

Overcoming Difficulties Faced during Ānāpānasati Meditation

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This discourse is collection of suggestions and advice to help Yogis overcome difficulties faced while practicing Ānāpānasati meditation during a 10 or 15 days meditation retreat. Hopefully this sharing of experience will benefit the Yogis and teachers who practice and teach Ānāpānasati meditation. This is a small way of supporting Buddhasāsana.

The main complaints and difficulties made by Yogis are:

1. Pain in the body,
2. Mind drifting due to lack of concentration,
3. Sleepiness and drowsiness,
4. Sleeplessness,
5. Distracting noises,
6. Appearance of visions from the past,
7. In-breath and out-breath too subtle to be recognized.

1. Pain in the body.

One does not experience body pain while watching TV or sitting in front of computer for two to three hours because the body changes posture frequently. However, during a retreat a Yogi meditates in a sitting posture for one to one and half hours and then subsequently practices walking meditation for another one to one and half hours. Practicing in this manner for the whole day could create some pain in the body for the Yogi. Some say it is like being beaten all over the body.

Two or three days after entering a meditation centre, a Yogi may experience severe pain in areas of the buttocks, thighs, knees and ankles. Some Yogis complained of not experiencing any peace or serenity but only pain and they expressed their wish to go back home. As these Yogis couldn't overcome these difficulties, they come up with various reasons to leave the meditation centre before the retreat is complete.

One must understand that it is natural to feel pain whenever a body goes through intense physical work. As children, when we first started learning how to run, cycle or lift weights, we felt pain after the first two or three days of these activities. But later, the pain disappeared and we began to enjoy doing these sporting activities. Some even went on to practice consistently to participate in competitions and won prizes.

When I went to teach meditation in Bali, Indonesia, after the completion of the teachings, I visited a Hindu temples revered by Hindus in Bali. The

highest temple was on top of a hill that required taking more than 1,500 steps to reach. Along the path up the hill, I found many local elders and youths.

They were merrily singing and talking while carrying bricks, sand, gravel and cement bags for construction works on the hill. They seemed tireless as they were going up effortlessly whereas I went up the stairs step by step slowly.

After visiting the temple, stepping down the stairs and reaching back to the monastery where I stay, I started feeling pain in thighs, ankles and knees starting from the same evening of the temple visit. For the next two or three days, I felt like I had been hit repeatedly by a stick. On the other hand, the local people I saw carrying heavy loads up to the temple did not seem to suffer as I did. They were able to carry the loads quite easily. It is a matter of practice. In our country too, there are people who do the same thing at Mt. Popa, Mt. Kyaiktiyo (Golden Rock Mountain) and Mt. Zwegabin. They too are running up and down while normal pilgrims go up and down on shaky legs and knees.

Similarly in meditation, if you have not practiced meditation previously, there will be pain in your body for the first two or three days. However, after a few days, you will be able to sit without changing your posture for several hours without feeling any pain. Your mind will not wander around too much and you would be able to concentrate more and have a better meditation experience.

According to the Buddha's Abhidhamma point of view, one mind moment (Cittakkhaṇa) and one thought process (Vīthi) cannot focus on two objects at the same time. Because of the mind is very fast, so it may seem like it is focusing on multiple objects at one time. So we think, the thought process knowing pain and the thought process knowing in-and-out breath are arising at the same time. Actually, these processes are arising one after another and not concurrently. Therefore when the thought processes knowing in-and-out breath are arising successively the thought process focusing pain body consciousness associated pain (dukkhasahagata-kāyaviññāna) will occur less and less.

When the minds which are knowing in-and-out breath were arising successively some meditators said their nose disappeared, head or upper body disappeared while they were meditating. At that time the minds concentrating on the breath were arising successively that body consciousness knowing the tangible objects were not arising. So Yogi seemed to feel as if his body had disappeared.

When this happens, some Yogis would stop meditating and open their eyes to check if they still have a body. Some Yogis told me that they feared that their body was disappearing and stopped meditating. I'd tell them that it is good that your body disappeared. I'd asked them in a joking manner, "Wouldn't it be better if the body disappeared for good rather than just for a short time? Then you wouldn't need to worry about it or have to change your postures to feel comfortable. They replied that it would be good but they still have attachments, and they're worried that those they leave behind would grieve for them. To clear

their worries I'd to tell these people a story about an old man who wanted to attain Nibbāna.

Once upon a time, there was an old man in a village who went to a secluded prayer hall in a pagoda near the village everyday to pray. An opium addict from the village also came to the prayer hall daily to smoke opium. The old man would pray loudly all the prayers he knew and the loud prayers of the old man would disturb the opium addict's ecstatic feeling while high on opium. The opium addicts had an idea that might stop the old man's prayer? He went to a village dance troupe to rent an angel's costume.

