

The Mystery of the Breath Nimitta

or, *The Case of the Missing Simile*

An Essay on Aspects of the
Practice of Breath Meditation

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Introduction

As the title suggests, there is a significant puzzle to be solved by any meditator or scholar who tries to clearly understand the qualities of experience which accompany the transition from mere attention to respiration to full immersion in jhanic consciousness. I will attempt to show that there are good grounds for confusion on this matter as one traces the historical progression of the commentarial accounts from the *Patisambhidamagga* (*Pat*) through the *Vimuttimagga* (*Vim*) to the later *Visuddhimagga* (*Vis*). Since the *Visuddhimagga* is so influential and so widely quoted by modern teachers, it would seem critical that it is reliable and, if in certain aspects it is not, then, with supporting evidence, to show clearly why it is not.

The body of this essay will show that a description of the mind of the jhanic meditator found in the Canon itself and quoted in the *Patisambhidamagga* as a simile comparing the mind with a full, clear moon, degenerates to a mistaken literalization of these images as internally produced visual data. Since the contents of mind are not easy to point to, the Buddha frequently used similes comparing visual and other sense objects with mental contents in order for meditators to clearly understand what they should be seeking and experiencing. In religious traditions of all kinds we often find a naive tendency to take literally what is meant as a simile. It seems this process has occurred somewhere along the line and has become enshrined in the *Visuddhimagga's* description of the *patibhaga-nimitta* or “counter-part sign.” It is important that new generations of western meditators not be misled by this probable historical error.

The terms “*nimitta*” or “sign” and *patibhaga-nimitta* or “counter-part sign” are frequently referred to in this essay, and it is best to clarify their meaning at the outset. The “sign” means a characteristic mark or phenomenon which accompanies and helps identify an experience. For example, the flu is often accompanied by weakness and nausea; here nausea would be a sign of the flu. Extreme joy may be accompanied by a feeling of lightness of body and tears; these would be signs of joy. A doctor looks for certain signs which characteristically accompany

specific illnesses. In the same way, certain signs are characteristic of entering deep states of right concentration and are intrinsic to the jhanic state. According to the definitions (taken from Commentarial sources) found in Nyanatiloka's *Buddhist Dictionary*, there are three types of *nimitta*.

The first type is the *parikamma-nimitta*, which refers to the perception of the object at the very beginning of concentration - it is also known as the "preparatory image or sign." When the mind reaches a weak degree of concentration, a still unsteady and unclear image or sign called the "acquired sign" (*uggaha-nimitta*) arises. This perception precedes the appearance of an entirely clear and static image called the "counter-image" or "counter-sign" (the *patibbaga-nimitta*). The appearance of this third type of *nimitta* signals the appearance of neighbourhood (or access) concentration, the state that precedes full jhanic absorption.

Both of these states share the same sign but differ only in the intensity of the component (state) factors. As mentioned in this definition, the counter-part sign is understood as a more refined and clarified version of the sign and is the natural result of heightened awareness and concentration. By knowing these signs, both the student and teacher are helped to assess the success or failure of the corresponding concentration attainments.

Discussion

Mindfulness of in-and-out breathing (*anapanasati*) is one of the most important among the subjects or working grounds for meditation recommended by the Buddha. It is also one of the most popular meditation methods used by past and present generations of Theravada Buddhist practitioners seeking to complete the noble path of deliverance. The method is described in a number of suttas belonging to the Pali Canon (e.g., *M* 118, *M* 10, *D* 22). However, the suttas are quite concise, and at times sparse, in their treatment of meditation methods. Hence, one finds post-canonical exegetical works having as their main purpose the comment, explanation, complement, or clarification

of texts that may be deemed abstruse or lacking information within the Canon.

Concerning the subject of breathing meditation, three such commentarial works, the *Visuddhimagga* (500 CE; 1st Engl. ed. 1956), the *Vimuttimagga* (100 CE ?; 1st Engl. ed. 1961) and the *Patisambhidamagga* (300 BCE ?; 1st Engl. ed. 1982) are at present available in English translation. Both teachers and students use them widely as valuable references for clarifying key aspects of the practice. Traditionally the *Visuddhimagga*, the latest work of the three, has been used and considered perhaps the most authoritative standard to be followed as a manual of meditation.

