SN 54.6 — SN 54:6 To Ariṭṭha (On Mindfulness of Breathing) | Ariṭṭha Sutta

English translation by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu.

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Text

To Ariṭṭha (On Mindfulness of Breathing)

Ariṭṭha Sutta (SN 54:6)

Near Sāvatthī. There the Blessed One said, “Monks, do you develop mindfulness of in-&-out breathing?”

When this was said, Ven. Ariṭṭha replied to the Blessed One, “I develop mindfulness of in-&-out breathing, lord.”

“But how do you develop mindfulness of in-&-out breathing, Ariṭṭha?”

“Having abandoned sensual desire for past sensual pleasures, lord, having done away with sensual desire for future sensual pleasures, and having thoroughly subdued perceptions of resistance with regard to internal & external events, I breathe in mindfully and breathe out mindfully.”1

“There is that mindfulness of in-&-out breathing, Ariṭṭha. I don’t say that there isn’t. But as to how mindfulness of in-&-out breathing is brought in detail to its culmination, listen and pay close attention. I will speak.”

“As you say, lord,” Ven. Ariṭṭha responded to the Blessed One.

The Blessed One said, “And how, Ariṭṭha, is mindfulness of in-&-out breathing brought in detail to its culmination? There is the case where a monk, having gone to the wilderness, to the shade of a tree, or to an empty building, sits down folding his legs crosswise, holding his body erect, and establishing mindfulness to the fore.2 Always mindful, he breathes in; mindful he breathes out.

“[1] Breathing in long, he discerns, ‘I am breathing in long’; or breathing out long, he discerns, ‘I am breathing out long.’ [2] Or breathing in short, he discerns, ‘I am breathing in short’; or breathing out short, he discerns, ‘I am breathing out short.’ [3] He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in sensitive to the entire body.’3 He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out sensitive to the entire body.’ [4] He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in calming bodily fabrication.’4 He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out calming bodily fabrication.’

“[5] He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in sensitive to rapture.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out sensitive to rapture.’ [6] He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in sensitive to pleasure.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out sensitive to pleasure.’ [7] He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in sensitive to mental fabrication.’5 He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out sensitive to mental fabrication.’ [8] He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in calming mental fabrication.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out calming mental fabrication.’

“[9] He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in sensitive to the mind.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out sensitive to the mind.’ [10] He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in satisfying the mind.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out satisfying the mind.’ [11] He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in steadying the mind.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out steadying the mind. [12] He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in releasing the mind.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out releasing the mind.’6

“[13] He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in focusing on inconstancy.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out focusing on inconstancy.’ [14] He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in focusing on dispassion [lit: fading].’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out focusing on dispassion.’ [15] He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in focusing on cessation.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out focusing on cessation.’ [16] He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in focusing on relinquishment.’ He trains himself, ‘I will breathe out focusing on relinquishment.’

“This, Ariṭṭha, is how mindfulness of in-&-out breathing is brought in detail to its culmination.”

Notes

1. The Commentary reads this statement as indicating that Ariṭṭha has attained the third level of awakening, non-return, but it is also possible to interpret the statement on a more mundane level: Ariṭṭha is simply practicing mindful equanimity—in the present moment, having temporarily subdued desire for past and future sensual pleasures, and having temporarily subdued any thought of resistance with regard to the present.

2. To the fore (parimukhaṁ): An Abhidhamma text, Vibhaṅga 12:1, defines this term as meaning “the tip of the nose or the sign of the mouth.” However, the term appears as part of a stock phrase describing a person engaged in meditation, even for themes that have nothing to do with the body at all, such as sublime-attitude (brahma-vihāra) meditation (AN 3:64). Thus it seems more likely that the term is used in an idiomatic sense, indicating either that mindfulness is placed face-to-face with its object, or that it is made prominent, which is how I have translated it here.

3. The commentaries insist that “body” here means the full length of the breath, but this is unlikely in this context, for three reasons: (a) The first two steps already require being aware of the entire length of the breath. Otherwise, the meditator wouldn’t know if a breath was short or long. (b) The fourth step—without further explanation—refers to the breath as “bodily fabrication.” If the Buddha were using two different terms to refer to the breath—“body” and “bodily fabrication”—in such close proximity, he would have been careful to signal that he was redefining his terms (as he does below, when explaining that the first four steps in breath meditation correspond to the practice of focusing on the body in and of itself as a frame of reference). But he doesn’t. (c) As AN 10:20 indicates, the fourth step refers to bringing the mind to the fourth jhāna, a state in which in-and-out breathing grows still (SN 36:11; AN 10:72) and the body is filled with pure, bright awareness (after awareness has been extended to be sensitive to the entire body beginning with the first jhāna (DN 2; MN 119)). Because the fourth step focuses on the stilling of the breath, there has to be a step in which the awareness is extended to fill the entire body. That would be this step.

4. “In-&-out breaths are bodily; these are things tied up with the body. That’s why in-&-out breaths are bodily fabrications.” —MN 44

“And how is a monk calmed in his bodily fabrication? There is the case where a monk, with the abandoning of pleasure & pain—as with the earlier disappearance of elation & distress—enters & remains in the fourth jhāna: purity of equanimity & mindfulness, neither pleasure nor pain.” —AN 10:20

“When one has attained the fourth jhāna, in-and-out breaths have ceased.” —SN 36:11 & AN 9:31

5. “Perceptions & feelings are mental; these are things tied up with the mind. That’s why perceptions & feelings are mental fabrications.” —MN 44

6. AN 9:34 shows how the mind, step by step, is temporarily released from burdensome mental states of greater and greater refinement as it advances through the stages of jhāna.