

SD 62.2

Padīpōpama Sutta

The Discourse on the Parable of the Lamp | S 54.8

Ce **Dīpa Sutta** The Lamp Discourse

Theme: The benefits of breath meditation

Translated by Piya Tan ©2019, 2024

1 Sutta summary and significance

1.1 SUTTA SUMMARY

The **Padīpōpama¹ Sutta**, the discourse on the parable of the lamp, is a brief teaching on the breath meditation and its benefits. First, the full 16 stages of the meditation are succinctly stated [§§2-11]; that is, the way that the Buddha had himself meditated and then awakened [§§12]. The benefits are then listed [§§13-30.1] [1.2.1]. The Sutta closes with the lamp parable illustrating how breath meditation brings nirvana [§31].

1.2 SUTTA SIGNIFICANCE

1.2.1 The benefits of breath meditation

The Buddha gives the following **9 benefits of breath meditation**:

- (1) The Buddha himself used the breath meditation that brought him full awakening. [§12]
- (2) The breath meditation tires neither the body nor the eyes, and it frees the mind from the influxes of sense-desire, existence, views and ignorance. [§13]
- (3) It helps renunciants overcome distracting memories of their lay-life, and the laity deal with memories that may trouble them. [§14]
- (4) The experienced meditator can attain the “noble powers” (*ariy’iddhi*) by resolving what is perceived as repulsive or as attractive the way the arhats do. [§§15-19]
- (5) Breath meditation facilitates the attaining of the 4 dhyanas. [§§20-23]
- (6) It facilitates in the gaining of the 4 formless attainments. [§§24-27]
- (7) It helps one attain nonreturning and arhathood, and also enjoying the attainment of cessation. [§28]
- (8) An experienced breath meditator, even when still unawakened, will be able to have insight into the 3 kinds of feelings (pleasant, unpleasant and neutral). [§§29-30.1]
- [9] The experienced breath meditator will pass away as an arhat. [§31]

1.2.2 How to study the Padīpōpama Sutta (S 54.8)

1.2.2.1 If you are new to breath meditation or have not studied **the Ānāpāna,sati Sutta** (M 118), SD 7.13, then you should begin with the Padīpōpama Sutta in this way:

(1) Read through **the Padīpōpama Sutta** (S 54.8) at least once, from beginning to end just as it is, *without referring to the notes*.

(2) When you are ready, read the Padīpōpama Sutta **again**, *paragraph by paragraph* or *line by line*, this time referring to **the notes** that interest you. For more information on those notes you are uncertain about, especially the short forms and special expressions, refer to the latest **Sutta Guide**. This is your vital guide to the SD sutta study which can be downloaded free from <http://dharmafarer.org>.

¹ *Padīpōpama* = *padīpa*, “lamp” + *upama*, “parable.”

1.2.2.2 After you feel familiar with the Padīpōpama Sutta, then, go on to study **the Ānāpāna,sati Sutta** (M 118), [SD 7.13](#) (make sure you have the latest version: check **the version dates** at the very end of the translation).² An effective reading plan for the Ānāpāna,sati Sutta is as follows:

(1) Read **SD 7.13** (the latest version), beginning with only **§1.1** (Sutta summary and significance).

(2) Read through *only* **§§15-22 (the 16 steps)** of the Sutta translation by paragraph or section, stopping to study the notes and cross-references. The notes can be overwhelming; just stay with those notes that interest you. You can always reread the other notes later.

1.2.2.3 You need to do **breath meditation** in order to understand the Sutta as it is intended. Do not think about the Sutta in your breath meditation. Just do the breath meditation as you know it. At the end of it, you may **review** your practice (how calm, joyful, and so on, you felt, and remember this wholeness); your understanding of the Sutta will somehow meld deeper into your practice.

You are not likely to get it all right the first few times. Yet, you will be surprised that after some practice, even for a few short minutes each time, you will gain new depths and insights into your breath meditation experience. It is an enriching and liberating experience.

Focus where the breath feels good.³ Smile at the breath.

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² For the latest versions of translations and files, please contact us directly: themindingcentre@gmail.com or <https://t.me/suttasangha>.

³ This is one of Bh Thanissaro's favourite quips.

Padīpōpama Sutta

The Discourse on the Parable of the Lamp

S 54.8

1-2 [Originating in Sāvattī.⁴ While residing in Sāvattī, the Blessed One said:⁵]

3 “Bhikshus, **concentration by mindfulness of breathing**,⁶ when cultivated and developed, is of great fruit and great benefit.

4 And how, bhikshus, is *concentration by mindfulness of breathing cultivated and developed so that it is of great fruit and benefit?* **[317]**

5 Here, bhikshus, a monk,⁷ who has gone to the forest, or to the foot of a tree, or to an empty abode,⁸ sits down,

and having crossed his legs and keeping his body upright, establishes mindfulness before him.⁹

6 Mindfully¹⁰ indeed he breathes in, mindfully he breathes out.¹¹

⁴ Ce.

