

***Sabbakāyapaṭisaṃvedī:***  
**A Breathing Meditation Puzzle**

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Mindfulness of breathing or *ānāpānasati* has a prominent place among the meditation methods taught by the Buddha. This doesn't come as a surprise, if we know this is exactly the method the Teacher used to attain his own enlightenment, but also to “generally dwell during rains residence”.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, he qualified this type of mental training as a noble abode (*ariya-vihāra*), divine abode (*brahma-vihāra*) and Tathāgatha abode.<sup>2</sup>

Instructions for this meditation are given in a number of suttas, most elaborately in the *Ānāpānasati Sutta* (MN 118), but also in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (MN 10), *Mahārāhulovada Sutta* (MN 62) and the others. The drawback of all these instructions is that they come as an unchanged, fixed formula, which pose a problem in making sure their intended meaning is completely understood. This problem is reflected in a number of different old and modern interpretations of the Pāli text. One among several points of contention is Pāli compound “*sabbakāyapaṭisaṃvedī*”, which appears in the Canon 17 times,<sup>3</sup> embedded in the following standard passage in *Ānāpānasati Sutta*:

“kathaṃ bhāvitā ca, bhikkhave, ānāpānassati kathaṃ **bahulīkatā** mahapphalā hoti mahānisamsā? idha, bhikkhave, bhikkhu araññagato vā rukkhamūlagato vā suññāgāragato vā nisīdati pallaṅkaṃ ābhujitvā ujum kāyaṃ pañidhāya parimukhaṃ satim upaṭṭhapetvā. so satova assasati satova passasati. dīghaṃ vā assasanto ‘dīghaṃ assasāmī’ti pajānāti, dīghaṃ vā passasanto ‘dīghaṃ passasāmī’ti pajānāti; rassaṃ vā assasanto ‘rassaṃ assasāmī’ti pajānāti, rassaṃ vā passasanto ‘rassaṃ passasāmī’ti pajānāti; ‘*sabbakāyapaṭisaṃvedī assasissāmī*’ti sikkhati, ‘*sabbakāyapaṭisaṃvedī passasissāmī*’ti sikkhati; ‘passambhayaṃ kāyasaṅkhāraṃ assasissāmī’ti sikkhati, ‘passambhayaṃ kāyasaṅkhāraṃ passasissāmī’ti sikkhati.”<sup>4</sup>

1 *Paḍīpopama sutta* (AN 54:8).

2 *lcchānaṅgala sutta* (SN 54:11)

3 Together with its variant “*sabbakāyapaṭisaṃvedī*”, it could be found in the following suttas: *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna sutta* (DN 22), *Satipaṭṭhāna sutta* (MN 10), *Mahārāhulovāda sutta* (MN 62), *Ānāpānassati sutta* (MN 118), *Kāyagātāsati sutta* (MN 119), *Ekadhamma sutta* (SN 54:1), *Kimila sutta* (SN 54.10), *lcchānaṅgala sutta* (SN 54.11), *Dutiyabhikkhu sutta* (SN 54.16), *Girimānanda sutta* (AN 10:60), and in the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* (1.3 Chapter on Mindfulness of Breathing).

4 *Ānāpānassati sutta* (MN 118), Chattha Sangayana edition, electronic version published by the Vipassana Research Institute, Iḡatpuri, India 1997.

"And how, bhikkhus, is mindfulness of breathing developed and cultivated, so that it is of great fruit and great benefit? Here a bhikkhu, gone to the forest or to the root of a tree or to an empty hut, sits down; having folded his legs crosswise, set his body erect, and established mindfulness in front of him, ever mindful he breathes in, mindful he breathes out.

