

Ānāpānasati & Its Benefits

by Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu

Interpreted into English by Santikaro Bhikkhu

A Dhamma lecture given at Suan Mokkh on 10 March 1990

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 and 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 Buddhadāsa Indapañño Archives in Bangkok (suanmokkhbkk@gmail.com).

Today we will speak about *ānāpānasati* (mindfulness with breathing) and its benefits.

This talk will have the character of a scrutiny – for you to scrutinize your own understanding of *ānāpānasati* to see where you understand it correctly and where not; and then it also will be an examination so you can test yourself to see how well you understand.

There are many angles and aspects, levels and perspectives to *ānāpānasati*. We should know all of these thoroughly.

If we look at it in terms of science, then we see it in the scientific aspects – that there are certain principles to it, that if we act in a certain way, then certain results will arise. We can then practice according to these principles, exploring them further; and thus we can approach *ānāpānasati* scientifically.

We can look at it in terms of health and then practice *ānāpānasati* for the sake of good health. Health here has to be good on three levels – good physical health, good mental health, and good spiritual health or the health of our mindfulness and wisdom. *Anāpānasati* can help us develop all three levels of good health.

We can look at it in terms of art. *Anāpānasati* is something very refined, subtle, exquisite and beautiful; and further it's something very difficult to do.

Like all true art, ānāpānasati does not come easy. So we can see ānāpānasati as an art. It is in fact the true Buddhist art.

A European friend is very interested in Buddhist art and he collects all kinds of Buddha images and carvings, paintings. He's very interested in the architecture and decoration of temples and monasteries and things, and he calls all of this 'Buddhist art.' We've told him 'no, none of this is Buddhist art.' The Buddha didn't know anything about any of this so-called Buddhist art. That's not the real Buddhist art. Buddhist art is a very subtle refined method, is any subtle and refined way of eliminating *dukkha* from the mind. This is the real meaning of 'Buddhist art,' not all of that material stuff.

We can look at ānāpānasati in terms of Dhamma or Dharma [Sanskrit] which first of all means duty – duty for the sake of survival. Duty is that which brings about a correctness, a rightness, which is the necessary quality for survival – which reminds us of the biological principle of survival of the fittest. Anāpānasati is a means of developing true fitness of the body, mind, and wisdom so that we can truly survive.

If we like we can even look at this in terms of religion. But when we speak of religion we should always be careful to interpret the word 'religion' carefully and correctly. Literally, we can analyze it and it comes to mean the observances or practices which lead to a bond or to ties between humanity and the highest thing. If we understand religion in this way – as the observances which bind humanity to the highest thing – then we can see that ānāpānasati is religion itself, that it's the heart of religion.

All of these can be now scrutinized by you. You can take a good look and see whether you understand all of this or not, and whether your understanding of ānāpānasati and your ability to practice it are capable of bringing all of these benefits.

Finally we can even look at it in terms of superstition, meaning that, thinking about ānāpānasati as a way of finding and developing different kinds of magic powers. Even this can be done. There are people who put forth all kinds of effort and energy in order to do so.

Now you've seen for yourself that this kind of meditation is totally based in the breathing. It uses the method of breathing; and so ānāpānasati is a way of breathing. It's a very special kind of breathing that can control the world. If we know how to breathe correctly we can govern the mind, or master the mind, so

that it doesn't get caught up in the world, and so we can say that it is master of the world. This is a very special thing – to be able to breathe in such a way that it masters the world.

When we talk about mastery of the world, we mean that the mind is no longer influenced by the positiveness & negativeness which exists in the world. Instead of being under the power of these influences, the mind remains in a normal, original natural state, and so this is what we mean by having mastery over the world because it has mastery of these positive & negative things that we come across in our everyday life.

