

# Reliable and Versatile

## Breath in Buddhist meditation systems

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*What we call 'I' is just a swinging door which moves when we inhale  
and when we exhale - Shunryu Suzuki<sup>1</sup>*

### Introduction

The breath can be a reliable guide and a versatile tool during meditation. It is right there, under our nose. It comes and goes, is painfully susceptible to changes in body in mind, but goes on autonomously. Thus it aptly illustrates the Buddhist central issues of impermanence, suffering and the lack of Self in reality. But meditation on the breath can also induce relaxation, can develop mental discipline, and can lead

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<sup>1</sup> Bucknell and Kang 1997: 148.

to concentration. Buddhists have been aware of these possibilities of working with the breath during the meditation. The Buddha pointed the way with his rendering of *ānāpānasati*, mindfulness of breathing. In this essay I will note and compare different interpretations of working with the breath and breath-energy that evolved in different Buddhist meditation systems along that way. The *locus classicus* for Buddhist breath meditation deserves some attention first, after which I will follow with a description of other ways to work with the breath in developing calm and insight. Hereafter we turn to the purifying and transformative powers of the breath in meditation, and I will finish with some remarks on chanting.

Two remarks on terms are in place. Firstly, meditation can be a misleading term. When we speak of ‘Buddhist meditation systems’, we have to be aware that ‘meditation’ as a translation of *bhāvanā* can mean many things. It refers to a range of exercises or mental and spiritual effort aimed at developing and cultivating wholesome mental states that conduce to the realization of the Buddhist path. I have chosen not to limit the scope of meditation to practices aimed at calm or insight, but have included some remarks on the transformative powers of breath in Northern Buddhism and the breath as vehicle for chants in for instance the Pure Land Schools. Secondly, the word ‘breath’ carries quite strong connotations of life, life-force, energy etc. in Asiatic languages. The *Pali pāṇa* (Sanskrit *prāṇa*) means ‘life’ and is also used as a term for a living or breathing being, in the first of Buddhist precepts not to harm. A more specific translation of *Pāṇa* is ‘that which preserves and nurtures life’.<sup>2</sup> The circulation of this life-force is linked to breathing, as becomes clear from the Tibetan translation of *prāṇa* as *lung*, meaning ‘energy-winds’.<sup>3</sup> These are the energies of the physical body, enabling it to act, and supporting activity of different types of mind.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Buddhādāsa 1997: 51.

<sup>3</sup> Norbu 2000: 95.

<sup>4</sup> Bucknell and Kang 1997: 190-191.

What this illustrates is that in the Asian languages of Buddhism 'breath' is a concept that is pregnant with meanings that go beyond the modern usage of the English 'breath' (or the French *soufle*, the German *Atem* or the Dutch *adem*, for that matter). I will try to bring some of these connotations to the fore.

### **A locus classicus for Buddhist breath meditation**

The classic teaching the Buddha gave on breath meditation is the *Ānāpāna-sati Sutta*.<sup>5</sup> It outlines in considerable detail the various stages and levels of the practice of mindfulness with breathing. The word *ānāpāna-sati* combines *āna* (when *prāṇa* enters the body), *apāna* (when *prāṇa* leaves the body) and *sati* (Sanskrit, *smṛti*). *Sati* refers to mindfulness or observative awareness which can be applied to the present or to the past. *Ānāpānasati* is both mindfulness with breathing and a method to note, investigate and contemplate different manifestations of reality while being mindful of every breath.<sup>6</sup> A similar version of this teaching can be found in an abridged version in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*<sup>7</sup> ('discourse on the foundations of mindfulness'), which is one of the most important expositions of Buddhist meditation in the *Pāli* canon and in the Theravāda school. The discourse enumerates meditation practices for the cultivation of *sati* under a fourfold rubric called the four foundations or applications of mindfulness'. Each of these describes how the practitioner can observe the object of meditation simply as it is with bare attention and without attachment. The first foundation focuses on the body and starts with mindfulness of breathing. According to the

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<sup>5</sup> Majjhima Nikāya III.78 (reference is to the volume and page number of the Pāli Text Society edition of the Majjhima Nikāya; see Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 1995).