Breathing in long, he understands: 'I breathe" in long'; or breathing out long, he understands: 'I breathe out long.' Breathing in short, he understands: 'I breathe in short'; or breathing out short, he understands: 'I breathe out short.'<sup>5</sup> ' He trains thus: 'I shall breathe in *experiencing the whole body [of breath]*'; he trains thus: 'I shall breathe out *experiencing the whole body [of breath]*.'<sup>6</sup> He trains thus: 'I shall breathe in tranquillising the bodily formation';<sup>7</sup> he trains thus: 'I shall breathe out tranquillising the bodily formation'.<sup>8</sup>

This makes a well known first tetrad of the instructions on how to practice mindfulness of breathing. In this sutta, it is further augmented by additional twelve steps, which makes total of sixteen steps of instructions. But we are here concerned with the third element of the tetrad and the key term: *sabbakāyapaṭisaṃvedī*.

In deciphering its meaning, we should first turn to the *Papañcasudāni*, the commentary to the *Majjhima Nikāya*, and see what it has to say. Unfortunately, Buddhaghosa commented only on the introductory part of the sutta and the part that follows after the four tetrads on mindfulness of breathing. For better understanding of this sutta section he merely refers a reader to his later work, well-known *Visuddhimagga*.

In this compendium of Theravada orthodoxy, mindfulness of breathing explanation is part of the Chapter VIII, "Other Recollections as Meditative Subjects". There, after quoting the source text from

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5 "The practice of mindfulness of breathing (*ānāpānasati*) involves no deliberate attempt to regulate the breath, as in hatha yoga, but a sustained effort to fix awareness on the breath as it moves in and out in its natural rhythm. Mindfulness is set up at the nostrils or the upper lip, wherever the impact of the breath is felt most distinctly; the length of the breath is noted but not consciously controlled. The complete development of this meditation method is expounded in MN 118. For an organised collection of texts on this subject, see Bhikkhu Nanamoli, *Mindfulness of Breathing*. See too Vsm VIII, 145-244." (Bhikkhu Bodhi)

6 "MA: The phrase "experiencing the whole body" (*sabbakāyapaṭisaṃvedī*) means that the meditator becomes aware of each in-and-out breath through the three phases of its beginning, middle, and end." (Bhikkhu Bodhi)

7 "The "bodily formation" (*kayasankhara*) is defined at MN 44.13 as in-and-out breathing itself. Thus, as MA explains, with the successful development of the practice, the meditator's breathing becomes increasingly quiet, tranquil, and peaceful." (Bhikkhu Bodhi)

8 Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli & Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya*. Boston: Wisdom Publication, 1995, p. 943-944.

the sutta (interestingly, the one from *Ānāpāna Saṃyutta*, SN 54, and not from *Majjhima Nikāya*), Buddhaghosa had to say the following about the section we are interested in:

“171. (iii) *He trains thus: 'I shall breathe in ... I shall breathe out experiencing the whole body':* he trains thus: 'I shall breathe in making known, making plain, the beginning, middle and end<sup>9</sup> of the entire in-breath body. I shall breathe out making known, making plain, the beginning, middle and end of the entire out-breath body', thus he trains. Making them known, making them plain, in this way he both breathes in and breathes out with consciousness associated with knowledge. That is why it is said, 'He trains thus: "I shall breathe in ... shall breathe out ...

174. Herein, in the first part of the system<sup>10</sup> he should only breathe in and breathe out and not do anything else at all, and it is only afterwards that he should apply himself to the arousing of knowledge, and so on. Consequently the present tense is used here in the text, 'He knows: "I breathe in" ... he knows: "I breathe out"'. But the future tense in the passage beginning ' "I shall breathe in experiencing the whole body" ' should be understood as used in order to show that the aspect of arousing knowledge, etc., has to be undertaken from then on.”<sup>11</sup>

Obviously the Buddhaghosa understands *sabbakāya* as a “whole body of breath”, with its three phases of beginning, middle and end. From that point on, this became the standard Theravāda interpretation of this passage, which has been repeated many times by various meditation teachers. But for some other interpreters this way of understanding didn't seem to fit well with the next step in the practice, where Buddha again uses term *kāya*, but this time obviously referencing to the actual body. At the same time he doesn't signal any change in the meaning of the same word, which is rather strange.