Early the next day, he wore the angel costume and hid behind the huge Buddha image. Like usual, the old man arrived and started praying about attaining Nibbāna within a short period the opium addict jumped out from behind the Buddha image in his angel's costume, grabbed the old man's hand and said, "Come along with me if you want to go to Nibbāna." The frightened old man said, "Please wait, let me discuss with my old woman at home." And he ran away grabbing his umbrella and footwear.

When the old man told the old woman at home about this, the old woman said, "Why don't you go with angel to Nibbāna? Why bother to discuss with me and miss out on this great opportunity?" The old man said, "I shouldn't leave you behind." And from that day on, he never went to the pagoda's prayer hall anymore.

If you go into deep concentration and lose the feeling of your body, then stop meditating because of this, it is just like the old man refusing to go to Nibbāna because he didn't want to leave behind the old woman. If so, you will be far from Nibbāna.

If you do lose feeling of your body, you should continue your meditation as subsequently you will experience even better feelings. In fact, this occurrence is due to your deep concentration that is free from any hindrances (Nīvaraṇa) and it stabilizes on the breaths as the great wholesome consciousness (Mahākusala Citta) is arising in your mind. During a fleeting moment of Mahākusalajavana Citta, together with Joy (Pīti) and Wisdom (Paññindriya), there exist a combination of Citta and Cetasikas totalling 34 mentalities. In Abhidhamma terms, these are seven universals (Sabbacittasādhāraṇa), six occasionals (Pakiṇṇaka) cetasikas, nineteen the universal beautiful factors (Sobhanasādhāraṇa Cetasika), Wisdom faculty (Paññindriya Cetasika) and a Citta totalling 34.

Among those Cetasikas, tranquility of mental body and tranquility of consciousness (Kāyapassaddhi, Cittapassaddhi) lightness of mental body and lightness of consciousness (Kāyalahuta, Cittalahuta), Flexibility of mental body and Flexibility of consciousness (Kāyamudita, Cittamudita), Wioldiness of mental body and Wioldiness of consciousness (Kāyakammaññata, Cittakamma Kāyakammaññata), Proficiency of mental body and Proficiency of consciousness (Kāyapaguññata, Cittapaguññata), Rectitude of mental body and

Rectitude of consciousness (Kāyujjukata, Cittujjukata) will arise at the same time. As these Cetasikas become stronger, your body will be peaceful and joyful, free from pain, and be able to sit and meditate well. Some Yogis feel so good that even when the time is up and everyone takes a break from the meditation, they will continue to meditate for more hours. (Note: These Cetasikas can be discerned when you reach the Nāma meditation stage. As these Cetasikas engulf your whole body, not only the normal pain but some long term illnesses and pain also disappear. I don't mean that all your illnesses and pain will suddenly disappear once you start meditating or meditation would cure all illnesses without requiring medical treatments. I say this according to the Buddha's Abhidhamma.)

I read in this book "Finding the right path after losing the way" written by Sayadaw U Zawtika (Mahamyaing) that some western scientists conducted a research on why Yogis meditating for hours can do so without pain and changing posture. As they put more emphasis on the physicality, they did some tests on what they can test physically. They took a blood sample of a Yogi tested it and they saw that there were more Endorphins than usual. These were released by a gland in the brain. Quoting Sayadaw U Zawtika.

"Once the Yogi's concentration improves and could sit for long disregarding the sensations, the body release endorphins. It is a combination of Endogenous and Morphin. This Morphin has the same effects like morphine used in laboratory. However, Endogenous is produced by the body.

A body will feel pain and aches once the level of endorphins fall. However, as the level of endorphins rises in the blood the mind becomes clear and uplifted. The body feels more relaxed. During meditation, endorphins level rises. As a result, when you can meditate well, you don't feel pain and aches. When your body feels a floating sensation, the endorphin level is high in the blood." Page 140 to 143 "Finding the night path after losing the way" by Sayadaw U Zawtika (Mahamyaing).

Those who are starting to practice meditation should not despair when they face pain in the body. If you persist, you will start to feel good sensations. However don't meditate with these expectations. Keep your mind in a stable condition and meditate regularly. These things will happen as your meditation improves. Time will come when these happens.

2. Mind drifting due to lack of concentration.

The second difficulty that might arise is that your mind might drift as you lack concentration. Due to this, some people change their posture frequently and complain of being unable to meditate. Your body posture is connected to your mind. Your posture is the result of your mind. If your mind is peaceful and does not wander, your body will still and you'll be able to meditate. The more your mind wanders, the more you'll need to change your posture and your body will not be still.