⁵ Ee (PTS 5:316, 307 opening).

⁶ *Ānāpāna, sati, samādhi*.

⁷ Comy on **Mahā Sati’paṭṭhāna S** with the identical context here says that “monk” (*bhikkhu*) indicates “whoever undertakes that practice ... is here comprised under the term *bhikkhu*” (DA 3:756; MA 1:241; VbhA 216 f; cf SnA 251). See Dh 142; also Dh 362, 260-270. Cf **Bhikkhu Vagga** (ch 25) and **Brāhmaṇa Vagga** (ch 26) of Dh. See SD 62.1 (3.1.4.3).

⁸ This stock of 3 places (a forest, *arañña*; the foot of a tree, *rukkha, mūla*; an empty abode, *suññ’āgāra*) conducive to meditation are at **D** 2:291; **M** 1:56, 297, 398, 425, 2:263, 3:82, 89, 4:297; **S** 5:311, 313, 314, 315, 316, 317, 323, 329, 336; **A** 1:147, 148, 149, 3:92, 100, 4:437, 5:109, 110, 111; **Pm** 1:175, 2:36. **Pavevika Sutta** (A 3.92) mentions 7 places: a forest, the foot of a tree, a cemetery, a forest path [a remote forest], the open air, a heap of straw, a thatched shelter (*araññaṃ rukkha, mūlaṃ susānaṃ vana, pantham* [vl *vana, pattham*] *abbhokāsaṃ palāla, puñjaṃ bhusāgāraṃ*, A 3.92/1:241, SD 44.2). **Sāmañña, phala S** (D 2), prob a very ancient account, gives 9 places suitable for meditation, and the spiritual preparation for living in such places, thus: “Possessing this aggregate of noble moral virtue, this aggregate of noble sense-restraint, this aggregate of noble mindfulness and full awareness, and this aggregate of noble contentment, he resorts to a secluded dwelling: a forest, the foot of a tree, a mountain, a gorge, a hillside cave, a cemetery, a remote forest [jungle grove], the open air, a heap of straw” (*so iminā ca ariyena sīla-k, khandhena samannāgato iminā ca ariyena indriya, samvarena samannāgato iminā ca ariyena sati, sampajaññaena samannāgato imāya ca ariyāya santuṭṭhitāya samannāgato vivittaṃ senāsanaṃ bhajati, araññaṃ rukkha, mūlaṃ pabbataṃ kandaraṃ giri, guhaṃ susānaṃ vana, pattham abbhokāsaṃ palāla, puñjaṃ*, D 2, 67/1:71 = SD 8.10; V 2:146; M 3:3; A 2:210). These are def at DA 209 f, VbhA 366 f. The oldest reference to an ideal meditation spot is in **Ariya, pariyesanā S** (M 26) and **Saṅgārava S** (M 100): “still in search of the wholesome, seeking the supreme state of sublime peace, I walked by stages through Magadha until eventually I arrived at Senānigama near Uruvelā. There I saw an agreeable spot, a delightful grove with a clear-flowing river with pleasant, smooth banks and nearby a village for alms resort. I sat down there thinking: ‘This is conducive for spiritual striving.’” (M 26, 17/1:167 = 100, 13/2:212), SD 1.11.

⁹ **Parimukhaṃ**, lit “around the mouth,” here always used idiomatically and as an adverb, meaning “in front”: so U Thittila (Vbh:T 319, 328), Walshe (D:W 1995:335), Soma Thera (1998:42 f digital ed), and Ñānamoli & Bodhi (M:ÑB 2001:527). See SD 13.1 (3.9.4 f). On the 8 supports of meditation, see SD 60.1b (5.7.2).

¹⁰ Ce Se Ke PTS *sato*.

¹¹ *So sato’va assasati sato passasati*. Cf the sentence for the Buddha’s own breath meditation, where *va* or *eva* is omitted, in **lchā, naṅgala S** (S 54.11,4), SD 44.9.

7 THE 1ST TETRAD: CONTEMPLATING THE BODY¹²

- (1) Breathing *in long* [deep], he understands, 'I breathe *in long* [Long in-breath]';
 Or, breathing *out long* [deep], he understands, 'I breathe *out long* [Long out-breath]';
 (2) Or, breathing *in short*, he understands, 'I breathe *in short* [Short in-breath]';
 Or, breathing *out short*, he understands, 'I breathe *out short* [Short out-breath]';
 (3) He trains himself thus: 'Experiencing [Feeling] **the whole body** (of breath), I will breathe *in*';
 He trains himself thus: 'Experiencing the whole body (of breath), I will breathe *out*';
 (4) He trains himself thus: '**Calming the bodily formation**¹³ (of breath), I will breathe *in*';
 He trains himself thus: 'Calming the bodily formation (of breath), I will breathe *out*.'