In the note to his translation of *Ānāpānasati Sutta*, Thanissaro Bhikkhu comments on this problem as following:

“The commentaries insist that "body" here means the breath, but this is unlikely in this

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9 “What is meant is that the meditator should know what they are and be aware of them without his mindfulness leaving the tip of the nose to follow after the breaths inside the body or outside it, speculating on what becomes of them.”  
(Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli)

10 Step one and two of the tetrad.

11 Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)*. Trans. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society (1991), p. 266-67.

context, for the next step — without further explanation — refers to the breath as "bodily fabrication." If the Buddha were using two different terms to refer to the breath 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). The step of breathing in and out sensitive to the entire body relates to the many similes in the suttas depicting jhana as a state of whole-body awareness (see MN 119)."<sup>12</sup>

There is another book in the Pāli Canon, *Patisambhidamagga*, with a whole chapter dedicated to *ānāpānasati*. That "makes this the longest exposition of the subject in Pāli literature".<sup>13</sup> The authorship of this detailed analysis of different kinds of knowledge tradition ascribes to Venerable Sāriputta. Here, we find the following explanation of the third step of the first tetrad:

"42. (§48). "Experiencing the whole body,' I shall breathe in, thus he trains himself; 'experiencing the whole body,' I shall breathe out, thus he trains himself."

"Body": There are two bodies – the mentality-body and the materiality-body.

Feeling, perception, volition, sense-impression, attention-mentality and the mentality-body – and those (things) which are called the mental formations – this is the mentality-body.

The four great primaries and the materiality derived from the four great primaries – in-breath and out-breath and the sign for the binding (of mindfulness) – and those (things) which are called the bodily formations – this is the materiality-body."<sup>14</sup>

Here we see that ambiguity of the pāli word *kaya* brought a new aspect. Namely, *kaya*, as body in English, can mean "physical body", but also can mean a "group" of elements. Here, the word *kāya* is taken in this second meaning and two groups of elements are identified: those which constitute physical, material body and those who constitute mental "body". Here's what Pa-Auk Sayadaw says, obviously having in mind this passage from the *Patisambhidamagga*:

"There are two types of body in vipassana: the materiality-body (*rūpa-kāya*) and the mentality-

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.accesstosight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.118.than.html%23fn-2> (accessed on June 19, 2019)

<sup>13</sup> Paravahera Vajiraññāṇa, *Buddhist Meditation in Theory and Practice*. Colombo: Godage International Publishers, 2008, p. 229.

<sup>14</sup> Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, *The Path of Discrimination*. London: Pali Text Society, 1992, p. 183.

body (*nāma-kāya*). The materiality-body is a group of twenty-eight types of materiality. The mentality-body is a group of consciousnesses and their associated mental factors. In other words, the two bodies are the five aggregates (*khandha*): materiality, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness.”<sup>15</sup>

Based on this Abhidhammic analysis of *kāya*, the same author further comments on the passage we are analyzing here:

“Here, *the whole body* refers to the whole body of breath, not to the whole body from head to foot. *Experiencing the whole body* means you know the whole in-breath and out-breath from beginning, to middle, to end. And you know it at the touching point only: at the nostrils-gate or upper lip.

The breath is nothing but a mass of mind-born *kalāpas* with nine types of materiality (*rūpa*): the earth element, water element, fire element, wind element, colour, odour, flavour, nutritive essence and the sound of the breath. Those *kalāpas* arise always as a body, that is why they are called a 'body (*kāya*)'.”<sup>16</sup>

This indication of not one, but two types of bodies was maybe also what inspired Thai monk Buddhadasa Bhikkhu for understanding the word *sabba* as “all”, rather than “whole”. Following that, he understood the term *sabba-kāya* to mean “all bodies” and in step three of the tetrad talks about “experiencing all bodies”.