If we observe we can see that there are three basic kinds of breathing. There is very short breathing where we breathe very quickly – very short, shallow, and fast. Then there is another kind of breathing where when we breathe in we inhale to the limit, and when we exhale we exhale completely. In this kind of breathing, as we breathe in the chest expands but in the end the abdomen contracts. And then as we exhale the chest deflates and the abdomen will push out. This is the opposite of how we think it is. When people describe the breathing, they say when you breathe in the stomach goes out and when you breathe out the stomach goes in. But if we inhale to the limit, to the fullest extent, we'll see that it's the other way. That in fact on a very deep full inhalation the abdomen will contract a bit and as we breathe out the abdomen will expand. So this is something... and this has tremendous... certain very powerful influences on the body.

Another style of breathing is just to let it go on naturally – let the breathing happen in an ordinary natural way without regulating or control it. And then you'll have the kind of breathing you're familiar with. When we inhale the abdomen expands, when we exhale it deflates. So just breathe in an ordinary natural way without any regulation or control will lead to this other, this third kind of breathing.

(Excuse me, I confuse things a little bit). But now we come to the third kind. The first kind was this very very extreme, long, deep breathing. The second is just the ordinary breathing – when we let it go. And now the third kind of breathing, a third style of breathing, is the very subtle and refined breathing that takes place when we are in *jhāna*. Jhāna is when the mind is totally focused on one object to the degree that it only knows that object which is an inner mental object, and there is no awareness of physical things – of the senses, of sights and sounds, and so on. There's just this inner mental object. When the mind is

in one of the different levels of *jhāna* (absorption), the breathing becomes very very refined, and in this, it's so refined that there's no expansion and contraction of the abdomen. The breathing is so subtle – this is beyond what most people know – but the breathing is so subtle that there is... the abdomen neither expands nor contracts. This is the third kind or style of breathing.

So these three types of breathing which you can study and investigate... You can study these until you can breathe in all these different ways. The first kind is of course very strenuous, deep kind of breathing – the deepest, the longest kind of breathing – where we make the breath very deep, to the degree that when we breathe in the abdomen contracts and when we breathe out it expands. Then there's the second kind of breathing that is very ordinary, normal, and natural. The result of which is the abdomen expands on the in-breath and contracts on the out-breath. And then there is the third kind – the very subtle, very refined breathing from when there is *jhāna* – where whether we are breathing in or out, there is no contraction or expansion of the abdomen at all. So there are these three different ways of breathing or aspects of the breathing which you can study until you know them very well.

In everyday life we're surrounded by all kinds of things and often different emotions are coming up. A lot of times they're rather crude or coarse emotions that have been stirred up by situations in the world around us. We can remove these coarse emotions by breathing in a properly coarse way. By taking these very deep strenuous breaths, we can gain control of the emotion; and then by successively refining the breath, calming the breath so that it becomes normal and natural, we can calm that emotion away and we can make the breathing even more and more subtle so that the emotion totally disappears. If we know the right way of doing it, if we have the right method, we can master all these emotions that arise in ordinary life, all of which are stirred up by the influence of positiveness & negativeness. And so having this way of breathing, knowing how to use it, is to be able to master the world because we can master all these positive & negative things which give rise to the emotions.

We are able to control all of the different emotions that can get stirred up in life if we are skilled in practicing *ānāpānasati*. In this way we can deal with whatever happens, and then these emotions stop being such problems – they're no longer tumultuous absorbing things. And then when life isn't troubled by all these different emotions, it becomes very enjoyable. Life becomes fun. It's like a sport – when we have the ability to eliminate these emotions by using

ānāpānasati, knowing the right way to breathe and being able to breathe in that way according to the different situations and circumstances of life.

So we've been speaking of the benefits of ānāpānasati in a general way. We haven't gone into too much detail. Now we will speak about how to practice it – to speak about the method of breathing in and out that will lead to these various benefits.

We define ānāpānasati as paying attention to, taking particular note of, a certain truth or any truth of nature. And while marking that or noting that truth, we are aware of the breathing in and breathing out. This is our definition of ānāpānasati.

Even at the very beginning when there is just awareness – paying attention to breathing, the ordinary breathing in and out – still this breathing is a fact, a reality of nature. This breathing is part of nature, it happens naturally. So we can pay attention, we can note this breathing in and out as a truth of nature and we can continue practicing this as we breathe in and out. So we define ānāpānasati, whether in the beginning stages or later, as being the noting of a truth of nature while breathing in and breathing out.