8 THE 2ND TETRAD: CONTEMPLATING FEELINGS¹⁴

- (5) He trains himself thus: 'Experiencing **zest** [joy], I will breathe *in*';
 He trains himself thus: 'Experiencing zest [joy], I will breathe *out*';
 (6) He trains himself thus: 'Experiencing **happiness**, I will breathe *in*';
 He trains himself thus: 'Experiencing happiness, I will breathe *out*';
 (7) He trains himself thus: 'Experiencing **the mental formations**,¹⁵ I will breathe *in*';
 He trains himself thus: 'Experiencing the mental formations, I will breathe *out*';
 (8) He trains himself thus: '**Calming the mental formations**, I will breathe *in*';
 He trains himself thus: 'Calming the mental formations, I will breathe *out*.'

9 THE 3RD TETRAD: CONTEMPLATING THE MIND¹⁶

- (9) He trains himself thus: 'Experiencing **the mind**, I will breathe *in*';¹⁷
 He trains himself thus: 'Experiencing the mind, I will breathe *out*';
 (10) He trains himself thus: '**Gladdening the mind**, I will breathe *in*';¹⁸
 He trains himself thus: 'Gladdening the mind, I will breathe *out*';
 (11) He trains himself thus: '**Concentrating the mind**, I will breathe *in*';
 He trains himself thus: 'Concentrating the mind, I will breathe *out*';¹⁹
 (12) He trains himself thus: '**Freeing the mind**, I will breathe *in*';²⁰
 He trains himself thus: 'Freeing the mind, I will breathe *out*.'

¹² On contemplation of the body, see SD 60.1b (5.8.1).

¹³ Or "activity."

¹⁴ On contemplation of the mind, see SD 60.1b (5.8.3).

¹⁵ Or, "mental functions." On *kāya, saṅkhāra*, see **Cūḷa Vedalla S** (M 44,14), SD 40a.9, see SD 7.13 (4.4.2.3).

¹⁶ On contemplation of the mind, see SD 60.1b (5.8.3).

¹⁷ Here, it refers to the mind in concentration, or having just emerged from dhyana.

¹⁸ "Gladdening the mind," ie, refining the meditation sign. See SD 7.13 (4.4.3.4).

¹⁹ "Concentrating the mind," ie, sustaining the meditation sign (*nimitta*). See SD 7.13 (4.4.3.6).

²⁰ "Freeing the mind," see SD 7.13 (4.4.3.7).

10 THE 4TH TETRAD: CONTEMPLATING DHARMAS²¹

- | | | |
|------------------------------|--|--|
| (13) He trains himself thus: | ‘Contemplating impermanence , | I will breathe <i>in</i> ’; ²² |
| He trains himself thus: | ‘Contemplating impermanence, | I will breathe <i>out</i> ’; ²³ |
| (14) He trains himself thus: | ‘Contemplating fading away (of lust), | I will breathe <i>in</i> ’ ²⁴ |
| He trains himself thus: | ‘Contemplating fading away (of lust), | I will breathe <i>out</i> ’; |
| (15) He trains himself thus: | ‘Contemplating cessation (of suffering), | I will breathe <i>in</i> ’; |
| He trains himself thus: | ‘Contemplating cessation (of suffering), | I will breathe <i>out</i> ’; |
| (16) He trains himself thus: | ‘Contemplating letting go ²⁵ (of defilements), | I will breathe <i>in</i> ’; ²⁶ |
| He trains himself thus: | ‘Contemplating letting go (of defilements), | I will breathe <i>out</i> .’ |

11 Bhikshus, this is how the mindfulness of the in-and-out-breathing, when developed, often cultivated, is of great fruit and great benefit.²⁷

TEACHING BY EXAMPLE

12 I, too, bhikshus, before my awakening, while I was still a **bodhisattva**, not yet fully awakened, generally dwelt in this dwelling.

Bhikshus, while I often abided in this dwelling, neither my body nor my eyes became tired, and my mind, by not clinging, was freed from the influxes.

13 Therefore, bhikshus, if any monk should wish:

‘May neither my body nor my eyes become tired, and may my mind, by not clinging, be freed from the influxes,’

—this very same concentration by mindfulness of breathing should be closely attended to.²⁸

14 Therefore, bhikshus, if a monk should wish:

‘May the memories and intentions connected with the household life be abandoned by me,’

—this very same concentration by mindfulness of breathing should be closely attended to.

