

# *The Basic Foundation of Knowledge for Practice of Ānāpānasati*

by Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu

Interpreted into English by Santikaro Bhikkhu

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*In the late 80s and early 90s, until his health deteriorated too much, Ajahn Buddhadāsa gave regular lectures during the monthly international retreats held at Suan Mokkh and then Suan Mokkh International Dharma Hermitage. Usually, Ajahn spoke in Thai and Santikaro Bhikkhu interpreted into English live. Audio recordings are now available from [www.suanmokkh.org](http://www.suanmokkh.org) and [www.bia.or.th](http://www.bia.or.th). The following is a transcription generously made by a Dhamma volunteer. If you noticed possible improvements to the text and would like to contribute, please kindly contact the volunteer and the Buddhadāsa Indapañño Archives in Bangkok ([suanmokkhbkk@gmail.com](mailto:suanmokkhbkk@gmail.com)).*

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Today, I am going to talk about the ‘basic foundation of knowledge for the practice of *ānāpānasati*.’ If the basic knowledge, the fundamental knowledge of the practice of *ānāpānasati* is correct, then it will be very easy for you to practice *ānāpānasati* successfully, and you will achieve the proper benefit from this practice. It won’t be necessary for us to talk about all the details of the various steps and stages of the practice of *ānāpānasati*. Rather, we will talk about some of the background issues and things that you need to know about.

The first point we would like you to say is ‘take life as the lesson.’ *Dukkha* and the extinction of *dukkha* is something that you should learn and study within yourself, by yourself, for yourself, and for the benefits for yourself. For this reason, it is necessary to take life as the lesson which we study. So we must learn from life. If we have successfully completed the entire practice of *ānāpānasati*, then we will know what life is, we will know what life is about, where life comes from, what the purpose of life is, and what it takes to fulfill the purpose of life. We can know all this through the successful and complete practice of mindfulness of breathing. So we take a logical presentation of this – we can say that through *ānāpānasati* we will develop the following types of knowledge – knowledge about what is life, knowledge about where life comes from, knowledge about why there is life or what life is for, and fourth how to

fulfill the purpose of life and how to fulfill the benefits of life – so what, where, why, and how.

Therefore, practice *ānāpānasati* in order to come to understand your own life. This is the proper way to practice of *ānāpānasati* in order to understand life and to understand all the problems that are related to this thing we call ‘life.’ So these two aspects, the life itself and the problems of life, are why we practice *ānāpānasati*. In short, we study life in life, we learn about life from life. With *ānāpānasati*, we study the breath. We use the breath as the object of our learning. Whether in Thai or in English, we generally associate the breath with life. When one stops breathing, one is dead – life ends. When the breath ends, life ends. All over the world, we equate it too. So when we study the breath, we are also studying life. So in *ānāpānasati*, we study life by studying the breath. So therefore, we study the breath completely, deeply, profoundly, and sufficiently to deal with all the matters that we have been talking about i.e. life and the problems of life. We study the breath in this way in order to have a full understanding of life and develop the wisdom that is needed to solve the problems of life – this is what *ānāpānasati* is about.

If you observe carefully, you will see that using the breath is the easiest and most convenient way to study life. It is far more convenient than all the other different meditation objects. If we take some of the other traditional meditation objects, we will see how convenient the breath is. For example, corpses – if we decide to meditate on corpses, then we have to go to a cemetery, a battlefield, or a morgue, or some place where they happen to have corpses laying around – this isn’t quite as convenient as the breath. Or if we decide to meditate on the *kasiṇas* which are round different colored discs, then we would have to go and buy one of these discs or make one or find one. Then, every time we would want to meditate, we would have to set it up and carry it around. This can lead to a lot of unnecessary trouble. But with the breath, we don’t have to put it away, we don’t have to take it out and we don’t have to go anywhere to find it. Wherever we are, the breath is with us. Wherever we go, the breath goes with us. As long as we are alive, the breath is always a handy convenient meditation object.