<sup>6</sup> Buddhādāsa 1997: 146.

<sup>7</sup> Digha Nikāya II.289 ((reference is to the volume and page number of the Pāli Text Society edition of the Digha Nikāya; see Walshe 1995).

*Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the practice of mindfulness of breathing should be undertaken in the following way:

*Here, gone to the forest, or to the root of a tree, or to an empty hut, he sits down; having folded his legs crosswise, set his body erect, and established mindfulness in front of him, mindful he breathes in, mindful he breathes out.*

*Breathing in long, he knows “I breathe in long”, breathing out long, he knows “I breathe out long.”*

*Breathing in short, he knows “I breathe in short”, breathing out short, he knows “I breathe out short.”*

*He trains thus: “I shall breathe in experiencing the whole body,”*

*he trains thus: “I shall breathe out experiencing the whole body.”*

*He trains thus: “I shall breathe in calming the bodily formation,”*

*he trains thus: “I shall breathe out calming the bodily formation.”<sup>8</sup>*

The *Ānāpānasati Sutta* goes beyond these 4 phases with another 12, taking in all four *satipaṭṭhānas*.

## **The development of Buddhist breath meditation**

Based on the original discourses a number of methods of breath-meditation developed, focussing on aspects of calm (*samatha*) aimed at concentration (*samādhi*) and on insight (*vipassanā*) aimed at wisdom (*paññā*). Some depended on the stage of the meditator’s skill, others became the distinguishing feature of a particular master’s special method.<sup>9</sup> Thus arose several approaches to counting the breath, abstaining from counting, emphasis upon the strength and rhythm of

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<sup>8</sup> Anālayo 2003: 126.

<sup>9</sup> King 1992: 73.

breathing, observing the breath at the nose or at the movement of the abdomen, etc.

One influential Theravādin analysis on breath-meditation is described in the *Visuddhimagga*, a systematisation and clarification of the Theravāda doctrine and practice by the fifth century CE commentator Buddhaghosa. He identifies 8 stages in working with the breath during meditation<sup>10</sup>:

1. *Counting*. When mindfulness is weak, counting the in- and out-breath can help. For counting helps to unify the mind, 'just as a boat in a swift current is steadied with the help of a rudder'.<sup>11</sup> This includes:

- ~ counting of in- and out-breaths with a minimum of five and a maximum of ten (since this would require attention which would hinder the mindfulness of breathing)
- ~ counting several times during one breath and noticing the effect in the whole body
- ~ counting once per breath and paying attention to the point where the breath touches the nose tip or upper lip

2. *Connection* to the path the breath follows from nose to navel and back. This leads to one-pointed attention and elimination of conceptual thinking.

3. and 4. *Touching* and *fixing*: One-pointed attention leads to the acquirement of concentration, indicated by a particular sign or object (or *nimitta*) and the first *jhāna*. The breath as an object becomes too shallow and subtle as an object, but is still there as a basis under the concentration.

5. -8. *Observing* breath-meditation *jhāna* and turning away from it; *purification* of non-*jhānic* awareness of the *jhānic* state just experi-

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<sup>10</sup> *Visuddhimagga* VIII 145-244; also see King 1992: 74-77.

<sup>11</sup> *Visuddhimagga* VIII.193.

enced; *destruction* of the remaining attachments even to *jhānas*; *looking back* on all these *jhānic* attainments as stages now left behind.