During the first few days upon entering a meditation retreat, the minds of the Yogis wander back to their daily lives, and the vision of their usual way of life makes their minds unstable. The combination of an unstable mind with visions of their usual way of life causes them to be unable to concentrate and meditate. Some never overcome this stage and return home in disappointment after coming up with various reasons. One of these reasons may also be because they are not used to staying in a meditation retreat. Once they get used to it their mind will eventually become stable.

A simple piece of advice to those who start meditating while their minds are not stable is not to give up on meditation. You should take Ānāpānasati meditation seriously. Don't follow your wandering mind. If you follow your wandering mind, you are not being respectful toward your work of Ānāpānasati meditation. You are dutiful and work diligently you can know and realize your in-breath and out-breath. Try to only be ware and aware and be mindful of your in-breath and out-breath.

The best way to control your wandering mind is using the counting method. The method is to count until you reach the determined number of in-breath and out-breath. As you count, you must not let your mind wander toward anything. If you are able to do this you'll be able to concentrate more and you'll see your progress.

Some Yogis note softly in-breath and out-breath as they breathe in or out. Once this Yogi achieves a level of concentration, he/she can stop the noting of the breath and mentally knows on the breathing. It is better to keep your mind on the breath without counting or labeling but some may need this method to reach an initial level of concentration.

The next step is, to practice the method of knowing long and short breath. And knowing the whole breath method also should be practiced. Having known these methods the Yogis must decide which method is appropriate and practice that method to subside the hindrances as soon as you meditate and as long as to subside during meditation period.

Sometimes as the mind gets used to concentrating on the breath alone, it'll start to wander again. This shows that your concentration sometimes lapses and that makes your mind wander off again. So you'll just have to keep on maintaining the concentration without letting it wander off.

This is something similar to a time when you are repeatedly reciting some verses such as school lessons and your mind wanders off to other matters. In such instances, the best remedy is to concentrate on the start, middle and end portion of your in-breaths and out-breaths. You must know throughout the whole breath from begin to end. But your mind doesn't follow with in-breath and out-breath. At the same point you must know the whole process of breath. As you keep your mind on the start, middle and end portion of your in-breaths and out-breaths, your mind wouldn't wander off much anymore. That is why it is important to master this method and practice it well.

Most of the time in-breath is slow and out-breath is fast. You may know start, middle and end of your slow in-breath but you don't know the faster start-middle and end of your out-breath even though you seem to know it while your mind wanders off to other things. This is because your concentration lapses on the faster out-breath and your mind wanders off as concentration lapses. So you may need to concentrate more. As you keep your mind only on the in-breath and out-breath, you'll be able to meditate longer.

Another important thing is to meditate regularly when you are building up your concentration. Don't speak or use the phone to talk to others. Don't even do your daily routines like reading and writing while in the meditation retreat or go outside for some daily chores or meet up with people.

Your mind is like a fish out of water on a land. Like a monkey or a young calf jumping and playing around, when it is tied to a pole for the first time, it'll try to free itself but will then gradually calm down as it gets used to the situation. The same goes with your mind and it'll gradually calm down and concentrate as you meditate.

When some Yogis reached this stage, they came to talk about their good experiences. But after a week or ten days later, they came back and reported about losing their concentration again despite not talking, reading or doing other mundane normal life matters. After considering what could have gone wrong here, we come to know that the Yogis were preparing to go back home and this was the main reason that they were losing their concentration as their minds were more on the thought of going back home. This is usual for Yogis who come to a meditation retreat for 10 to 15 days.

The mind wanders during the first few days of arrival at a meditation retreat. It will also wander on the last few days as it starts to wander back into your daily out of meditation retreat life. When you return to your home and your daily routine life, you wouldn't be able to meditate as much as you can while in a meditation retreat. So don't let go of your mind on the last few days and try to retain this concentration.

3. Sleepiness and drowsiness.

Another difficulty commonly encountered in meditation is sleepiness and drowsiness. Some simply fell asleep. They couldn't concentrate. The reason for this is the differences in sleeping and wake-up time between your normal life and in a meditation retreat.

Back home, most people normally sleep late after watching TV, video or surfing the internet and would wake up late in the morning. In a meditation retreat, sleeping time is early and you wake up before sun rises. As you could not sleep early when everyone goes to sleep but you still have to wake up when everyone gets up, you feel sleepy when you meditate. And when you eat too much you will also fell sleepy. You sometimes feel sleepy due to the weather. Certain types of meditation also make you sleepy and drowsy. These are the

most common reasons for sleepiness and drowsiness and there may be some other reasons as well.