The meaning of the word *ānāpānasati* is the following. It is to note or contemplate or focus on some useful meditation object – some object that we ought to focus on or contemplate while and every time, to focus on a useful meditation object while breathing in and while breathing out – *ānāpāna* means

to breathe in and to breathe out, and *sati* means to be mindful. While focusing the attention or contemplating the meditation object, there is mindfulness of breathing in and out all the time. For us to be practicing *ānāpānasati*, it must be like this. Now there are many different ways of practicing *ānāpānasati*. We are going to talk about the way of practicing *ānāpānasati* that is both beneficial and is in line with Buddhist principle. The other kinds of *ānāpānasati*, we will not be talking about. There are many ways of doing mindfulness of breathing, not all of them are useful and not all of them are in line with what is taught in Buddhism. Imagine for example, if you were to think of your wife, or husband, or your child, or someone back home in America, England, Germany, Canada, or wherever, and to think of this person every time you breathe in and every time you breathe out, this is *ānāpānasati* also. But this is not the kind of *ānāpānasati* we are going to talk about. But it is a kind of mindfulness of breathing. Here, we are going to talk about the *ānāpānasati* that takes as its objects of contemplation, things which are useful for extinguishing, the stopping of *dukkha*. So in *ānāpānasati*, we contemplate these useful things – things that help and contribute to the extinction of *dukkha* with every in-breath and with every out-breath. This is the kind of *ānāpānasati* that we need, the other kinds are unnecessary. We need this kind of *ānāpānasati* that helps us to study things which will provide knowledge and wisdom that will help us extinguish *dukkha*.

In the beginning of the practice of mindfulness of breathing, we take the breath itself as the meditation object. We focus on studying the breath – each in-breath and each out-breath. Then after that, we take other useful things as the meditation objects. But this is very important; we maintain the mindfulness of the breathing. So after the initial beginning stages of focusing directly on the breath, then other objects are noted, are contemplated, are studied, and experienced but there is always the breath in the background, there is always the awareness of the breath as the rhythmic instrument like a metronome. Breathing in, out, in, out, in, out – this is always there to make sure that mindfulness never eases, that is never lost, that doesn't slip. It helps to maintain mindfulness constantly and consistently while the different objects are contemplated and studied through the practice. From the first stage, the breath is used directly, and then we move on to use different objects while maintaining this background awareness of breathing in and breathing out as sort of a rhythm as a governor. And then the third and final aspect of the practice of *ānāpānasati* is to contemplate the highest truth, the highest *dharmas*, but still there is the mindfulness of breathing in and breathing out all the time, even when one is

contemplating the highest *dhammas* or the highest truth of reality. This is the overall view of *ānāpānasati*. And for it to be *ānāpānasati* there needs to be the mindfulness of breathing in and breathing out – in and out consistently and constantly. This is what it means to practice *ānāpānasati*.

In the first part of the practice – one way of looking at it is it has four types, or its four major stages. In the first part, the breath serves a dual function. First, it is the object of meditation. We contemplate the breath, we experience and study the breath itself but also the breath serves as the background governor or regulator of mindfulness. For every in-breath and every out-breath, we study the breath. For the breath is studied, that's the first use. The second use, it regulates mindfulness, it is like a metronome studying a rhythm of in, out, in, out. So in the first part of the practice, the breath is used in these two ways.

So after the beginning step of focusing directly on the breath, and using the breath as the rhythmic background, then we change the object to the longness and the shortness of the breath. No longer the breath itself, but in the longness or shortness of the breath is the object. But still, the in-breath and out-breath maintains itself as the rhythmic instrument in the background. So with every in-breath and every out-breath, we focus on the longness of the breath or the shortness of the breath with every in-breath and with every out-breath.

Next, we examine, we note, we contemplate, we study how the long breath influences the body and how the short breath influences the body. No longer are we focusing on the longness and the shortness of the breath, nor are we focusing on the breath itself. Now we focus on how the long breath or the short breath influences the body every time we breathe in and every time we breathe out. We see that how the breath influences the body, how they are inter-related and how they influence each other. When the breath is long, we learn that the body relaxes and when the breath is short we learn that the body becomes disturbed or agitated. The truth – the fact of this interrelationship of this influence that the long breaths and the short breaths has on the body – this truth, this fact, is what we contemplate now at this point with every in-breath and every out-breath. So it's the third object of study still with mindfulness of breathing in and breathing out in the background.