We see how these stages work from *samatha* (1-4) to *vipassanā* (5-8). When we compare this analysis to the explanation by the Yogācārin Vasubandhu (whose work became quite influential in Northern Buddhism) there are a few similarities.<sup>12</sup> Vasubandhu also commences by mentioning ‘meditative stabilization of counting’ and ‘placement’. Instead of ‘touching and fixing’, he then describes how one can ‘investigate’ the effect of breath in the body, i.e. to see where it causes warmth or cold. In the following phase called ‘change’, the object of observation switches as it becomes more and more subtle. After this, there is talk of ‘purifying’, as the objects of observation are becoming more and more subtle. The last way, ‘observing the fruit’, consists of ‘observation of the paths of meditation and no more learning’. When asked why these last three types of meditation are breath-meditation, Lodrö explains that one needs the coarse breath to tune into the subtler objects of observation involved in the last three meditations. According to Buddhaghosa, this is a difference between breath as object of meditation and other objects: Other meditation subjects become clearer at each higher stage, but the breath does not.<sup>13</sup> It becomes more and more subtle to the point at which it is no longer manifest.

### **Breathing towards calm and insight**

In the *Ānāpānasati sutta* it is shown how mindfulness of breathing can grow into awareness of feelings, mind and *dhammas*. In other words, the sutra shows how mindfulness of breathing can get us started and can keep us going on our way to ever more subtle calm and insight. The

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<sup>12</sup> Lodrö 1998: 59-60.

<sup>13</sup> *Visudhimagga* VIII. 208.

purpose of the four steps of mindfulness of breathing in the *Ānāpāna-sati Sutta* therefore does not seem to be restricted to the development of concentration, but covers both calm and insight.<sup>14</sup> There has been quite some discussion, among Buddhists and scholars alike, concerning the exact relation between calm/*samatha* and insight/*vipassanā* meditation, both in general as well as on different stages of the path. It has been said that whereas meditation of the *samatha* type is also found in some other ancient Indian systems, *vipassanā* is a uniquely Buddhist development.<sup>15</sup> Some modern scholars hold an opposite view, as Cousins points out.<sup>16</sup> Space and, frankly, a lack of relevance of this discussion for this essay's topic do not permit me to delve into that matter here.<sup>17</sup> Suffice it to say that in order to be able to see things as they really are, we need a calm, clear and concentrated mind. 'Controlling the breath leaves us ready and fit for training', the Thai Buddhist master Buddhadhāsa remarks.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, for the process of calming, it is necessary to be able to see and understand that the things that cause unrest (even on very subtle levels) are characterized by impermanence, suffering and not self. For calming, some degree of insight is necessary.

A classical Theravādin way of using the breath for calm-meditation is to apply mindfulness to it and concentrate on specific aspects: the duration of inhaling or exhaling, the movement that the breathing causes in the body, the points where the moving air can be felt, etc. When the breath has settled down and has become reasonably subtle, the counting might be dropped. Mindfulness might then be focussed on sensations in the body, as in 'connecting/following' then 'touching' and then on a mental image, which is called a *nimitta*. In some Theravāda

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<sup>14</sup> Anālayo 2003: 136.

<sup>15</sup> E.g. De Silva in Pickering 1997: 63.

<sup>16</sup> Cousins 1996: 57-58.

<sup>17</sup> For a clear introduction to this matter, see Gethin 1998: 198-201 or Cousins 1984. Griffiths 1981 deems the concentration- and insight-meditation as problematic.

<sup>18</sup> Buddhadhāsa 1997: 51-52.

meditation systems the attention then shifts to stabilize this mental image, while *vipassanā*-methods in general tend not to focus on the stage of the *nimittas*.<sup>19</sup> In Northern Buddhism, the breath might be linked to visualization of light or (a) Buddha to help calm the mind.<sup>20</sup>

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* has become especially influential as the scriptural foundation for the modern revival and popularization of *vipassanā* meditation in the Theravāda countries of South and Southeast Asia (Pranke 2004: 754). The practice of *ānāpānasati* has always been very prominent in the Theravāda-tradition, since Theravādins consider this as the core of the Buddha's meditation teaching: the insights needed for Awakening can arise being mindful of the breath, alert to the breath, and also conscious of how the mind relates to the breath.<sup>21</sup> One of Thailand's most renowned teachers of Buddhist meditation in the twentieth century was Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo (1906-1961). He created two separate methods of breath meditation.<sup>22</sup> While the first method goes from awareness of the breath to the mental images (*nimittas*) and the effect these can have, the second method expands more on the awareness of the body, instead of moving from there to other stages. To swap vocabulary: It is almost as if the second method focuses on the breath as a way to relax physically and get organized neurologically.<sup>23</sup> Or, as Dhammadaro puts it: 'Once you've learned to put your breath in order, it's as if you have everyone in your home in order'.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Harvey 1990: 249.

