

# Ānāpāna sati: confusion in the West is not uncommon

Thomas Bruhn

Freelancer: [www.thomasbruhn.de](http://www.thomasbruhn.de)

[thomasbruhn7@gmail.com](mailto:thomasbruhn7@gmail.com)

Some confusions can be observed in the West concerning the Theravāda Buddha Dhamma. It is the main objective of this paper to bring into focus one of the not uncommon misunderstandings. To focus our research, we hold a firm stand towards the words of the Buddha as they can be found in the Theravāda Tipiṭaka. In this way we can avoid research problems that may arise by using Mahāyāna texts. We can find *Ānāpānasati* in many Suttas and in some most respected Commentaries too. We use the descriptive research method. It is mentioned that *Ānāpānasati* is included in the four applications of mindfulness and brings to fulfilment the seven links in awakening, *Bojjaṅgas*. Thus, *Ānāpānasati* by itself is sufficient to attain *Nibbāna*. This fact is also confirmed in the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* of the *Khuddaka Nikāya* in the Sutta Piṭaka: it is made clear here that *Ānāpānasati* leads to the realisation of *Anicca*, *Dukkha* and *Anatta* and thus to *Nibbāna*. In the most respected commentary Visuddhi Magga the technical details for the meditation are given. In the West, however, breath meditation is used for other purposes too. There are hundreds of popular books to calm down one's mind, to control the emotions, to achieve Self-Healing, reduce anxiety, increase concentration, to control the breath, to practise Yoga, for pain relief, stress relief and for various other aims. One should be aware about the different purpose of those techniques. They are simply not *Ānāpānasati*. This is not to judge those techniques as good or bad. There are cultural implications. When we discuss the different breathing techniques, we should conclude for ourself what they are aimed for: for the attainment of *Nibbāna* or for something else.

Keywords: *Ānāpānasati*, breath meditation, purpose

## Ānāpāna Sati in the Sutta Piṭaka and the Commentary

„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... (5, p.5).”

In our discussion here we simply try to follow as close as possible the words of the Buddha. So, our method is a descriptive one.

The Buddha Gotama taught *Ānāpānasati* to attain *Nibbāna*.

We can read in the the *Ānāpānasati Sutta* (1, p.124): “*Ānāpānasati, bhikkhave, bhāvitā bahulikatā cattāro satipaṭṭhāne paripūreti. Cattāro satipaṭṭhānā bhāvitā bahulikatā satta bojjaṅge paripūrenti. “Ānāpānasati, Bhikkhus, if developed and made much of, brings to fulfilment the four applications of mindfulness” (four Satipaṭṭhānas, here by way of the mindfulness of the body, kāyagatā-sati). “The four applications of mindfulness.... bring to fulfilment the seven links in awakening.” (Bojjaṅgas, these are seven of the 37 Bodhipakkhiyādhammās, factors of Awakening).*

Thus, *Ānāpānassati* by itself is sufficient to attain *Nibbāna*. But “this type of meditation can be known outside the period during which a Buddha’s Teachings are practised.” (10, p. 83) That means before or after the five thousand years<sup>1</sup> of penetration of the Dhamma *Ānāpānassati* can be practised as well, but for a different purpose.

In the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* (*Ānāpānakathā*) in the *Khuddaka Nikāya* of the *Sutta Piṭaka* it is made clear that *Ānāpānassati* leads to the realisation of *Anicca*, *Dukkha* and *Anatta* und thus to *Nibbāna*. (5, p.202)

But it can be used also to attain the higher Jhanas.

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

*Parimukhaṃ* can be translated in this way: around the mouth, around the nostrils, around the entrance by which the air gets into 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.<sup>2</sup>

The *Vibhaṅga* of the *Abhidamma Piṭaka* confirms *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 (14, p.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 (6, p.1). “

The in the *Theravāda* tradition most respected commentary *Visuddhi Magga* says the same: „He then sits down, etc., indicating a posture that is peaceful and tends neither to idleness nor to agitation.“ (13, p.290) „Established mindfulness in front of him (*parimukhaṃ satim upaṭṭhapetvā*) = having placed (*thapayitvā*) mindfulness (*satim*) facing the meditation subject (*kammaṭṭhānābhimukhaṃ*)“ (13, p. 291) „So too, the bhikkhu should not look for the in-breaths and outbreaths anywhere else than the place normally touched by them.“ (13, p.306)

In the Mahāyāna traditions the details may be different. So, we do not discuss these differences here to avoid research problems.