Now, next we move on to contemplating, noting, studying the fact, the truth that we can control the body by controlling the breath. This fact is the next object of the practice of mindfulness of breathing. We probably can't control the body directly; however, we can control the body indirectly through the

breathing. So this control or we make, or we force the body to calm down by using the breath – this fact is the truth that is the object of meditation at this stage of the practice. This fact is contemplated every time we breathe in and every time we breathe out. A new object, but still that rhythm of breathing in and breathing out is in awareness, is that basic awareness is in the background the whole time.

So now at this point, we are doing the fourth step of the first group or first type of mindfulness of breathing. And what we are doing now is relaxing the body by relaxing the breath. We are calming what we call in Pāli *kāya-saṅkhāra* (the ‘body conditioner’) – the thing that conditions the body. This thing that conditions the body is the breath, so at this point; the breath is being calmed in order to calm the body. This fact is what we are studying. This is the object of contemplation at this point but don’t forget, always, for this to be *ānāpānasati*, there is mindfulness, this fact is contemplated while breathing in and it is contemplated while breathing out. In every in-breath and in every out-breath, this fact is contemplated. This is what *ānāpānasati* is. There is always this background awareness and mindfulness of the in-breath and the out-breath constantly without missing a one. And while this background of mindfulness is maintained, we study these different objects, and the fourth object is the fact of calming the body by calming the breath with every in-breath and every out-breath.

There is the Pāli word *kāya* or in Thai *kai*. This word is usually translated as ‘body’ – the physical body. The body is a *kāya* – this flesh body. But the breath is also a *kāya* – the breath body. This is because the word *kāya* literally means ‘group’ which also the English word ‘body’ has the same meaning sometimes. We can talk of a body of people. So *kāya* means ‘group.’ So we talk about the breath group or the flesh group, and see how these two *kāya*, these two bodies (the breath-body and the flesh-body) how they are inter-related and by calming the breath-body the flesh-body (the flesh-*kāya*) is also calmed and relaxed. With every in-breath and with every out-breath, this is studied. So these steps up to this point are the contemplation of the body in the body – the contemplation of *kāya* – *kāyānupassanā* is the Pāli word. So this is what has been happening so far with every in-breath and with every out-breath. The word *kāya* can be applied in many different ways. It has many different meanings – this Pāli word *kāya* which translates as ‘group.’ For example, the infantry of the army which is Thai is *gong thap* [??] – the infantry in Pāli language is called *bala kāya*. *Bala*

means ‘power’ and *kāya* means ‘group ,’ so the ‘power group’ is the part of the army which attacks. So the *kāya* can be applied to all sorts of animals, people and things. But we don’t have to bother ourselves with all these different meanings of the word *kāya*. At this point, we are only concerned with two meanings, two kinds of *kāya* – the group of breath and the group of flesh, skin, blood, bones, and all these physical things which make up the physical flesh-body. These two kinds of *kāya* are very closely inter-related and inter-connected and so we study and contemplate, we experience the calming and relaxing of these *kāya* – the breath-*kāya* and the physical body-*kāya*. This is what this stage of practice is about. There are different methods of calming and relaxing the *kāya* and we use these with every in-breath and out-breath and focus on this fact with every in-breath and every out-breath as the body and the *kāya* calms and relaxes.