On the subject of the sign (*nimitta*) and counter-part sign (*patibhaga-nimitta*), which arise during breath meditation, there are significant discrepancies between the descriptions found in the *Visuddhimagga* and *Vimuttimagga*. Diverse written works by modern teachers mention the characteristics of sign and counter-part sign appearing during breath meditation. Often these descriptions take the classic simile description found in the *Visuddhimagga*, perhaps as a cautious attempt at not straying from orthodoxy. However, as we show below, this description of the sign (learning or counter-part) may turn out to be quite misleading and, as often expressed by frustrated meditators, unclear. In the *Visuddhimagga* description of mindfulness of breathing (*Vis* 213-15, p.277), para. 213 one reads:

...So too, the bhikkhu 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 his attention to that. For as he gives his attention in this way they reappear after no long time, as the oxen did at the drinking place where they met. So he can secure them with the rope of mindfulness, and yoking them in that same place and prodding them with the goad of understanding, he can keep on applying himself to the meditation subject.

214. When he does so in this way, the sign [see corresponding note, next paragraph] soon appears to him. But it is not the same for all; on the contrary, some say that when it appears it does so to certain people producing a light touch like cotton or silk cotton or a draught.

215. But this is the exposition given in the commentaries: It appears to some like a star or a cluster of gems or a cluster of pearls, to others with a rough touch like that of silk- cotton seeds or a peg made of heartwood, to others like a long braid string or a wreath of flowers or a *puff of smoke*, to others like a stretched-out *cobweb* or a *film of cloud* or a lotus flower or a chariot wheel or the *moon's disk* or the *sun's disk*. [*Emphasis mine*].

A note taken from a commentary to the *Visuddhimagga* reads: “The sign’ is the learning sign and the counterpart sign, for both are stated here together. Herein, the three similes beginning with cotton are properly the learning sign, the rest are both. ‘Some’ are certain teachers. The similes beginning with the ‘cluster of gems’ are properly the counterpart sign.” (*Paramattha-manjusa, Vis Atthakatha; Vis* p.786, n.58).

The similes in the preceding sections (*Vis* 214-15) represent both tactile and visual sense perceptions. The following extracts are presented for the reader to assess whether a mix-up came about as a result of an error in the transmission (perhaps an error in written transcription) based on data obtained from earlier commentarial material such as the *Vimuttimagga* and the canonical *Patisambhidamagga*, or of having taken literally what originally was meant as a simile.

The *Vimuttimagga* (p.68), in referring to the “discerning of qualities” for the diverse meditation subjects, states that “...one subject of meditation seizes the sign through contact. Namely, mindfulness of respiration. And again, one subject of meditation seizes the sign through sight or contact. Namely, air *kasina*.” This distinction is critical. It shows that breath meditation is different from other concentration objects in that it is exclusively tactile. Visual objects may be perceived during breathing meditation as a side effect for some meditators; however, the meditator should

remain focused exclusively on the tactile sensation of breath. Thus, as mentioned in the *Patisambhidamagga* (170, p.172):

...the bhikkhu sits, having established mindfulness at the nose tip or on the upper lip, without giving attention to the in-breaths and out-breaths as they approach and recede,...the body and cognizance in one who is energetic [in this endeavour] becomes wieldy,...his applied thoughts are stilled...[and] his underlying tendencies come to be done away with....

Going back to the *Visuddhimagga* similes given above (214-15), and comparing them with what one finds in the corresponding description in the *Vimuttimagga* (Mindfulness of Respiration. Procedure, pp.158-59; see paragraph below), one finds that they are diametrically opposed in apparent intended meaning. Whereas the *Visuddhimagga* similes are given in terms of what one may find as the sign to be dwelled upon, in the *Vimuttimagga* one finds words of caution so as to abstain from attending to such perceptions (instead of attending to the tactile respiration sign). The pertinent fragment from the *Vimuttimagga* is transcribed in full:

To the yogin who attends to the incoming breath with mind that is cleansed of the nine lesser defilements the image arises with a pleasant feeling similar to that which is produced in the action of spinning cotton or silk cotton. Also, it is likened to the pleasant feeling produced by a breeze. Thus in breathing in and out, air touches the nose or the lip and causes the setting-up of air perception mindfulness. This does not depend on colour or form. This is called the image. If the yogin develops the image [sign] and increases it at the nose-tip, between the eyebrows, on the forehead or establishes it in several places, he feels as if his head were filled with air. Through increasing in this way his whole body is charged with bliss. This is called perfection.