The way to overcome sleepiness and drowsiness during meditation was prescribed in the Nīvaraṇa Chapter: Mahāsatipatṭhāna Sutta commentary and Pacalāyamāna Sutta, Sattakanipāta, Aṅguttara Nikāya such as

- a. Knowing your limit in food,
- b. Change from a posture in which you feel sleepy and drowsy to another posture,
- c. Bearing in mind the perception of light,
- d. Staying in an open area,
- e. Having a friend who has already eradicated sloth and torpor,
- f. Speaking words that are appropriate to a standing or sitting meditation postures and about ascetic practices (Dhutaṅga).

The six methods listed above will prevent you from feeling sleepy and drowsy. Knowing your limit in food means knowing how much to eat. Some eat too much because they have to fast after moon time in a meditation retreat and are afraid of being hungry in the evening. Some eat less as they fear that may feel sleepy if they eat too much but end up feeling weak and are unable to meditate. You must not overeat or eat too little.

Another thing is to change your posture when you feel sleepy or drowsy. If you feel sleepy or drowsy while meditating in a sitting posture, stand up and meditate in a standing position or practice awareness while walking. Sweeping the floor or offering flowers to the shrine can also help to overcome the feeling of sleepiness and drowsiness.

The third point is to bear in mind the perception of lights and color. That is to open your eyes and look at some bright place or a faraway site. And if meditator is able to practice Ālokaśiṇa (light), this will drive away the feeling of sleepiness and drowsiness.

The fourth point is to meditate in a bright open space that will help overcome sleepiness and drowsiness.

The fifth is to befriend a person or a good meditation teacher who had rid himself of being sleepy and drowsy. It would be difficult to get a good meditation teacher but do try to befriend a person who meditates well and is enthusiastic about meditating. Avoid a person who is lazy and sluggish in meditation.

That's why when all Yogis gather to meditate, everyone is able to meditate and concentrate well. If you meditate alone at your home, you may want to lie down and rest or walk up and do something else but at a meditation retreat, you'll hesitate to do such things while the rest are meditating.

Once Pa-Auk Sayadawgyi told us about a monk who sought permission to meditate in his room rather than in the hall with others, and permission was granted. The next day, monk was found to be asleep snoring while others were meditating in the hall. Some foreigners also felt they couldn't concentrate in the

hall with others so they tried to meditate in their own rooms. But there too they were unable to meditate as they didn't meditate regularly like others would do in the hall and they would get up and do some things that pop up in their mind when they meditate. So they finally ended up returning to the hall to meditate together with the others.

When you meditate in a group, you become considerate of others and limit your movement and changing of postures.

The sixth is to speak only enthusiastic words on meditation that will increase your concentration and remove the feelings of sleepiness and drowsiness. Avoid speaking about matters that'll cause you to lose concentration. But for people who are not interested in meditation, talks about meditation would be a cause for sleepiness and drowsiness.

In Pacalāyamāna Sutta, Aṅguttara Nikāya, the seven points explanation made by the Buddha to Venerable Mahā Moggallāna, have some similarities as well as differences to the six points above.

The first point is whatever perception you have in mind when drowsiness descend on you, don't attend to that perception, don't pursue it. Sometimes, if you keep your mind on good sensations done, you'll feel sleepy and drowsy. Once thus occurs, you should change your mind and concentrate on to other matters. Though this, you can prevent sleepiness and drowsiness.

If this is not sufficient to remove the sleepiness and drowsiness, you should ponder, examine, and mentally inspect the Dhamma as you have heard it and learned it, If this is still not sufficient, you should recite in detail the Dhamma as you have heard it and learned it. This is the third point, it is possible that your drowsiness will be abandoned.

The fourth is to pull both ears and rub your face, temples, arms and limbs with your hands. This will excite the feelings and remove sleepiness and drowsiness.

If this does not help, get up from your seat, and wash your face with cold water. Survey all the quarters, and if it is night time go out and look up at the constellations and stars. Afterwards, you can meditate again. But if this doesn't help, you should attend to the perception of light, that means you are able to practice the light kasiṇa (Ālokakasiṇa), this light kasiṇa should be cultivated and developed. This is the sixth way of removing sleepiness.

If concentrating your mind on the lights does not work, change your meditation posture. Practice awareness through walking and this will remove the feeling of sleepiness and drowsiness. When practicing awareness through walking, you must not look around. Concentrate on your meditation object and practice awareness of it. Some Yogis walk around mindlessly, talking about many things, as they walk hand in hand rather than being aware or concentrating on meditation objects.