So these first four steps make up the first group of steps or the first tetrad of the practice of *ānāpānasati* and it’s directly interested in the breath and the body so it’s called the ‘*kāya*-tetrad.’ Then we go on to studying the *vedanā* (feeling), then after that the *citta* (the mind; mind states; states of consciousness), and then to the fourth *dhammas* (mind objects; eternal truths). So there are these four different groups of objects which are contemplated throughout the practice of *ānāpānasati*. Different objects are taken at the different stages; altogether there are sixteen steps or sixteen different objects which are used. However, there is always the background awareness (a background mindfulness) and the knowing of the breathing-in and the breathing-out. Whether the object is the breath or something related to the breath, or the object of the feeling (*vedanā*) or related to the *vedanā*, or whether it is the mind states, the *dhammas* (the mind objects), whatever is being taken as the meditation object directly, there is always the background rhythm of the mindfulness of breathing in and breathing out from the very beginning of the practice all the way to the end, even to the very last step of the practice which is the contemplation of successfully completing the practice. When you get to the end, you have to realize it. So at this last stage, one realizes that one is has finished while breathing in and breathing out. This basic awareness of breathing in and out is the view all the way through the practice – this is what it means to practice *ānāpānasati* – to always have this background awareness. The mindfulness of the breath must always be there otherwise it is not mindfulness of breathing. And with this basic mindfulness of breathing, a variety of objects are studied in order to develop wisdom and understanding. There are these sixteen objects or sixteen facts or truth are what

is studied in order to develop necessary wisdom to deal with life's problems. The direct objective of the practice of ānāpānasati is to extinguish suffering – this is the only valid reason for practicing ānāpānasati, to extinguish suffering. However, there will be various side effects, side effects, various extras. For example, very good physical and mental health will develop due to this practice. The calming and relaxing of the breath, of this consistently long breathing has beneficial affects to the health. And the calming and relaxing that happens during the process is very good for both the body and the mind. So the specific objective or goal of this practice is to extinguish dukkha. However, good physical and mental health and other benefits will also be developed through this practice. So in this way, we profit from ānāpānasati much more than the costs we have to invest.

As far as the good health of the body goes, just in this way, our efforts are repaid, the cost of the practice are returned, our investment pays off. Just by the fact that by developing the peaceful calm relaxed breathing, peaceful calm and relaxed body, that this return of the body to a natural state of calmness and coolness, this in itself is worth and this in itself justifies the practice of ānāpānasati . This is one benefit of the practice. Another benefit of ānāpānasati is, ānāpānasati can be used to limit and get rid of bad mood or dangerous emotions – bad mind states such as anger, fear, and greed. So say fear arises in the mind, by practicing ānāpānasati the fear will be calmed and gotten rid of, or anger can be gotten ridden of by practicing ānāpānasati. All kinds of unhealthy and unskillful states of mind, bad emotions, bad moods, can be taken care of and can be gotten rid of, and can be calmed by the practice of ānāpānasati . Now in this way, it only takes care of these things temporarily, and if we are not mindful and wise, these things will return. However, if ānāpānasati is continuously and fully developed, it is possible that a point will be reached where these bad moods and these dangerous emotions will never return again. They will never arise further. So this is another benefit of ānāpānasati. Another benefit of the practice of ānāpānasati is that one will know the moment of death. One will know when one is going to die. By fully practicing this meditation, by fully developing it all the time – not just five or ten minutes a day but constantly throughout the day for one's entire life, one gets to know the breath in such a detail that one comes to know everything there is to know about the breath. And then one is an expert about the breath to such a degree that one will know which breath will be the last one. This is from fully understanding the breathing. There is a scripture about one teacher who was very old, who had been practicing

ānāpānasati for a very long time and had become very skillful and then he was an expert in it. So as he was getting old, the time was coming and he knew it was coming and he called two of his students to a field of grass and he had them stand in the field of grass, then he walked to one end of the field and then he walked to the other and the two students were in the middle, and then he walked back and forth about four or five times, and then he came back, and when he was standing right between the students, he died and they caught him and then took the body away. This, he knew the moment when he would die because he was such an expert because he was so skillful in regards to the breath. This was from having studied it so thoroughly, so constantly and consistently that this knowledge was obtained. This is another benefit of the practice of ānāpānasati. So if you wonder when you are going to die, then here is one way to.

This road enables you to choose the moment of death – it doesn't work that way. It only enables one to know which breath will be the last, will know at what breath the conditioning that maintains the body and what point that conditioning will stop. And that point where the body breaks up, that point which we call death, one can know at what breath that will happen through this practice. But this is not a way to choose the moment of death – it's knowledge not magic.