And again, there is a yogin: he sees several images from the beginning. He sees various forms such as *smoke, mist, dust, sand of gold*, or he experiences something similar to the

pricking of a needle or to an ant's bite. If his mind does not become clear regarding these different images, he will be confused[!]. Thus he fulfils overturning and does not gain the perception of respiration. If his mind becomes clear, the yogin does not experience confusion. He attends to respiration and *he does not cause the arising of other perceptions [emphasis mine]*. Meditating thus he is able to end confusion and acquire the subtle image [sign]. And he attends to respiration with mind that is free. That image [sign] is free. Because that image [sign] is free, desire arises. Desire being free, that yogin attends respiration with equipoise. Equipoise, desire and joy being free, he attends to respiration, and his mind is not disturbed. If his mind is not disturbed, he will destroy the hindrances, and arouse the meditation (*jhana*) factors. Thus this yogin will reach the calm and sublime fourth meditation, *jhana*. This is as was fully taught above.

These warnings not to be distracted may be directly derived from the Mindfulness of Breathing Discourse (*M* 118.26): “I do not say there is development of breathing for one who is forgetful, who is not fully aware.”

The phrase “pleasant feeling similar to that which is produced in the action of spinning cotton or silk cotton” should be understood as the pleasant tactile sensation experienced at a certain point on the hand of the weaver who supports or guides, while at the same time spinning, a line of cotton. The simile interpreted in this way is appropriate in the sense that the initial contact with the line is felt in a coarse way and eventually changes in quality (numbness, pressure, heat, etc.) to a different quality of perception by effect of the sustained friction. This is a more refined simile than found in the *Visuddhimagga*, which settles for the static image of “the touch of cotton.”

The sentence “this does not depend on colour or form” makes it quite clear that the meditator should not expect the sign of respiration mindfulness as a visual image, since it is not possible to conceive of a visual perception lacking both colour and form. What may be inferred from the sentence is that the sign is a tactile

percept. Incidentally, in the *Patisambhidamagga*, the earliest and most extensive source treatise on breathing, there is no mention in the whole section on breathing meditation of a visual or “light” *nimitta*.

A great mystery is solved when one realizes that most of the images ascribed to the counter-sign in the *Visuddhimagga* and to the “distractions” in the *Vimuttimagga* are found in the earlier *Patisambhidamagga* as part of a metaphorical description of the bhikkhu liberated from the defilements on account of his distinction in the practice of mindfulness of breathing. The descriptions follow:

Whose mindfulness of breathing in and out is perfect, well developed, and gradually brought to growth according as the Buddha taught, ‘tis he illuminates the world just like the full moon free from cloud’ (*Pat* III, 171, p.172).

And,

Just like the *full moon* free from *cloud*: Defilements are like clouds, the noble ones’ knowledge is like the moon, the bhikkhu is like the deity’s son who possesses the full moon. As the moon when freed from *cloud*, freed from *mist*, freed from *smoke* and *dust*, delivered from the clutches of the Eclipse-Demon Rahu, *gleams* and *glows* and *shines*, so too the bhikkhu who is delivered from all defilements gleams and glows and shines. Hence ‘just like the full moon free from cloud’ was said (*Pat* 182, p.175). [*Emphasis mine*]

Here, what is given canonically as a simile for the mind, in the *Vimuttimagga* is taken literally as visual percepts, although appropriately, given as images to which one should not pay attention. The *Visuddhimagga*, however, both mistakenly takes the similes “smoke,” “mist,” “dust,” “gleam,” “glows,” “shines,” and “moon,” as literal visual images, and also misapprehends them as the counter-sign, the mark of success(!), in direct opposition to the *Vimuttimagga*.

One can only wonder how these metaphorical images, found at the end of the section describing breathing meditation in the *Patisambhidamagga*, eventually became literal visual events related

to meditation practice in later commentarial works. From the evidence presented in this note, it may seem advisable to consider both the *Vimuttimaggā* and the *Patisambhidamaggā* as more reliable texts as far as breathing meditation is concerned.