<sup>20</sup> Geshe Thubten Ngawang, (2001), 'Atem- und Lichtmeditation' in: *Tibet und Buddhismus* Vol. 58, [www.tibet.de/tib/tibu/2001/tibu58/58meditation.html](http://www.tibet.de/tib/tibu/2001/tibu58/58meditation.html)

<sup>21</sup> Thanissaro Bhikku 2002, 'The Steps of Breath Meditation', [www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/thanissaro/meditations.html#steps](http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/thanissaro/meditations.html#steps)

<sup>22</sup> Dhammadharo 1995: i.

<sup>23</sup> Idem: 15.

<sup>24</sup> Idem: 17.

In the Zen-tradition, counting and following the breath is not only used to 'dampen down wandering thoughts'.<sup>25</sup> In Zen, sometimes a certain amount of attention is paid also to the timing of the count of the breath, so as to prevent the counting from causing any physical strain.<sup>26</sup> But even in a tradition that is known for its sober and strict approach to meditation, it is acknowledged that there might be some variation in the breathing practice of different students and of different times in personal practice.<sup>27</sup> Echoing the words of Shunryu Suzuki at the start of this essay, one Zen Buddhist noted: 'The breath is a clear indicator of our inner life: a bridge between body and mind'.<sup>28</sup> With this statement on mindfulness of breathing as a good starting point for the cultivation of the mind, the difference between Zen and Southern Buddhist use of breath seems not that great. But there is a caveat for the Zen Buddhist: If he makes the counting and the breath two things, this might cause distraction and duality. The same applies in Theravāda practice, where counting could hinder achieving one-pointed concentration. Counting and following techniques can be good exercises in mindfulness but they can also encourage mental constructions. In Theravāda practice these are considered to be preliminary stages of meditation. In Zen meditation, students are instructed not to pay attention to these constructions (that might be considered *nimittas* in Southern and Northern Buddhism) since this might lead one to experience it as an 'object', as something 'external'. By concentrating the mind on the breath, Shunryu Suzuki says, we not only experience absolute independence from inner and outer world. Mindfulness of the breath also makes it possible to attain absolute freedom.<sup>29</sup>

Breathing is an autonomic process, which we do not in general actively or consciously 'do'. It is hardly surprising therefore that Zen,

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<sup>25</sup> Harvey 1990: 270.

<sup>26</sup> Sekida 2005: 60-61.

<sup>27</sup> Idem: 54.

<sup>28</sup> As quoted by Manné in Pickering 1997: 118.

<sup>29</sup> Bucknell and Kang 1997: 150.

which stresses effortless activity, sometimes even called non-doing, has no clear-cut approach to manipulation of breathing. Yet Sekida offers quite a technical, or even physical, approach to breathing in *zazen*.<sup>30</sup> From the experience of *zazen* he concludes that by maintaining a state of tension in the abdominal respiratory muscles we can control what is happening in the brain.<sup>31</sup> Other Zen teachers explicitly advise not to try to control the breathing-process.<sup>32</sup>