Another benefit, that is even better, is that through continuously and constantly practicing ānāpānasati all time one will fully and completely develop knowledge of the higher truths of reality meaning one fully develops the understanding and awareness of impermanence, of unsatisfactoriness and non-self. So by the consistent practice of ānāpānasati, these characteristics of reality are fully and more completely understood. In addition, the practice of ānāpānasati – the correct and constant practice of mindfulness of breathing is identical to being on the eightfold noble path. When one's practice of ānāpānasati is correct, at that time, one is on the path – on the noble path which has eight aspects. So this is a further benefit – the understanding of reality, of higher truth, of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and non-self. And through this practice, one is on the eight-fold noble path, one is following it correctly. At one point in the scriptures, the Buddha said that if monks are living rightly, the world will not be free of Arahants. Arahants are perfected beings or enlightened beings, these are the beings in whom the *kilesa* (the defilements of mind), i.e. anger, greed, envy, fear, stupidity and ignorance, do not arise – and these fully perfected beings – all the defiled mental states do not arise. The Buddha said



that through living rightly, or existing correctly, or being properly, I guess living rightly is the best translation, through living rightly the world will not be empty of Arahants – of perfected beings. Now this ‘living rightly’ (existing rightly), what does it mean? It means practicing ānāpānasati, one who is practicing ānāpānasati correctly then one is living rightly. So if you would like to help the world, to not be free of enlightened beings, you can do this by practicing ānāpānasati. If you want to keep the possibility alive that there will be enlightened beings in this world, the best way to do this is to live rightly and by living correctly – the best way to that is to practice *ānāpānasati*, mindfulness of breathing in and breathing out. Practicing ānāpānasati will bring the benefit of developing the four Dhamma comrades that we talked about the first time. Don’t forget these four comrades in Dhamma of *sati*, *sampajañña*, *samādhi*, and *paññā* – mindfulness (*sati*), *sampajañña* (wisdom in action), *samādhi* (the one-pointed unified mind), and *paññā* (wisdom).

The importance of these four Dhamma comrades is that, this is to summarize or to remind you, is that whenever a sense object of some sort comes to one, if these four comrades are able to go out and meet that sense object, whether it comes through the eyes, nose, ears, tongue, body, or mind, then there will be no danger in that sense object. However, if any sense object strikes one and is not dealt with correctly by these four comrades in Dhamma, then these sense objects will be dangerous. We can see these sense objects as our enemies, they are far more dangerous than any communists, or thieves, or who knows what. The only way to deal with these enemies is with these four comrades in Dhamma – mindfulness, wisdom in action, one-pointedness, and wisdom. Then when these comrades meet and deal with all the different enemies of sense objects, then they are no longer dangerous. Then there are no problems that arise because of them. This is another reason of practicing ānāpānasati. If you look even deeper, a more profound benefit of the practice of ānāpānasati is that it lessens the *anusaya*. *Anusaya* – we can translate as ‘tendencies,’ what these are, are accumulation or deposits of little bits of defilements. Whenever these defilements arises, through its arising and passing away, it leaves a little bit of something behind – it drops a few things and these build up. The buildup of these deposits, these accumulations, are called the *anusaya*. And they are a real problem because once enough they will drop and this in itself is a source of further defilements. So it becomes habitual. These are sort of tendencies which are developed. So ānāpānasati can clean up these deposits, this filth which builds up in mind through the familiarity with defilement. It’s a tendency and a

habit and familiarity with defilements, these are the *anusaya*. And *ānāpānasati* will help to clean up these things so that they will lessen and abate. And it is possible that the point will be reached where the *anusaya* – these accumulations, these deposits – will be completely cleaned up and there will be no more defilement and no more problems – this is to be enlightened or to be perfected. And so through the practice of *ānāpānasati*, these *anusaya* (tendencies) which are searches of these defilements will lessen. On the other hand, enlightened tendencies or familiarity with enlightenment will develop. This is another benefit of the practice of *ānāpānasati*.