Only in the *Patisambhidamaggā* is the material handled appropriately. Similes for the quality of mind such as “clear,” “illuminated,” or “free from clouds,” are treated as similes, and furthermore the simile images of “clouds,” “mist,” etc., are properly understood as impediments to that clarity. The editors (traditionally Acariya Buddhaghosa) of the *Visuddhimagga* seem rather uncomfortable with the “diversity of perception” of the various *nimittas* for breath meditation and demonstrate their uneasiness by explaining that such diversity originates in the mere uniqueness of meditators’ perceptions (see quotation, next paragraph). Neither this explanation nor the need for it appears in the earlier commentaries.

216. In fact this resembles an occasion when a number of bhikkhus are sitting together reciting a *suttanta*. When a bhikkhu asks, ‘What does this sutta appear like to you?’, one says, ‘It appears to me like a great mountain torrent,’ another ‘To me it is like a line of forest trees’, another ‘To me it is like a spreading fruit tree giving cool shade’. For the one sutta appears to them differently because of the difference in their perception. Similarly this single meditation subject appears differently because of difference in perception. It is born of perception, its source is perception, it is produced by perception. Therefore it should be understood that when it appears differently it is because of difference in perception (*Vis VIII, 216, p.278*).

I am sure many a meditator has wondered why the Buddha had failed to mention the critical information of the “sign” and “counter-sign” in breath meditation, which the *Visuddhimagga* has deemed so critical to success in jhanic practice. I hope this essay has shown that the Buddha’s description of the practise of breath meditation contains all necessary and sufficient information for success.

I would add that the only sign of *jhana* which is reliable, and which applies in all cases, is the description of the *jhana* factors given by the Buddha Himself, whether the meditation object is visual or tactile. I would further hope that the meditator realizes that the progressive clarity and refinements of his or her perception of the object of meditation are simply the “side-effects” of clarity and illumination of the still and focused mind.

Lastly, I would emphasize that the object in respiration is contact with air. The quality of the air element is critically important to this meditation. If the Buddha were interested in mere sensation of contact then it would be simpler to touch one’s nose with the fingers. The taking on of the lightness of air as an experience of the body is critical. As the *Vimuttimagga* says:

He feels as if his head were filled with air. Through increasing in this way his whole body is charged with bliss. This is called perfection. [*Previously quoted*].

Location, Location, Location: A Small Related Matter

A related secondary matter regarding the breath *nimitta* is, once again, a traceable misunderstanding which has evolved to its final form in the *Visuddhimagga*. A critical phrase is used in the *Satipatthana* (Four Foundations of Mindfulness) and *Anapanasati Suttas*, that is: “*parimukham satim upatthapetva*,” which is often translated as “setting mindfulness before him.” One is then left to wonder why the *Patisambhidamagga*, the *Vimuttimagga*, and the *Visuddhimagga* all confidently give the location of breath contact as the nostrils. Furthermore, we find in the three works: “either at the nose or lip.” And here Buddhaghosa, the editor, gives an explanation that a “long-nosed man can feel the breath at his nostril as it passes through his nose. A short-nosed man however, feels it on his upper lip.” This is a strange bit of business if one thinks about it, because even if one is a “short-nosed man” one can only feel the exhalation of warm air out the nostrils onto the upper lip. We are now missing the entire in-breath. So it seems we have another puzzle.

If we look back to the original sutta at the word “*mukha*,” it literally and sensibly means “entrance” or “mouth.” If we give it this obvious meaning we have: “He fixes his attention at the ‘entrance,’” the entrance being either the nose or the mouth. The early commentators are assuming the reader realises that the meditator may be breathing either through his mouth or his nose. If he is breathing through his mouth he should direct his attention to air contact at the lip. It is very sensible advice really, for it would be a shame to have to give up breath meditation just because one has a cold or a plugged nose or, even more importantly, near death one may be only able to breathe through the mouth. Surely we should not give up at that point! So we see what began as a straightforward location of breath contact at the nose or mouth, i.e. “the entrance,” slowly takes on the perplexing addition of a “long-nosed and a short-nosed man.”