“In step three, the aim is to experience all *kaya*, all bodies. The essence of this step is to feel all bodies while breathing in and breathing out. While practicing the earlier steps of *ānāpānasati*, we began to observe that the breath conditions our flesh-and-blood body. This next step, therefore, does not involve anything new; we merely investigate this fact more profoundly, clearly, and carefully than before. We contemplate in a deeper way that there are two *kaya* (bodies). We should continuously observe this while breathing in and breathing out.”<sup>17</sup>

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15 Pa-Auk Sayadaw, *Knowing and Seeing* (4th Rev. Ed.). Singapore, Pa-Auk Meditation Centre, 2010, p. 248

16 Pa-Auk Sayadaw, *The Only Way for the Realization of Nibbāna*. 2012, p. 34.

17 Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, *Mindfulness with Breathing: Unveiling the Secrets of Life: a Manual for Serious Beginners*, Trans. Santikaro Bhikkhu, Boston: Wisdom Publication, 1997, p. 57.

All these quotations are quite sufficient to conclude that Theravāda orthodoxy understands the meaning of our passage in a way that the meditator should keep uninterrupted attention on the full extent of every in-breath and out-breath, on all of its three phases: from the beginning, through the middle, to the end. Also, this attention should not follow movements of the breath while it's entering the body or leaving it, but stay at the point where it touches the body for the first time, which is obviously at the area of nostrils. On the other hand, this approach was not the only one advocated within the Theravada practice.

It might be interesting here to compare this “classic” Theravada interpretation with some other old Buddhist schools in India. Thus we have a passage from *Mahāvibhāṣā* of the Sarvastivadins, which gives quite a different explanation of the third step in the body mindfulness tetrad:

“Question: As one observes the wind of breath as entering by the nose and getting out by the nose, why is it said that ‘I breathe in and out perceiving the whole body’?”

Answer: When mindfulness of breathing is not yet accomplished, one observes in-and-out-breath as entering and getting out by the nose. When mindfulness of breathing is accomplished, one observes breath as entering and going out through all the pores of the body, which is like a lotus root.” (T 27, 136a–b)<sup>18</sup>

Thus Sarvastivadins take the word “body” quite literally and interpret “the whole body” as the entire physical body, with pores, involved in breathing. Knowing how Sarvastivādin ideas migrated into China through innumerable translations, it may not be a surprise that this interpretation is in accord with another one we find in the relevant parallels of the Chinese *Agamas*. For example, in *Ekottarika-agama*'s parallel to *Mahārāhulovada sutta* (EA 17.1 at T II 582b2), the third step in the instructions also relates to focusing attention to the whole (physical) body. But after that comes an interesting deviation. Namely, the next instruction directs the meditator to be aware if the breath is present or not: “at the time when there is breathing, he knows it is there; at a time when there is no breathing, he knows it is not there”.

This could be related to noticing gaps between breaths. The other option is that this instruction points out to the fact that in the states of deep concentration, breath becomes very subtle and

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18 Quoted in: Tse-fu Kuan, *Mindfulness in Early Buddhism*. London: Routledge, 2008, p. 71-72.

difficult to notice. On this phenomenon *Visuddhimagga*<sup>19</sup> gives elaborate analysis and somewhat oddly warns meditator that once the breath becomes imperceptible he should not discontinue practice and leave, thinking that the meditation is over. On the other hand, instead discussing existence or disappearance of the breath, Pāli version of the first tetrad as a fourth and last instruction instructs towards tranquillising “bodily formation”.

On the same track with other sources from the Chinese Buddhist Canon, which *sabbakāyapaṭisaṃvedī* understand as “the whole body” stands *Dhyānasamādhi Sūtra*, a compilation of various texts related to meditation, whose translator was famous Kumārajīva (344-413):

“Mindfulness [during] all breaths pervades the body, [while] being as well mindful of the out- and in-breaths. Completely contemplating the inside of the body [during] all out-breaths and in-breaths, awareness pervades and reaches inside the body up to the toes and the fingers and pervades every pore [on the surface of the body], just like water entering sand, aware from the feet to the hair [while] breathing out [and in], pervading every pore as well, just like water entering sand.”