The next quotes will be 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, p.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, p.11) „...but any

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<sup>1</sup> See for the 5000 years: *Buddhaghosa's commentary on the Dhammasaṅgaṇī, the first book of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka, Atthasālinī, PTS, London, 1958, p.35 and Sayagyi U Chit Tin, The Coming Buddha Metteyya, BPS, Sri Lanka, 1992, p.27 and the footnote in the same page: “Ven. Ledi Sayadaw calls these five thousand years the age of Ariyas (Noble Ones).”*

<sup>2</sup> For this: please see my publication on the *Bodhipakkhiyādhammādīpanī* of the Ven. Ledi Sayadaw.

of the four postures diligently adopted will suffice.” (4, p.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, p.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, p.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, p.46)

Now next a recommendation and some quotes from *Bhikkhu Nānamoli, Mindfulness of Breathing (Ānāpāna sati)*.

„Nānamoli’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 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.” (5, p.206)

*Bhikkhu Nānamoli* gives a simile from the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* in his commentary.

„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.” (2, p.65) *Bhikkhu Nānamoli* writes in a footnote: „The *Vimuttimagga* has the following: Here he trains himself in breathing in (and out) means mindfulness is fixed at the nose-tip or the upper lip.” (2, p.27)

The *Vimuttimagga* is a manual, traditionally attributed to the Arahant Upatissa. There are many similarities in content to the *Visuddhimagga*. Additional quotes in the *Vimuttimagga* go like this: „These are the places connected with breathing in and out...he considers the contact of the contact of the incoming and the outgoing breath, through mindfulness that is fixed at the nose-tip or on the lip.” (15, p.158)

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

Next please note the teaching of the Venerable Webu Sayadaw.

„The technique of meditation taught by Venerable 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 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.” (11, p.3) „Every time we breathe in or out, the breath touches near the nostrils. Every time it touches, we should be aware of it.” (11, p.5) “The tip of the nostril therefore, is the seat or sensation. The rushing in and out of air at the nose tip is *Vayo* (movement). When these two (things) meet there is created *Phothhabba* (touch sensation). When the air rushes in, you will feel its impact and when it goes out you will again feel the impact.” (12, p.1) „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.” (12, p.1) The Venerable Webu Sayadaw used *Ānāpāna-sati* to attain *Nibbāna* and *Arahatship*. The Venerable Webu Sayadaw was believed by many to have attained the highest goal.

Next quotes will be from the 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.” (9, p.2) ...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.” (8, p.9) His student Sayagyi U Chit Tin follows accordingly: „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).” (10, XXI)

These are my conclusion so far: In the words of the Buddha Gotama (*Tipiṭaka: Sutta Piṭaka* and *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*) and in the commentaries *Ānāpāna sati* is referring to the observing the normal, natural breath at the area around the mouth, at the entrance of the nostrils.

But „...(it) can help to establish mindfulness by a few intentional breaths, breathing a little harder than normal.” (10, XXI)

The purpose is to achieve *Nibbāna*.

To practise according to the original texts after having found a competent teacher is the thing to do in case one aims for awakening. The posture should be comfortable (13, p.290). We can practise in all four postures and at any time we wish.

We are able fulfil the study of the texts (*pariyatti*) and the practise of meditation (*patipatti*) together.

### **Confusion in the West is not uncommon**

It must be mentioned now that breath meditation in the West is used for other purposes too. There are hundreds of popular books to calm down one’s mind, to control the emotions, to achieve Self-Healing, reduce anxiety, increase concentration, to control the breath, to practise Yoga, for pain relief, stress relief and for various other aims.

One should be aware of the dangers using any breath meditation without a Dhamma teacher and not confuse the various other techniques with *Ānāpāna sati*. One should be sure about one’s own aims.

It might be well and good to practise breath mediation for all those different purposes mentioned above and cited below, but that is not *Ānāpānassati* to attain *Nibbāna*.

Among the many books I have chosen one book (3) and will cite some passages to give you the impression of what is NOT *Ānāpānassati*. These books are popular in the West, more popular than books on *Ānāpānassati*.

“Try holding your breath for a few seconds and breathing deeply and slowly”, “conscious breathing and emotions”, “how to make the square breath”, “abdominal breathing”, “alternate nasal breathing”, “breathing in Yoga”, “what is fire breathing”, “strengthen the navel chakra”, “purify the spirit and remove mental blocks”, “release the crying”, “focus on one word and breathe”, “breathing technique to cool the body (Sheetali)”, “alternate nasal breathing”, “how to perform controlled breathing”, “make a body scanner”, “how to breathe correctly”, “breathing can relieve back pain”, “meditative breathing....we must perform abdominal or diaphragmatic breathing”, “how to breathe to clear negative emotions and balance the solar plexus”, “breathing exercises to improve concentration”, “retention techniques”, “slow abdominal breathing”. (in: Finch, Samuel; *Breathing Techniques, a door to mindfulness*, 2020. p.9 ff.)

This is not to judge those techniques as good or bad.

They are simply NOT *Ānāpānassati*.

So, what is our conclusion? Before we start to practise, we should have a close look at the aim the teacher has in view. It might be for the promotion of the *sāsana* or for something else. Let all be aware!

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*These sources are in my hand either as electronic source or printed as a book - mostly in both ways.*