The practice of just sitting in Zen might have influenced other Japanese Buddhist school, like Jōdo Shinshu (True Pure Land School): one of the most widely practiced meditation techniques in the Jōdo Shinshu today is called 'quiet sitting'.<sup>33</sup> Since religious progress from a Pure Land point of view can only come from trusting in the grace of Amitābha Buddha, meditation serves no direct soteriological goal. Quiet sitting has the goal of living a better life. Having said this, there are different approaches to the use of the breath within the tradition of quiet sitting, as is the case with for instance the practice of mindfulness of breathing in Southern Buddhism. Some followers of Jōdo Shinshu do not focus on the breath at all. They just sit for thirty minutes or an hour, with eyes closed and hands folded in the lap.<sup>34</sup> This sober approach might be a reminder of the practice of *shikantaza* in Zen, although that is hard to tell. Others choose to make use of techniques outlined by other Buddhist schools, with the remark, however, that awareness of the body breathing in and out comes straight from Amitābha or Amida's Mind.

A well-know contemporary teacher whose Tiep Hien Order (the order of Interbeing) is influenced by both Theravāda and Mahāyāna (notably the Lin Chi tradition of Zen) traditions, is the Vietnamese

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<sup>30</sup> Sekida 2005: 53-59.

<sup>31</sup> Idem: 56.

<sup>32</sup> E.g. T.P. Phelan (1996) 'Practicing with Our Breathing', [www.intrex.net/chzg/Pat1.htm](http://www.intrex.net/chzg/Pat1.htm).

<sup>33</sup> Rev. P.K. Eidmann (no date), 'On meditation', [www.seattlebetsuin.com/on\\_meditation.htm](http://www.seattlebetsuin.com/on_meditation.htm).

<sup>34</sup> Rev. P.K. Eidmann (no date) 'Quiet Sitting', [www.seattlebetsuin.com/quietsitting.htm](http://www.seattlebetsuin.com/quietsitting.htm).

monk Thich Nhat Hanh. Throughout Nhat Hanh's teachings, breath and mindful breathing is omnipresent. His approach seems heavily influenced by the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. Breath is constantly used to be mindful, just like the *Ānāpānasati Sutta* uses the breath to contemplate 16 distinct approaches to reality. Nhat Hanh combines the thorough mindfulness practices of classical Buddhism with the absolute priority of the here and now that is so characteristic of Zen:

*Breathing in, I calm my body*

*Breathing out, I smile.*

*Dwelling in the present moment*

*I know this is a wonderful moment.*<sup>35</sup>

### **Breath for purification and transformation**

Purification of the breath can be found as a preliminary phase in many meditation-exercises. This is not unlike the physical and mental sensation of a deep sigh before we get to a certain task. But certain practices in Northern Buddhism go further than this. One way that the breath is used, serves purification: Negative energy or emotions are envisioned to leave the body on the out-breath, positive energy enters the body with the in-breath.<sup>36</sup> 'When dark torpor sets in, clear out the stale breath and wake up by chanting, shouting, swaying, and so on,' is the advice of Jamgön Kongtrul (1813-1899), a Tibetan Buddhist master, when one tries to understand the phase of meditation that one is in. This refers to a practice of clearing out the 'dregs' of the old vital wind by a specific yogic breathing exercise.<sup>37</sup> In Theravāda, chanting may also be used to help one rouse energy.

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<sup>35</sup> Nhat Hanh 1987: 5.

<sup>36</sup> Bucknell and Kang 1997: 168.

<sup>37</sup> Kongtrul 2002: 71 and 171, n. 158.

Other practices in Northern Buddhism use the breath to support transformative (*tantra*) practices, to regulate one's energy. The breath serves as a vehicle for this energy. 'Inner heat yoga' is such a process of energy control. It uses the breath and visualization to transform the energy of mind that is blocked at certain points (*chakras*) in the energy-channels which go through the body. These energetic obstructions can be caused by attachment, anger, and other emotions. It seems that during the inner heat meditation, breath supports the visualization mentally (by timing the visualization with the breath-pattern) and physically (by using the breath to tense or relax certain parts of the body). Afterwards, the breath is also used as an indicator to one's progress in having transformed the energy: when the vital energies have entered the central channel (a result from solving the energetic obstructions and the practice of inner heat meditation) the breath will flow evenly through both nostrils.<sup>38</sup>