Anāpānasati means knowing all of the things connected with the breath. It isn't just knowing the breathing itself but it's to know the various things arising with the breath and associated with it. As your instructors have explained to you, there are a number of things happening and correct ānāpānasati practice is to know and understand, to pay attention to, these different things.

One of the things happening are the *vedanā* (the feelings), and so we investigate these feelings. We see how they are connected to the breathing, how they arise while practicing ānāpānasati. We see their causes. We see what they are, what they are like, what their function is and what the results of these feelings are. We investigate all the facts of the feelings. This is another stage, an area of our practice of mindfulness with breathing.

We're surrounded by things which give rise to these feelings. As we experience all the things in this world, in this life, various kinds of *vedanā* are arising all the time. In ānāpānasati we pay attention to these feelings until understanding them thoroughly, and when we really know the feelings, then we are not deceived by them. Instead the mind is *above* the feelings. This means that the feelings no longer have the ability to influence and control the mind. And so the mind is above the feelings and cannot be tricked by these different

things in the world which cause the feelings. In this way the mind is able to be above the world, is free of the world, because these feelings doesn't get the mind all caught up in things. This means that we no longer make problems out of things in the world. Things in this life are free of trouble because the mind is above the vedanā.

Next comes the mind. Of course in all experience there is the mind as the experiencer of the experience, as the one who knows these things, and so we come to investigate all the different minds that can arise. By this we mean investigating the different states of mind, getting to know all the different states of mind that can occur, not only while practicing ānāpānasati, but the different state of mind that can happen in life. Then when we know these thoroughly, we train to be able to master these states of mind. The more we do this, the more... then that we can live free of problems.

The mind is the center of life because all life and experience happens to the mind and through the mind. The mind (the *citta*) is the center of life. We can call it even the 'owner' of life. When this mind understands the different states of mind and can control them or master them, then it's possible to find the state of mind which is most appropriate, which is most proper, for living our ordinary daily lives; and then we can live without any problems and troubles.

And then a fourth truth of nature is the fact of attachment. And so then we must study, we must investigate this truth of nature that there is attachment, and see the various attachments that there are and the things we are attached to. If we investigate this thoroughly, we will know attachment. We'll understand it. We'll be able to stop attaching to things and we can end, we can finish, all attachment, if we investigate this truth of nature deeply.

We can observe and see that there are many different things to which we're attached. There are the external things – the things out there in the world – and we all have a number attachments to things outside ourselves. And then there is attachment to the body – attachments to our own bodies and the physical sensations connected with having these bodies. And then there are the feelings, the perceptions, the thoughts, the states of mind which we attach to – which is an inner kind of attachment. Attaching to all these feelings and thoughts and things within ourselves. So we can see many many different things to which we're attached, both external and internal. It's important to understand all these different things.

The essence here is to see the truth – the reality of all the things we’re attached to. Whether they’re internal things or external things, we need to see them as they really are. We need to see their truth to directly realize that these things are impermanent – that they’re changing all the time – that all of these objects of impermanence are *dukkha*. If we attach to them, they become *dukkha*. And that they are not-self, that none of these have any substance or essence that can be attached to as ‘self.’ When we see the truth of the objects of attachment, then the attachment itself dissolves, fades away, and ends. This is what this fourth area of our practice is about – to see the truth of attachment and of the things we’re attached to.

Through practicing this fourth stage of *ānāpānasati*, we develop the ability to control or to master attachment. This means that we can live free of attachment in ordinary life. Whether it’s external things or internal things, as soon as we attach to something, it bites, it bites us, it gets heavy. And when we’re attaching to things, this heaviness is *dukkha*. So all these different things, whether things outside us – our husbands and wives, children, homes, cars, possessions, jobs, societies, all these things, money, silver, jewelry, clothing – attaching to any of these bites us, makes these things heavy and burdensome, and turns things into *dukkha*. Or if it’s things inside – all the various experiences we have, all of these experiences – if we attach to them, become heavy. These heavy experiences then bite us. They are *dukkha*. But by practicing this fourth stage of *ānāpānasati*, we are able to master attachment and then neither the things outside or the things inside can bite us. They can’t bite us. They don’t become heavy. They don’t stir up *dukkha*. This is the wonderful benefits of mastering this fourth stage of mindfulness with breathing practice.