I would like to introduce you to the Thai word *anisonḡ* – it's strange for the English speakers but is a very common word in Pāli [*ānisamsa*] and in Thai *anisonḡ* – it means 'flowing advantage' or an advantage flowing outward. So we will talk about the final *anisonḡ* or 'flowing advantage' of *ānāpānasati*. This final advantage is that the mind is no longer disturbed, bothered, or pestered and no longer hassled by any defilement whatsoever. The defilements no longer bother the mind, no longer afflict and harm the mind. The hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*), these no longer disturb the mind. Goodness no longer bothers the mind. Sadness no longer afflicts the mind. All these various kinds of *dukkha* are no longer problems. None of these things can afflict the mind anymore. Instead of being a slave to happiness, sadness, or goodness and evil, the mind is emancipated; it is freed from all these things and all these *dukkha*. This is the final *anisonḡ* of the practice of *ānāpānasati*. This is the objective stated in the very first page of the Bible, the third page of the Genesis where God forbid Adam and Eve to eat the fruit from the tree of good and evil because they would die if they did so. Here is the way to make up for that original sin. Eating that fruit from that tree was to become afflicted to attack by attachment to good and evil through happiness and sadness – to become a slave to all these things. And when the mind is enslaved, there is *dukkha*. This final *anisonḡ* of the practice of *ānāpānasati* is for the mind to be emancipated from all these defilements, hindrances, all these happy and all these sad things, for the mind to be above all this duality, completely non-attached, completely emancipated and free where there is no *dukkha*. This is the empty mind or the 'void' mind – completely void of 'self,' of 'I,' of 'me,' and 'mine.' This is the final *anisonḡ* – of the correct practice of *ānāpānasati* as we have been explaining it today.

And through the way of looking at this final *anisonḡ* is that through this correct practice of mindfulness with breathing, one becomes the one who

knows, the awakened one, the blossomed and opened one. This third one is a little difficult but this is *puttha* [Thai] or you're more familiar with 'Buddha.' 'Buddha' – the one who knows, the awakened one, the one who is totally alive and opened up like a rose that has fully blossomed to the world, a perpetual bloom – a point where you don't wilt – this is final *anisoṅga* is to develop, to be, to realize Buddha – the knowing, the highest kind of knowing, to be completely awake, always – never asleep, never dull, never groggy – always wide awake and alert. And to have the freshness, the beauty, the openness to everything to experience to reality to the world of a rose that perpetually bloomed, a lotus that is always fully blossomed. This is the final *anisoṅga* of the practice of *ānāpānasati*.

The last thing which you should know is that the Buddha said 'I was enlightened through the practice of *ānāpānasati*' – these are the words of the Buddha. Many people are not quite so interested in the *ānāpānasati* and are more interested in the *satipaṭṭhāna* – four *satipaṭṭhāna*. These are generally called 'the four foundations of mindfulness' which the first one is the body, the second the feelings, the third mind, and the fourth the *dharmas* (mind objects). And these four foundations of mindfulness are taught with all kinds of different ways of fulfilling these four foundations and sometimes it can get quite complicated and people are juggling with a variety of different meditation practices. The way that is most efficient and most simple and most beneficial and most certain of fulfilling these four foundations of mindfulness is the practice of *ānāpānasati*. Certain people will only use *ānāpānasati* in the beginning stages and then move on to other techniques and they overlook the fact that *ānāpānasati* alone can fully perfect and fully complete and fulfill these four foundations of mindfulness. So, the easiest way to practice the four foundations of mindfulness is to practice *ānāpānasati*. It is not necessary to bring in other techniques in order to do so. *Ānāpānasati* is alone is sufficient. The Buddha did not say the following "I was enlightened through the four foundations of mindfulness" – he never said that. He did say "I was enlightened through the development of *ānāpānasati*." That is why here, we take the *Ānāpānasati Sutta*,<sup>1</sup> the foundation in both practice and then teaching about the mindfulness of breathing. We take the discourse on mindfulness of breathing itself as the basic place of reference rather than discourses on the four foundations of mindfulness because the Buddha himself said that he was

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<sup>1</sup> See *Ānāpānasati Sutta* (MN 118)

enlightened through the practice of *ānāpānasati*, not the four foundations of mindfulness.

We request to this point that today's talk be finished. Thank you once again for coming to Suan Mokkh.

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