However, this interpretation of the term *sabbakāyapaṭisaṃvedī* was not completely forgotten in the Theravāda Buddhism. In the 19th century it emerged in Myanmar with the U Ba Khin's lineage of meditation teachers, going against the traditional explanation given by Buddhagosa. Thus S. N. Goenka advised that after the initial two steps, during the third one we expand our field of awareness: “the whole body must be felt”, in the sense that “with the help of the breath the whole body is felt inside ... then it is also felt outside ... on the surface of the body”.<sup>20</sup> This means that after focusing on breath only, the meditator tries to feel whatever may be felt in the field of physical body. Similar to *Dhyānasamādhi Sūtra*, the meditator in the U Ba Khin/Goenka tradition is requested to systematically scan the whole body, from head to toes, moving methodically from one part to the next, “pervading every pore”.

With Goenka's meditation method gaining popularity in the East and West, this approach to mindfulness of breathing also got a faithful advocates. Therefore, today we have a number of contemporary meditation teachers who follow the same interpretation of the sutta text. But not all

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19 VIII, 208; p. 286.

20 S. N. Goenka, *Discourses on Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. Igatpuri, 1999, p. 30 and 31.

decided to take side and some modern teachers find themselves somewhere in the middle of this spectrum. Let's mention just one of them, Joseph Goldstein. In his book *Mindfulness – A Practical Guide to Awakening*, an elaboration on the *Satipaṭṭhāna sutta*, he shows himself being aware of both interpretations. Therefore, in a very skillful way, he tries to make room for both interpretations we are discussing in this essay:

“One trains thus: 'I shall breathe in experiencing the whole body,' one trains thus, “I shall breathe out experiencing the whole body.” One trains thus: “I shall breathe in calming the bodily formations,” one trains thus: “I shall breathe out calming the bodily formation.’

...there are two interpretations of what it means in this context to experience the whole body. It can be taken in its literal meaning—that is, feeling the breath throughout the body or feeling the whole body as we breathe. The second interpretation of “experiencing the whole body” is found in the Buddhist commentaries, which say that this phrase refers to the whole “breath body.” This means that we train experiencing the beginning, middle, and end of each breath. We go from simply knowing whether the breath is long or short to feeling the breath more intimately, experiencing the entire flow of changing sensations with each in- and out-breath.

As mentioned earlier, both interpretations can be seen as different skillful means to apply at the appropriate time. If we're too controlling of the breath, zeroing in on it may not be helpful. It might be better to be aware of the breath in the larger context of the whole body. On the other hand, if we're somewhat spaced out, lost in the wandering mind, narrowing our focus to just the stream of sensations of the breath could strengthen our mindfulness and concentration.”<sup>21</sup>

Based on what has been discussed so far, to the best of my understanding, it seems that the term *sabbakāyapaṭisaṃvedī* in the *Ānāpānasati Sutta* instructions on body contemplation refers to the whole body and not to the “breath body”. If it would refer to the breath only and its three main points, that would be in a way repeating of the previous exercise in this tetrad. Since to know if the breath is short or long, we already need to clearly distinguish its beginning and end. On the other

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21 Joseph Goldstein, *Mindfulness – A Practical Guide to Awakening*. Boulder:Sounds True, 2013, p. 52.

hand, when focusing on the whole body, we make the transition from focusing exclusively on the breath to observing a wider context in which this natural process occurs. Mindful connecting our breathing and body brings them in harmony. Now we are aware or “mindfully experiencing” the whole body rhythmically breathing. This starts to beneficially effect our body, so we are prepared for the next, and the last step of the tetrad. Since the breath has already become calm and steady by that time, we use it to calm the body as a whole. Thus harmonized, these two further affect the mind, dampening the constant resurfacing of the mental impurities and making the mind also steady and focused. Now we have a strong union of breath, body and mind, who supporting each other make up an excellent tool for observing and penetrating all physical and mental phenomena appearing in the field of our experience, from moment to moment. This is a safe way to liberating insight.

*Ānāpānasati* is one among several contemplations of the *body*, which use one of its functions, the breath. Therefore, its goal should be experiencing and calming the body, not experiencing and calming the breath. As I see it, breath is here just a tool. The same way as in cemetery contemplation a corpse is just a tool and not the goal. Or, in the contemplation of the postures, walking, sitting, standing and laying down are just a tool, not a goal.