The vast majority of people – and this probably includes you as well – think that it’s impossible to do anything in life without attachment. Most of us think that if we don’t attach we won’t be able to do anything. But through practicing correctly and thoroughly, *ānāpānasati* will tell you that we can do anything, we can do everything without having to attach to it. As soon as we attach to something, it bites us. As soon as there is attachment, it bites us and gets heavy. But through *ānāpānasati* we discover that we can do anything without attaching to it. We can perform all our duties freely without any attachment, and then these things don’t bite their owner when we can do them without attachment. And life that doesn’t bite its owner is a life that isn’t heavy and is free of *dukkha*. So we can find out that we can do anything without attachment.

Attachment has many many aspects. When we talk of ‘attachment,’ it also means ‘clinging to’ and ‘grasping at.’ There are other words we could bring in as well. Whenever the mind attaches and clings to something, then it loses its freedom immediately. And the mind that loses its freedom then becomes a slave to that whatever thing it is attached to. So the result of attachment is to become enslaved to things, to throw away one’s freedom in order to become the slave of objects outside ourselves as well as inside of ourselves. Through practicing ānāpānasati however, we can find out how it is to relate to things in freedom – how to deal with life and all the experiences of life without attaching to any of it in order to be truly free. And when we’re really free, then we’re not enslaved to any of these things. This freedom, this true independence, is a benefit of practicing ānāpānasati.

Whenever we attach to something, this attachment stirs up all kinds of emotions, and then these emotions bite us. Greed bites us. Anger bites us. Hatred bites us. When fear comes up, it bites us. Excitement, envy, jealousy, possessiveness, boredom – all of these bite the mind. Attachment is the cause behind all these emotions which bite our minds, which bite life. But when there’s no attachment, we are free of all these emotions and there is nothing to be bitten, there is nothing to bite, and so we are free. This is what we really mean by freedom, where none of these harmful emotions can bite us.

And when the mind is free, then we can do all the kinds of work that need to be done. We can observe this if we dare. For example, when we’re in the office at work or wherever we work. If you observe, you’ll see that when at work in our office or someplace, if there’s not good concentration, the mind will attach to things. And then when the mind is attached to something, it’s off with the attachment. The mind isn’t with the work that we’re doing. And so because of attaching to different things while working, we are unable to work properly. We don’t do a good job.

Even if we attach to our self as the one doing the work, then we’re unable to put our attention fully on the work itself. Even attaching to the work and to what we expect to get from the work, all of this attachment will impede the mind, will interfere with the mind’s ability to work. So because we often work with so much attachment – to other things, to ourselves as the worker, to the work being done, the fruits of the work – we often don’t do a very good job. But when we have the ability to overcome attachment, when the mind is free of all this attachment, when it’s free of the work itself, when there’s no attachment to this

life that is doing the work, when there's no attachment to the results/the fruits of the work, then we can really work. When there's no attachment, the work can be done in the most efficient and best way. This is one of the great benefits of non-attachment – that one can finally work properly.

One thing you can observe yourself is that it is possible to work for money, to earn money without any attachment; and that it's possible to receive that money without attachment; and then to keep it somewhere, in the bank or wherever, so that we have it available when we need it without attachment. It's possible to use the money to buy the things that we need without any attachment. It's possible not to be attached to the money itself, to its use, and to the things we buy. This is something that each of us can observe for ourselves by practicing correctly.

This is a very big problem for most people in the world. The problem of money – earning money, keeping money, buying things, using the money, the money itself, are things that many people are quite attached to and it creates many problems. But we can find for ourselves that it's possible to earn, receive, store, keep, and use money without being attached to any of it in the least. This is the benefit of being free of money – free because of non-attachment.

