledi Sayadaw.*)

teacher for a more extensive study of the text. This is helpful sutta-based background reading, which gives us a good idea of the true purpose of breath meditation. (11/206) “

Bhikkhu Nānamoli gives a simile from the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* in his book. The *Paṭisambhidāmagga* can be found in the *Khuddaka Nikāya* of the *Sutta Piṭaka*.

„It is as though a man were to cut with a saw a tree trunk placed on level ground. His mindfulness is established by the teeth of the saw at the point where they come into contact with the tree trunk, without his giving attention to the teeth of the saw as they approach and recede, although he is not unaware of these; and he manifests endeavour, accomplishes the task, and achieves distinction. As the tree trunk on the level ground, so the sign for the binding (of mindfulness). As the teeth of the saw, so the in- and out-breaths. As the man’s mindfulness is established by the teeth of the saw at the point where they come into contact with the tree trunk, without his giving attention to the teeth of the saw as they approach and recede, although he is not unaware of these, so he manifests endeavour, accomplishes the task, and achieves distinction - so, indeed, the bhikkhu sits, having established his mindfulness at the nose-tip or on the upper lip, without giving attention to the in- and out-breaths as they approach and recede, although he is not unaware of these, and he manifests endeavour, accomplishes the task, and achieves distinction.“ (5,65)

Bhikkhu Nānamoli writes in a footnote: „The *Vimuttimaggā* has the following: Here he trains himself in breathing in (and out) means mindfulness is fixed at the nose-tip or the upper lip “. (5,27). The *Vimuttimaggā* is a manual, traditionally attributed to the Arahant Upatissa. There are many similarities in content to the *Visuddhimaggā*. Additional quotes in the *Vimuttimaggā* go like this: „These are the places connected with breathing in and out. (He) considers the contact of the incoming and the outgoing breath, through mindfulness that is fixed at the nose-tip or on the lip (12,158).“

We can see that all three texts: the *Vimuttimaggā*, the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* and the *Visuddhimaggā* agree in regarding the breath in meditation should be watched either at the nose or on the lip.

The following explanations are from the teachings of the **Venerable Webu Sayadaw**.

„The technique of meditation taught by Ven. Webu Sayadaw is one of the forty techniques mentioned in the scriptures for the development of *Samādhi* or concentration. It is called *Ānāpāna-sati* and requires the meditator to be aware: 1. that he is breathing in while he is breathing in; 2. that he is breathing out while he is breathing out; and 3. of the spot or area in the region of the nostrils where the stream of air touches while he is breathing in and out (7,2).“ „Every time we breathe in or out, the breath touches near the nostrils. Every time it touches we should be aware of it“(7,4). „The most obvious thing to one and all is the breathing process. The nose is the prominent part of the body – the out-breath and the in-breath are always touching the nostrils. The nostrils are the sensitive part of the nose, which the out-breath and the in-breath touch as they go out or come in. In other words, the wind-element or element of motion comes into contact with the nostril, producing a sensation (from 6,1- in parts).“ „What one has to do is to keep on feeling the impact and knowing about it continuously as it happens. If you can practise that for a certain portion of a 24-hour day, you will find that it is most gratifying“(6,2). Venerable Webu Sayadaw mentioned: "This is a

shortcut to Nibbāna," he said, "anyone can use it. It stands up to investigation and is in accordance with the teachings of the Buddha as conserved in the scriptures. It is the straight path to Nibbāna"(7/5).

Next quote is from Paravahera Vajiranāna Mahāthera (A General Exposition According to the Pāli Canon of the Theravāda School).

„Hence he should fix upon the sign with the thought: *This is the place of touch*. This is what is meant in the text by the words *setting mindfulness in front (pari-mukhaṃ, in the very front of the face) (14/248).*”

The Vicepresident of Pali Text Society wrote to me however in 2010, saying that *parimukhaṃ* can be probably translated as „vollständig, in jeder Hinsicht“ (German), meaning „fully, in all aspects“ - a slightly different point of view on this word.

The following quotes are from **Sayagyi U Ba Khin** and **Sayagyi U Chit Tin**.

Sayagyi U Ba Khin advises like this: „We have developed a technique whereby we are able to help a sincere worker to experience a state of purity of mind in the course of a few days“ (13,2)“. (It is necessary for the meditator) not to allow for the interpolation of any discursive or distracting thoughts which are definitely detrimental to progress. In case this is not possible, he will have to go back to respiration-mindfulness, because Samādhi is the key to the contemplation of Anicca.“ (9,9) Sayagyi U Ba Khin spoke of the „*three in one*“– the in-breath, the out-breath and the point of contact (personal communication). His student Sayagyi U Chit Tin gave similar instructions: „The attention should be placed below the nose and above the upper lip, in the general area where the breath touches as you breathe in and breathe out. There are three elements to be noted: 1. The fact that you breathe in as you breathe in 2. the fact that you breathe out as you breathe out, 3. the spot where the air touches (and, if possible, the sensation resulting from the touch of the breath)“. (8, XXI)

These are my conclusions:

In the words of the Buddha Gotama (*Tipiṭaka: Sutta Piṭaka* and *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*) and in the most accepted commentary (*Visuddhimagga*), and also in other commentaries *Ānāpāna sati* refers to observing the normal, natural breath at the area above the mouth, at the entrance of the nostrils. „(It) can help to establish mindfulness by a few intentional breaths, breathing a little harder than normal “. (8, XXI)

To practise according to the original texts that have been described above and after having found a competent teacher is the thing to do, I think. The posture should be comfortable, I believe, according to the above (3,290) and according to the instructions that I have received. In this way we can bring theory (*pariyatti*) and practice (*patipatti*) together.