These ways were mentioned by the Buddha in the Pacalāyamāna Sutta. Because He knew of the nature of the human being if practicing all seven ways

is not possible to prevent sleepiness and drowsiness, the time may have come for you to rest. In which case, simply go to sleep.

The Buddha had also taught in detailed on how to go to sleep, neglecting on your right side - take up the lion's posture with one foot overlapping the other, mindful and clearly comprehending, with your mind set on getting up. Go to sleep with full awareness of going to sleep and to wake up with full awareness. With full awareness of awaking, don't waste time changing your sleeping posture and stay lazy in bed. Get up and continue with what you have to do.

Don't go to bed without awareness. Don't wake up overwhelmed with obstructions toward alertness. Sleepiness and drowsiness are something that Yogis need to overcome and meditate in a sitting posture when it is time for this. Some meditate in a standing posture or practice awareness of walking when it is time for sitting meditation. And when the time comes to practice awareness walking, they either go back to their room and talk or sleep. Don't disturb others with your unnecessary that will also prevent you from obtaining a deep concentration.

4. Sleeplessness

Some Yogis say they sleep well when they practice Ānāpānasati meditation in a meditation retreat. But some have difficulties to sleep during this period.

The reason from sleeplessness may be due to the change of bed. Due to space limitations, in some meditation retreats, you may not have privacy as you may have to share a room with other people. As a Yogi is fasting in the afternoon during a meditation retreat, a Yogi might not be able to sleep because of hunger.

Sometimes, meditating the whole day could cause sleeplessness at night, due to nerves around the forehead and temple are so tense. Some Yogis when they attain Ānāpāna nimitta, the sign of concentration, Uggaha nimitta and Paṭibhāga nimitta, these signs may appear when they close their eyes and when this occurs when they go to bed, they will be unable to sleep.

Sometimes family and medical issue cause sleeplessness or prevent you from sleeping well with bad dream disrupting your sleep. If sleeplessness is caused by medical problems or fasting, take some honey or allowable drinks in the evening. If fasting causes medical problems and sleeplessness, simply take five precepts, have a light dinner and you'll be able to sleep well.

Some meditators who could not sleep due to meditation cause the nerves are so tight and tense, then they need to reduce your concentration on your breathing prior to going to bed. The cause of sleeplessness is mainly the nerves at forehead, temples around the face are tense, the feeling can be noticed.

For such Yogis, I told them about the autosuggestion method by Aung Win (Psychology) that I read about when I was young. His method is: As you

are going to bed, lying flat position on the bed, you must relax your mind and body. Start from the top of the head focus on the skin, veins and nerves, mentally recite “My all skin loosen, veins and nerves are loosen” or “All my skin, nerves and veins are relaxing, relaxing.” After that focus on the nerves and veins of the forehead, temple and face and relax again.

Then back of the head, neck, left and right of shoulder, arms till to fingers, back of the body, chest, abdomen, thighs and legs till toes, reflect similarly the relaxing of all muscles and veins of those parts. After relaxing from head to toes the whole body be soften as cotton wool and you will soon fall asleep. Some Yogis fall asleep before reaching the lower body parts. By this way if you get sound asleep, next morning when you wake up your mind would be fresh and clear.

The method suggested by Pa-Auk Sayadawgyi is similar to the one provided by Aung Win (Psychology). Take the softness, among the six characteristics of the Earth elements from the four elements meditations.

Focus the thick and thin skins, flesh and reins of the whole body and review and reflect the softness nature. From the head to toes scan the whole body, part by part, like that way, reflect the softness, the tightness and tension of whole body disappear and relax. Thus help you fell asleep.

5. Distracting noises.

For Yogis who have just started meditating, surrounding noises could be a distraction as their concentration is not yet deep enough. The sounds of coughing, sneezing, traffic sounds, walking sounds etc. are distraction when your concentration is not deep. It distracts the fragile concentration a Yogis has built up. Even the sound of things taken out of a plastic bag is a big distraction to beginner Yogis and that sometimes causes annoyance and even anger to them.

For local (Burmese) Yogis, the noise of loudspeakers may not be a big distraction as they are used to it. However, it certainly would be a big distraction and annoyance for foreign Yogis who are not used to it. The simple remedy would be to ignore these noises and concentrate on meditation. Concentrate on the in-breaths and out-breaths. As you gain concentration, no sound or noise will distract you anymore.

Normally people are living among noises and sounds. But as they are concentrating on whatever they are doing, these noises and sounds do not affect them much. But when they shut their eyes and undertake Ānāpānasati meditation, these noises and sounds become huge distractions because the concentration on meditation is not yet as deep as the concentration on their routine daily work. This shows the lack of practice in meditation. Your mind is not used to concentrating on your breathing in meditation while you are used to concentrating on physical and mental pleasure that surrounding noises and sounds are not much of a distraction.