And then there are our families. It's possible to have families, to be members of a family without any attachment. When there's no attachment to the family, to being a member of a family, then the family just becomes a group of friends helping each other to build a good family and to work together to build a good life. But when we attach to the family, it's a whole other story. Because of attachment, the family becomes a huge mountain – a huge mountain that is on top of us. And when this mountain is on top of us, it flattens us, it smashes us. But when there is non-attachment, one can be a member of a family without any trouble. Then the family doesn't bite us. There's no *dukkha* (problems) due to the family. This is the benefits of non-attachment. This is the benefits of being free.

So we've looked at a few external things. Next let's look inside.

We can take life itself, life in all its different aspects and meanings; and any aspects of life, if we attach to it, it becomes a problem immediately. As soon as we attach to life, we make a problem out of it and make trouble for life. And then life is a source of all kinds of *dukkha*. But when there is life without any

attachment to it, then life is free. It's not heavy and it doesn't bite its owner. If we can live life without attaching to it, this is a tremendous benefit.

Even the thing which we love most of all, the thing we desire most of all, namely happiness, as soon as we attach to it, it creates trouble. Even happiness, this wonderful thing that we love so much, if we attach to it, it gets heavy, it gets hot, and it burns us. It bites us. When we are attached to happiness, then struggling to get happiness is *dukkha*. Experiencing the happiness itself turns into *dukkha*. The side-effects are *dukkha*. We become careless which makes more *dukkha*. So attaching even to happiness creates many many problems. When we can experience happiness without attaching to it, then we are really really free.

So we look outside and we look inside, we look inside and look outside, and discover that no matter what we attach to, it makes trouble. Whether we attach to things inside of ourselves or things outside of ourselves, this attachment gets heavy and creates problems instantly. When we see that all the things that we might attach to are just the source of trouble, that all attachment just makes problems for us and for others, then we learn that it's much better not to attach, that there's no need to attach. So this is why all these different things, attachments coming from all directions, we see in the end as arising from... we see that all attachment comes down to attaching to positiveness & negativeness. When we see this, it's possible to be free and not to attach to the positive & to the negative; and then when there's no attachment at all, then we are free. So this is why Buddhism teaches 'don't attach.' Buddhism teaches there isn't anything worth attaching to.

Something very strange about attachment is that even things that have passed us by, which happened long ago, we can still attach to these things; and then the things immediately in front of us – the present – we can attach to these as well; and even things in the future, even things that haven't happened, which haven't come, which aren't even real, because of thought we can attach to these things. And so we've got attachment all around us on every side and this just makes a lot of trouble and a lot of *dukkha*.

Or if we speak in Christian terms, we can say that if we attach to anything in this world then we cannot go to the Kingdom of God. As long as we're grasping on to something in this world there's no way that we can get free to enter the Kingdom of God. But okay, now we've entered the Kingdom of God – if then you go and attach to God itself, then God becomes a lot of *dukkha*, God gets

heavy. God becomes a problem. No matter what, there is not anything worth attaching to in this world or in any world or anywhere.

The state of not-attaching to anything at all is the Kingdom of God. The state of total non-attachment where there is no clinging to anything – not even God – this is the Kingdom of God. This is the meaning of liberation or the meaning of salvation. This is the true meaning of salvation – to be totally non-attached.

Now we can speak in Buddhist terms. As soon as we attach to something, it becomes heavy, it becomes a problem, it becomes *dukkha*; but when there's no attachment to anything, when there are no problems and burdens, then we enter Nibbāna. We are one. We experience Nibbāna immediately. As soon as there is no attaching to anything there is the condition of Nibbāna in the same way that the Christian, when not-attaching to anything, experiences the Kingdom of God.

All religions teach salvation or emancipation, liberation, whatever they call it. But in all religions they are teaching salvation which means just not being tied up or trapped in anything at all. As soon as we get attached to something, it binds us, it traps us and that becomes a lot of heavy *dukkha*. But salvation is to be not tied up, caught up, or trapped by anything at all. This is the meaning of salvation, of emancipation, no matter what religion we're talking about. It's this total freedom when there's nothing binding the mind, there's nothing covering or bundling us up, when there's freedom. And freedom means no *dukkha*, no problems, no burdens.