As a preliminary to the inner heat yoga (which is the first of the so-called Six Yogas of Naropa) one engages in various physical exercises, or *yantras*. These exercises serve to prevent undesirable side-effects like physical pain as a result of the changing energy flows during the completion stage yogas.<sup>39</sup> One of the physical preliminary exercises is the vase-breathing-technique, or 'filling the body like a vase'. First, the breath is purified by alternating the nostril that one uses for breathing in and out. Then, with the hands formed into fists with the thumbs inside, the meditator breathes in slowly and deeply, and pushes the air down to below the navel. The stomach is filled like the belly of a vase. The ball of air that is felt in the abdomen is then compressed by simultaneously pulling up air from below and contraction of the muscles of the pelvic floor. Finally, the air is slowly released up the central channel 'like an arrow' and out through the nose.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Mullin 1996: 37; Mullin 1997: 84, 114.

<sup>39</sup> Mullin 1997: pp. 58-62; Mullin 1996: 60.

<sup>40</sup> Mullin 1997: 107, 146.

The emphasis on holding the breath allegedly supports the process of transforming 'karmic wind' into 'wisdom wind'<sup>41</sup>, although the use of tantric symbolism keeps the process rather vague. The description of the vase-breathing technique resembles the Zen idea and description of holding tension in the *tanden*.<sup>42</sup> However, as has been pointed out above, 'vase-breathing' differs from the 'breath-control' in Zen in that it is aimed at purifying the breath and preparing the body and the energy-household for what is to come in other tantric exercises.

Another transformative practice found in several Buddhist traditions is *mettā-bhavanā*, or lovingkindness-meditation, which is sometimes connected to working with the breath. In Northern Buddhism, the practice of *tong-len*-meditation is not only meant to cultivate loving-kindness, it is also meant to actually transform suffering. 'Tong' means 'sending out' or 'letting go' and 'len' means 'receiving'. Sending positive energy and taking in negative energy alternate, riding the breath. In *tong-len*, like in comparable forms of compassion-meditation, one begins to think about one's mother, parents or somebody else who has loved one so much that the goodness can be felt. Breathing in, this goodness is felt, breathing out it is released and sent to others. In a slightly advanced form, it is held that the meditator can even take on the suffering of others on the in-breath (for instance by imagining thick, black smoke) and visualize sending out happiness (or pure light) on the out-breath. In the Japanese True Pure Land Tradition (Jōdo shinshu) there is the practice of *naikan*: a form of meditation that shows some similarities to *tong-len* and general *mettā-bhāvanā* but does not seem to make specific use of the breath.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Kongtrul 2002: 153.

<sup>42</sup> E.g. Kathleen MacDonald (Bucknell and Kang 1997: 172) and Sekida 2005: 51.

<sup>43</sup> M. Honoré France (2000) 'Naikan: A Buddhist Approach to Psychotherapy', [www.educ.uvic.ca/faculty/hfrance/naikan.htm](http://www.educ.uvic.ca/faculty/hfrance/naikan.htm).

## Breath as a vehicle: chanting, *nenbutsu*, *daimoku*

When chanting is considered as a meditative practice (and I think it can be), then it is obvious that here we have another way of working with the breath in Buddhism. Chanting, which throughout history has been practised in every Buddhist tradition, requires attention to the way one breaths. Breathing slowly, deeply and rhythmically can help the meditator during the chant. In the Nichiren school, chanting *namu myōhō-renge-kyō* means honouring the name or title of the *Lotus Sutra* (which practice is referred to in Japanese as *daimoku* or 'great title') and it eventually became a central practice. One Nichiren priest describes the correct way of chanting as once chanting vocally very slowly while concentrating on each of the seven letters of the *ōdaimoku* (literally 'great or honourable title'). On the out-breath the chant is vocal, on the in-breath the chant is mentally, without using the voice. After this, the chanting is repeated vocally once while exhaling and without voice while inhaling as many times as feels comfortable. The name of this technique is 'one breath - one *Ōdaimoku*'.<sup>44</sup> (Kanai, 'One Breath'). Others go with a breathing meditation that sounds quite a lot like Zen meditation and mindfulness-meditation as it has been described in the *Ānāpānasati sutta*. As an alternative to counting the breaths, it is suggested that the meditator recites the *daimoku* silently. More specifically, the suggestion is to silently recite *namu* as one is inhaling, and then *myōhō-renge-kyō* on the out-breath.<sup>45</sup>

