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9 Evolution of Breath

Article 9

EVOLUTION OF BREATH

During the time of the Buddha, there was an area called Kuru in north India, where people were very enthusiastic about spiritual pursuits. Many of them were ardently looking for spiritual solutions to the problems of life. The Buddha taught the Discourse on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness to these people at a township called Kammassagama. He presented the teaching as the way to ultimate purity and the ending of grief and suffering.

Many are familiar with the contents of the discourse on The Establishment of Mindfulness in an academic or philosophical sense. When the Buddha gave this teaching, he had the idea that it would help learners to attain something they had not known before, namely Enlightenment (Nibbana), the ultimate attainment available to a human being. What he intended was to impart a practical and achievable understanding of the method to be followed. The basis of that understanding would be the four foundations of mindfulness. The Buddha made it clear that this was the one and only way to Nibbana.

Fourteen methods are described. There are four sign-posts indicated by the four foundations, mindfulness of the body (kaya), mindfulness of sensations (vedana), mindfulness of the mind (citta) and the mindfulness of mental phenomena (dhamma). In each case mindfulness needs to be developed in conjunction with the following supportive factors;

Aedent Effort
Awareness
Understanding
Discipline

The word SIKKHATI in the opening paragraphs needs some explanation. One translation is training. A better translation is inculcating discipline. Breathing is taken as a physical exercise. It is a valuable mental experience which helps to keep away acts of indiscipline. After all the final aim of breathing mediation is the eradication of all roots of greed, covetousness and associated mental states. (This interpretation is being advanced by Venerable Dhammajeewa, head of the Meethirigala Forest Monastery, Sri Lanka).

The practice to be effective needs to be in a suitable environment conducive to the practice. A forest, the shade of a tree or an empty place with little disturbances are suggested. The environment needs to be devoid of factors that promote greed and covetousness.

The sitting position needs to be comfortable. The preference is for the lotus position, half lotus position or other position helpful to remain quiet for a reasonable period of time.

It is worth noting three factors applicable to the four foundations as described below:

- 1 The body must stay upright. There should be no leaning against say a wall. The posture must be balanced. The body will be energised.
- 2 It is necessary to bring awareness to the fore. This is of utmost importance.

Early meditators like Uddaka Arama Putta and Alara Kalama were probably aware of mindfulness. What was dominant in their minds may have been the achievement of Concentration (samadhi). They had attained the absorptions but were unable to reach enlightenment. It is necessary to bring mindfulness to the forefront, if one is aiming for Nibbana. Meditating with an object in view, looking for an achievement fails to usher release from the bonds.

3 The place of meditation needs to be appropriate.

In the initial meditation experience, it is natural for the mind to keep wandering around, as that is its habit. The very fact of having chosen a place, adopted quietness, and a good posture, with the meditator's commitment and determination would eventually succeed in reducing the wandering. It should not be taken as an obstacle. It is initially enough to know that the mind is running around.

As the attention is on the body, the mind gradually recedes to the body. To begin with you were observing the breath, but as the mind begins to stay close to the body, there arises understanding. That is a step forward. It may seem uninteresting or even unpleasant, but one has to ride over it. There is nothing to do now. It is passive breathing.

As one sits down the breath might be long and this can be noticed. Gradually it becomes short and almost not noticeable. There is nothing to get alarmed about it.

It is important to realise that breathing should not be done intentionally but allowed to happen according to prevailing conditions. For example, at the start you might be breathing fast, but it may become slow with time. It might feel heavy sometimes and light at other times. It can become very light and not even noticeable. You might even feel you are not breathing enough. The breath is evolving and changing in character. You just keep breathing naturally.

Your task at this stage is to simply observe what is happening.

**THE END OF THE 3 PAGE QSA DHAMMA MAGAZINE FOR THE PERIOD
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Issued by the President of QSA, Reverend James Wilson

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