Cetasikas (mental factors) of Vitakka (application), Vicāra (Sustainment), Manasikāra (attention) are involved in feeling any sensations or Vedanā in life. Similarly, concentration in meditation is achieved by the mind being put on a Vedanā or sensation by the same Cetasikas (mental factors). The reason why you are unable to put these Cetasikas on moral states (Kusalā dhammā) of mind such as concentrating on in-breath and out-breath, but instead putting it on immoral states (Akusalā dhammā) such as sounds and feelings that you like, is due to the lack of practice. The mind dwells on matters it likes, however through practice you'll be able to concentrate on your breathing while ignoring the distracting sounds and noises.

I heard that Sunlun Sayadawgyi told his followers to meditate in a place where no sound can distract you. Through this there'll be no distraction from sounds and noises.

In life, a place where there are no sounds is in an empty airless space in a laboratory. But you will die there as you can't breathe.

What the Sayadawgyi meant was that a thought process cannot dwell simultaneously on any two sensations. When you hear noises while meditating, your mind seems to be on both at the same time but is in fact alternating between knowing the breathing and hearing the sound. If your thought process are continuously on the breathing only, your mind wouldn't be on the sounds. That was what the Sayadawgyi meant by being at a place where there were no sound. Why not try this out?

You can try this out by placing a small table watch beside you when you meditate. When your concentration is not yet deep and single-minded, you'll hear the ticking sound of the watch. But when your concentration improves and can stay on the breathing, you will no longer hear the ticking sound of watch. So do not despair when you hear sounds and noises as you start meditating. Soon you'll be able to ignore it or even not hear it anymore. Another thing that the Sayadawgyi said was that internal sounds were louder than external sounds. This is more obvious during the night when you are unable to sleep. There wouldn't be any outside sounds but the thoughts that are forming inside your mind would be making a deafening sound that prevents you from sleeping. And those will be the biggest annoyance or distraction to you.

However, there's one thing that I would like to caution the Yogis. Don't achieve silence by falling asleep to be bhavaṅga mind (the life continuum) while meditating. Some feel so good and fall asleep. In that moment, they don't hear any sounds and know any sense. Some Yogis said: their all materiality and mentality (Rūpa and Nāma) are ceased in that moment. They attained the Path and Fruition mind.

This is not cessation of suffering and sensations. This is not a Citta (mind) that is having moral supramundane consciousness. (Sotāpatti path consciousness, Sakadāgāmi path consciousness, Anāgāmi path consciousness or Arahatta path consciousness) or resultant supramundane consciousness (Sotāpatti fruit

consciousness, Sakadāgāmi fruit consciousness, Anāgāmi fruit consciousness or Arahatta fruit consciousness). According to Abhidhamma, they are having a bhavaṅga consciousness. This is the consciousness a person has when he/she is asleep. Details about bhavaṅga consciousness can be learnt through the study of Abhidhamma. As this discourse is more about overcoming difficulties faced in Ānāpānasati meditation we will not go further into bhavaṅga consciousness. It is sufficient to say that when there is no occurrence of a thought-process or Vīthi, bhavaṅga consciousness occurs continuously.

6. Appearance of visions from the past.

Another difficulty faced by Yogis that have just started practicing meditation is the appearance of visions from the past. Visions of places they've been to, family members, siblings, relatives, mountains, forests, images of Buddha, pagoda, etc. as well as never-seen-before visions of angles, evil creatures, corpses, piles of bones, etc.

For some who do not have strong minds they feel fear when such visions appear. Some do break down and cry. Some consider these visions as real and follow them in a never ending train of thought processes. Such people describe their experience or visions in such detail that they have to be told stop.

When Vipassanā meditation stage has been reached, these visions are to be discarded by assessing them the three characteristics. However, during the early stage of Ānāpānasati meditation, these visions are to be ignored as something your mind created rather than real visions. Even if your visions are of Buddha himself with his five hundred Arahata disciples, you are to continue your concentration on your breathing.

When consciousness is not concentrated and wandering minds and bhavaṅga consciousness arise, these visions and images appear. As your concentration on breathing improves, these wandering minds and visions will disappear. As your mind clears, visions or images will instead become something like the clear sky: you will see Ānāpānasati nimitta such as Uggaha nimitta or Paṭibhāga nimitta may appear. Even if these do not appear yet, continue your meditation and you'll be to meditate in peace.