In the very first pages of the Jewish Old Testament, it teaches that you should not attach to good & evil. It's right there in the very beginning of the Bible. Taoism teaches not to attach to *yin & yang*. The Hindu teachings tell us not to attach to *punya & pāpa* [Sanskrit]. And then in Buddhism, we're taught not to attach to anything at all, not to attach to good & bad, right & wrong, or any of the other pairs of opposites. When there is no attachment, then we are free. There's no trouble. Life is truly free. So you all ought to take a good look at yourself and see what it is you're attaching to, and then liberate those attachments. Liberate them by practicing *ānāpānasati*, especially practicing this fourth stage or fourth tetrad that has to do with *dhamma*. In this way, liberate all these attachments so that there is freedom and peace.

You can all see for yourself without having to be told by anyone else, that in *ānāpānasati* there is non-attachment to the body, non-attachment to the feelings,

non-attachment to the mind and all the wealth of the mind, and there's no attachment to dhamma, to dhammas, to all the things whether positive or negative or whatever that make up this world. You can see this just by practicing. If you pass through enough practice you will see for yourself that in ānāpānasati there is no attachment to anything at all.

When there is no attachment to anything, then positiveness & negativeness cannot trap us, cannot influence us, so then there are no problems arising because of the positive & the negative, and we are free. We are free because there's nothing that can make any problems for us ever again.

Now the whole world is worshiping and indulging in the positive. Isn't that so? Take a good look and see how much the world is caught up and infatuated by the positive. Isn't this true that the whole world is deceived and trapped by positiveness?

So the positive is in excess. Positiveness is now excessive. And so we spend so much time and energy traveling around and collecting and buying things that will give us some positiveness, and so our homes, our houses are just crammed full of stuff that will be positive for us, that will make things positive for us. So our lives are full of excessive positiveness, and all this is because of attachment. It's just because of attachment.

So we hope that you will all be interested in ānāpānasati because this will give us the means to understand all the areas of life and live in response to things without attachment. Through ānāpānasati we can live in this world full of positive & negative things without being their slaves. We can be free of all the power of the positive & negative. If we really develop our practice, with just one breath we can completely sweep aside all the positive & the negative in the mind. And so we hope that you will be very interested in this practice. It has tremendous benefits. We hope you will take the time to find out how to practice, and then once you know how to practice, that you will practice diligently and correctly in order to be free.

As we mentioned at the beginning, you can use ānāpānasati as a science if you wish. Or you can use it for health. Or you can use it as an art. You can use ānāpānasati as dhamma, as a duty. You can even use ānāpānasati as religion. And it's even possible to use ānāpānasati as superstition for the sake of magic powers and so on. Take a good look at ānāpānasati and see all the different

ways we can use it, all the many benefits that come from it, and then you will appreciate what you have now available to you.

It's unlikely that in ten days you will achieve or experience all of these benefits and results. It's much more probable that you must continue practicing for a while until these benefits will occur. So this ten-day retreat is not meant that you're going to have all this happen to you at once, but this is a starting point where you can take the time to understand how to practice, and then you can put that into practice for the rest of your life.

If you wish you can come back for a second ten days or a third ten days in order to supplement and deepen your understanding and your ability to practice. But you can practice wherever you go. The important thing is to understand the basics of practice enough to be able to do it, and then you can add more refined, more detailed information as you go. The important thing, however, is not coming here for retreats or reading books or all that, but to practice this consistently. The retreat, books, whatever are to tell us how to practice, but it's all worthless until we actually do practice it. Through practice we can realize all the various benefits that we've been talking about.

And last of all we thank you again for being good listeners, for patiently staying with us, and we'd like to express our wish that you will progress in your understanding and in your practice of ānāpānasati until you reach its limit.

So thank you and we'll close today's talk.

• • • • •

Transcribed by Arthur Brown in 2015

Audio files: 5125330310030.mp3 & 1990-03A (3) Anapanasati and its Benefits.mp3

© Liberation Park, 2016