Although Pure Land Buddhists prefer to chant something different (namely the name of Amitābha/Amida Buddha), they are known to use the breath in a similar way during their meditative practices. Actu-

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<sup>44</sup> Rev. Shokai Kanai (no date), 'One Breath - One Odaimoku. A short explanation of Shodaigyo', [http://la.nichirensu.org/teachings/talks/kanai/one\\_breath\\_daimoku.htm](http://la.nichirensu.org/teachings/talks/kanai/one_breath_daimoku.htm)

<sup>45</sup> Ryuei Michael McCormick (1996, 2002, 2006) 'Basic Meditation Instructions for Nichiren Buddhists', [http://nichirenscoffeehouse.net/Ryuei/meditation\\_instructions.html](http://nichirenscoffeehouse.net/Ryuei/meditation_instructions.html).

ally, Pure Land Buddhists use the breath to discipline the mind, to aid single-minded concentration in a way that reminds us of classic mindfulness of breathing-meditation. An 11<sup>th</sup> century Chinese Pure Land-text calls this practice the ‘ten moments of mindfulness’: The continuous invocation of Amitābha Buddha’s name during one breath constitutes one moment of recollection, one moment of mindfulness, which is then repeated ten times.<sup>46</sup> At face value, this practice reminds us of the use of *mantra* in several currents of Theravāda Buddhism, like the Forest Tradition of Thailand. Here also *mantras* (most often ‘buddho’) are used together with mindfulness of breathing. However, these *mantras* do not have the ‘soteriological powers’ that Amithābha Buddha’s name or the title of the Lotus Sutra have according to Pure Land or Nichiren Buddhists.

## Conclusion

Take a deep breath. Calm down and acknowledge that you have come this far in reading this essay. Breathing in, let the words sink down in your consciousness. Breathing out, try to feel the experience of having read this information. Breathing in, know that the breath is impermanent, potentially problematic and not self. Breathing out, let it go. As I have tried to point out in this essay, breath has been and is consciously used in all Buddhist traditions and systems of meditation and devotion. The Buddha pointed towards the breath for practising mindfulness and noting, investigating and contemplating different manifestations of reality with every breath. The differences that have occurred ever since stem from different interpretations and personal experiences of Buddhist masters as well as from varying purposes of working with the breath. The start of this conclusion might serve as an experiential summary of the ways that Buddhist traditions use the breath during

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<sup>46</sup> Stevenson 1995: 376.

meditation: to calm down and purify, to be mindful, to delve into the nature of reality and develop insight, and to transform the energy that keeps us from doing all this. Add to this that breath is used to support chanting or uttering the name of the Buddha or the Lotus Sutra, and the range of Buddhist ways to work with the breath is complete. We can use it whenever that seems necessary and useful or leave it behind at a certain stage of our practice when it is required and return to it later. This shows that the breath, reliable and versatile as it can be, really is the workhorse of Buddhist meditation.

#### **About the author**

Christiaan Zandt has been fascinated by the workings of history (MA, University of Groningen, 1992-1997) and Buddhism (MA Buddhology, University of Sunderland (UK), 2004-2007). He has been a practitioner of Aikido and Shinto Muso-ryu jo (both distinct Japanese martial ways) for a number of years. Since 2006 Christiaan has been operating a company by the name of *Bisho*, offering training and advice inspired by Buddhism, Aikido, and a communication process known as Nonviolent Communication™.

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