If you do not concentrate on your breathing and instead follow the visions that are the results of a wandering mind, you'll suffer headaches and aches. That is why when you meditate, you are not to follow any vision or images that may appear and instead should concentrate on your breathing. Yogis who speak too much or go outside of the meditation retreat are the ones who have such distracting visions. Sometimes, changing the type of meditation as one of the four protective meditations can also overcome the appearance of such distracting visions.

7. In-breath and out-breath is too subtle to be recognized.

Another problem encountered by the Yogis is the subtleness of the in-breath and out-breath which is difficult to be recognized.

When this happens, some Yogis change their meditation method or they breathe in-and-out more strongly. Some feel out of breath as the in-breath and out-breath become too subtle or unrecognizable. Some will stop meditating as they become afraid that they aren't breathing.

In such cases, I sometimes jokingly say, "Not to worry. Continue meditating or concentrating on your breathing as even if you die, you would have faced death with a good outlook allowing you to continue to a better next life." Some rebuild their concentration by breathing harder as they have the wrong idea that strong forceful breathing is better for concentration than the soft breathing.

In Ānāpānasati meditation, once your concentration is good and there are appearances of Uggaha or Paṭibhāga signs, concentration must no longer be on your breathing and should rather be on these signs. However, meditation must be developed starting with the concentration on the subtle breath.

Ānāpānasati meditation is to be conducted according to the guideline set in Visuddhimagga. Breathing mustn't be strong or forced. Meditation must not be stopped out of fear. Visuddhimagga has clearly stated that these are the stages that those who meditate will go through. First is to concentrate mindfully on the breath. Second is to know the long and short breath. Third is to know the whole breath. And fourth is to be calming the breath. As such, the breathing is expected to become subtle.

When you run around and work hard, your body produces more energy as the bio activity level speeds up and your heart beat rises. Your body will heat up and sweat. Breathing through your nose become insufficient and you'll start to breathe with your mouth open. When you are not doing hard work, your breathing is normal, your heartbeat and blood circulation is also normal.

When you are meditating, your body isn't moving and is still. As your mind is not on violent or strong movements, your breathing will become stable. Your body isn't required to produce much energy. Bio activity level slows down, your heart beat slow down, breathing becomes subtle and soft. However, your breathing does not stop. It only becomes subtle. As your body is not used to it, it may feel a bit out of breath. But once you get used to it, the breath in such a subtle way itself becomes good for you.

Visuddhimagga explains about this with an example of the breathing of someone who is climbing a mountain. It describes what not to do for those Yogis who lose awareness of the breathing. They are to contemplate that they are not among the seven types of persons who do not breathe. Instead, they should concentrate more on the tip of the nose. Breathing will become recognizable.

It is explained in the Visuddhimagga that they are to contemplate that they are not among the seven types of persons who do not breathe and that they are in

reality breathing and that it is just your mindfulness which is not strong enough for you to be aware of breath.

The seven persons who do not breathe are

1. a foetus in the womb,
2. a drowned person,
3. an unconscious person,
4. a dead person,
5. a person in the fourth Jhāna,
6. a person in the attainment of cessation (nirodha-samāpatti),
7. a brahmā.

Another example given in the Visuddhimagga a retaining awareness on breathing is a farmer ploughing a field with his oxen. To rest the oxen and himself, the ploughman unhinges the oxen from the plough and lets it lose while he takes a rest. To start work again after resting, he does wander through the forest following their tracks, but rather he takes his rope and goad and goes straight to the drinking place where they meet (the oxen usually go to drink water). The oxen will eventually come to that place or may already be there. After finding the oxen, he secures them, with the rope, and prodding them with the goad, he brings them back, yokes them, and goes on with his ploughing.

So too, a meditating person should not look for the in-breaths and out-breaths anywhere else than the place normally touched by them. And he should take the rope of mindfulness and the goad of understanding, and fixing his mind on the place normally touched by them, he should go on giving attention to that. For as he gives his attention in this way they reappear after no long time, he can continue his meditation subject.

Sometimes the breathing becomes too subtle to differentiate between in-breath and out-breath. In such case, increase your concentration and mindfulness as if you are putting a thread through the eye of a needle. As you become aware of the in-breaths and out-breaths, you'll feel at ease and peace. You'll feel good so much as that you are not willing to change your posture or stop your meditation. You will ignore external sounds and noises. You'll experience the five benefits of an intense state of concentration or awareness or Samādhi.

Another point to note is the difference of the amount of air that comes in through the two nostrils. Close one of your nostrils with your finger, one at a time, and see which nostril has more breathing go through. For some the left nostril breathes more and for some the right nostril breathes more. Concentrate on the nostril that breathes more and you'll be able to concentrate more easily.