The first interpretation (i.e. “setting mindfulness before him”), of course, is true in general since the point of the exercise is enlightenment. However, that leaves us none the wiser when we ask “What exactly should we pay attention to?” The debate over the meaning of this phrase came about at a very early time, and in fact all three commentaries have opted for *mukha* as nose or mouth. This is a quotation from the original note in the *Patisambhidamagga*:

‘Has the sense of embracing’ is in the sense of being embraced. What is embraced? The outlet. What outlet? Concentration based on mindfulness of breathing is itself the outlet, right up to the arahant path. Hence *‘has the sense of outlet’* is said. The meaning of ‘outlet from the round of rebirths’ is expressed by the meaning of the word *mukha* (mouth) as foremost (front). ‘Has the sense of establishing’ is in the sense of individual essence. The meaning expressed by all these words is: Having made mindfulness an embraced outlet.

[Continuing on, from other teachers we have a straightforward and helpful bit of technical advice – surely the proper meaning]: But some say that *‘has the sense of embracing’* stands for ‘embracing as the meaning of

mindfulness’, and that *‘has the sense of outlet’* stands for ‘door of entry and exit as the meaning of in-breaths and out-breaths’. Then what is meant is: ‘Having established mindfulness as the embraced outlet of the in-breaths and out-breaths.’ (Note 14, Engl. Ed.; *PsA* 350-1)

Some modern teachers have suggested that it doesn’t matter where the breath contact is located, probably in response to the phrase which occurs later on in the sutta: “Experiencing the whole body, he breathes in...” etc. And since the whole body of the breath is not explicitly stated, they feel there is room for interpretation. But the breath as a “whole body” is explicitly mentioned in the *Anapanasati Sutta*, though not in the *Satipatthana Sutta*, the phrase means the same: “I say, monks, that of bodies this is one, that is to say breathing-in and breathing-out” (*M* III.83, p.125; the footnote states that “...breathing is a body because it is included in the field of touch.”)

As well, there is an explicit location of “the entrance” in the sutta which the three commentaries agree on, whatever the later confusion over nose and mouth may have been. It also overlooks the simile which immediately follows the explicit location: “As a turner or his apprentice, while making a long turn, knows that he is making a long turn, or in making a short turn, knows that he is making a short turn, so too a monk, in breathing in a long breath, knows that he breathes in a long breath, breathing in a short breath, knows that he breathes in a short breath... and so trains himself, thinking: ‘I will breathe out, calming the whole body formation’” (*D* 22). The Buddha includes this apparently redundant simile for one reason. Similes, like pictures, are worth a thousand words and usually survive the butcheries of translation. This is the Buddha’s failsafe mechanism to show that as a lathe worker fixes his attention one-pointedly with his chisel on a single spot while the wooden spindle is in ceaseless motion, the meditator does likewise at the “entrance spot” while the breath continuously flows past. Basically all the commentaries have managed to preserve this notion in the “simile of the saw.” They have used the example of a carpenter sawing a piece of wood. He keeps his attention where the saw teeth contact the wood. He does not follow the approaching and receding motion

of the saw blade. This essentially captures the meaning of the lathe-worker simile.

All of this does not mean that there is only one way to attain serenity using the breath. If someone has developed a technique that issues in *jhana* and which does not follow the explicit instructions that is fine too. Whatever works.

Summary

The following is a brief summary of instructions for meditators practising breath meditation:

- Attend to the sensation of breath/air wherever it enters and exits the body.
- If visual perceptions arise, ignore them.
- If the mind wanders, do not allow it. Return to only the point of contact of breath.
- Hold attention on the spot throughout the entire duration of in-breath and out-breath.
- The sensation or perception of sensation of moving air will change to a static feeling; this is the sign of the mind stilling.
- Dwell on this airy, buoyant quality, which should pervade the head. One should experience a cool and airy emptiness of the head. This may extend throughout the body. This is a further “sign” of increasing stillness.
- Remain with this airy lightness as an experience to focus upon.
- All hindrances should have fallen away and the five *jhana* factors will be present to a degree that may be weak, medium or strong.
- Refer to the *Anapanasati Sutta* for further instructions.

I hope the above points will help clarify any confusion that meditators have come up against and that they may breathe a sigh of relief as they move along the path.

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