In Abhidhammāttha Saṅgaha, Rūpa Chapter:

Tattha appanājavanaṃ iriyāpatham' pi sannāmeti. (Therein, the Javana of absorption also uphold the bodily postures.)

As your concentration power (Samādhi) increase, your body posture becomes more still and stable. Some difficulties faced in Ānāpānasati meditation include feelings of uneasiness on your forehead, temples, back of your head,

nose or eyes. The Buddha urges people to meditate because it'll make them to get the welfare and happiness. Through meditation, why could not be attained happiness? The Yogi has done wrong method or wrong practice. Thus feeling of such uneasiness should not be disappointed. Consult experienced meditation teachers. Find out where you have gone wrong and change. You'll be able to meditate better with ease.

In fact such feelings of uneasiness are due to the lack of concentration of the Yogis. To prevent your mind from wandering by following the methods mentioned in the preceding chapter. The thought that they have attained the Uggaha or Paṭibhāga nimitta but you still have not may come into your mind. Or you may be overly ambitious to attain such status in the short duration of the short term meditation retreat. All these would prevent you from concentrating on your breathing.

Overly trying to observe the breaths through your eyes could also strain the areas around your eyes. Because of the habit if you look the breaths through your eyes, should not be focused too much attention. Really the breathing should be observed mentally in a relaxed way. Don't expect much and simply concentrate on the breathing and ignore unnecessary sensations. Then those unnecessary sensations will disappear and you'll be able to concentrate on the breathing only.

Some have experienced such uneasiness in their earlier meditation sessions and meditate with the concern in their mind that these may occur again when they meditate the following time. Ignore this concern as well as you'll be able to concentrate on your breathing.

Yogis need to review what they are doing wrong in meditation and change it to improve their meditation. Through this, they'll be able to overcome difficulties face in undertaking Ānāpānasati meditation.

Some say they don't want to meditate. They consider it to be a boring thing to do so they ask what they should do. Some say the will to meditate to meditate is the weakest in the evening sessions.

To talk arouse energy, a wider discussion would be required here. The description in the commentary of Mahāsatipatṭhāna Sutta's Dhammānupassanā part on Nīvaraṇapabba and Bojjhaṅgapabba portion contain good points to be noted.

In short four protective meditations (Caturārakkha bhāvana) such as Buddhānussati and Metta meditation should be practiced to remove the obstacles toward meditation and make the mind fresh. Contemplate Foulness meditation (Asubha bhāvana), and Death Recollection (Marāṇa-anussati) can also drive away the hesitant mind set and boredom towards meditation. Through the contemplation of suffering rebirth, suffering of aging, suffering of sickness, suffering of death and suffering of four woeful states the Yogis must try to arise the knowledge of sense of urgency (Saṃvega-ñāṇa). This knowledge of sense of urgency (Saṃvega-ñāṇa) support to arouse the energy (Viriya), it supports to

develop the Samātha and Vipassanā meditation. Choosing one of these meditation objects and practice that would make you feel disgusted or create revolution toward life can drive away the boredom and hesitation toward meditation.

In conclusion, to progress in meditation Visuddhimagga has pointed out seven unsuitabilities to avoid and seven suitabilities to cultivate.

Āvāso gocaro bhassam, puggalo bhojanam utu,
Iriyāpathoti sattete, asappāye vivajjaye.
Sappāye satta sevetha, evañhi paṭipajjato;
Nacireneva kālena, hoti kassaci appanā.

Herein, the way of guarding it is this:

(1) Abode, (2) resort, (3) speech, (4) person, (5) food, (6) climate, (7) and posture.

Eschew these seven different kinds
Whenever found unsuitable.
But cultivate the suitable,
For one perchance so doing finds
He need not wait too long until
Absorption shall his wish fulfil.
The seven unsuitable things to avoid are:

1. a bad location to rest,
2. a bad neighborhood,
3. talking about inappropriate matters loudly,
4. people who are not appropriate as a friend in the meditation,
5. inappropriate food for meditation,
6. inappropriate weather conditions,
7. inappropriate body posture.

As a Yogis has to restrain (1) the eye faculty (2) the ear faculty (3) the nose faculty (4) the tongue faculty (5) the body faculty (6) the mind faculty together with sufficient Saddhā (faith/conviction), Viriya (energy/effort/persistence), Sati (mindfulness), Samādhi (concentration) and Paññā (wisdom/discernment), you will see significant progress.

May you overcome difficulties faced in Ānāpānasati meditation through past perfections (Pāramī), and present effort, reach successive stages of Samādhi and achieve Nibbāna and peace quickly.

Sādhu, Sādhu, Sādhu.