²¹ These last 4 aspects, ie, the 4th tetrad, relate to a meditator who has just emerged from dhyana. The 1st thing we should do then is to review that state: “What was that?” “How did that arise?” “What feeling is there?” “Why is there this feeling?” “What has been happening all this time?” “What worked and what failed?” “What was the result of the meditation?” “Why is it happy?” All such reflections bring deep insight. Having reflected thus, we either take up *satipaṭṭhāna* (the 4 focuses of mindfulness) or go directly to the last 4 aspects of breath meditation (as taught here). We have any one of these 4 aspects, (13)-(16), to contemplate on after emerging from dhyana. See **Satipaṭṭhāna S** (M 10): SD 13.1 (5D.4).

²² “Contemplating impermanence,” ie, contemplating any of the 5 aggregates as impermanent because they undergo rise, fall and change, or momentary dissolution. See SD 7.13 (4.4.4.1).

²³ *Aniccānupassī passasissāmī ti sikkhati*: SD 7.13 (4.4.4.1 f).

²⁴ “Contemplating fading away,” see SD 7.13 (4.4.4.3).

²⁵ Alt tr: “relinquishment.”

²⁶ “Contemplating relinquishment [letting go],” ie the giving up (*pariccāga*) or abandoning (*pahāna*) of defilements through insight and the entering into (*pakkhandana*) nirvana by attaining the path. See SD 7.13 (4.4.4.5).

²⁷ On the 1st 3 tetrads (*samatha*) leading to *vipassana* in the 4th tetrad, see SD 60.1b (5.8.5).

²⁸ Comy: When one works on other meditation subjects, it tires the body and strains the eyes. For example, when one works on the meditation-subject of the (four) elements, the body tires and feels crushed as if one has been thrown into a mill. When one works on a *kaṣiṇa* (concentration device, such as the element earth, a colour, etc), the eyes throb and tire, and when one emerges one feels a sense of falling. But when one works on this meditation-subject, the body does not tire and the eyes do not feel strained. (SA 3:264,9-17)

THE 5 NOBLE POWERS (*ARIY'IDDHI*)

15 (1) Therefore, bhikshus, if a monk should wish:²⁹

'Let me dwell perceiving **the repulsive in the unrepulsive**,³⁰

—this very same concentration by mindfulness of breathing should be closely attended to.

16 (2) If a monk should wish:

'Let me dwell perceiving **the unrepulsive in the repulsive**,³¹

—this very same concentration by mindfulness of breathing should be closely attended to.

17 (3) If a monk should wish:

'Let me dwell perceiving **the repulsive in the unrepulsive and the repulsive**,³²

—this very same concentration by mindfulness of breathing should be closely attended to.

18 (4) If a monk should wish: **[318]**

'Let me dwell perceiving **the unrepulsive in the repulsive and the unrepulsive**,³³

—this very same concentration by mindfulness of breathing should be closely attended to.

19 (5) If a monk should wish:

'Avoiding both the unrepulsive and the repulsive, let me dwell **equanimous**, mindful and clearly aware,³⁴

—this very same concentration by mindfulness of breathing should be closely attended to.

THE 4 FORM DHYANAS

20 (1) Therefore, bhikshus, if a monk should wish:

'May I, secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, enter and dwell in **the 1st dhyana**,

which is accompanied by initial application and sustained application,

with zest and joy born of seclusion,'

—this very same concentration by mindfulness of breathing should be closely attended to.

²⁹ **Tikaṇḍakī S** (A 5.144/3:169 f) details these 4 noble powers, regarding the benefits of each contemplation. **Sam-pasādaniya S** (D 28,18.3) says, "This ... is the spiritual power that is influx-free, acquisition-free and noble" (*ayam iddhi anāsavā anupadhikā ariyā*) (D 28/3:112,25-13,10), SD 14.14, and Pm 3:212-13 calls it "the noble ones' spiritual power" (*ariy'iddhi*); further explanation at Vism 12.36-38/381 f. Briefly, SA says: (1) to perceive the repulsive in the unrepulsive (*appaṭikkūle paṭikkūla,saññā*) one pervades an unrepulsive object (eg, a sensually attractive person) with the idea of foulness or regards it as impermanent; (2) to perceive the unrepulsive in the repulsive (*paṭikkūle appaṭikkūla,saññā*) one pervades a repulsive object (eg, a hostile person) with lovingkindness or attends to it as elements; (3) + (4) simply extend the first 2 modes to both types of objects conjointly; and (5) is self-explanatory.

Comy: This passage on the "noble one's spiritual power" (*ariy'iddhi*) is included to show the advantage in cultivating mindfulness of breathing. For if a monk wishes for the noble one's spiritual power, or the 4 dhyanas, or the 4 formless attainments, or the attainment of cessation, he should attend closely to this concentration by mindfulness of breathing. Just as merchandise entering through the 4 gates of a city benefits it, when it is captured all this merchandise as well as the city is captured, too. Even so, all the attainments listed in the Sutta are achieved by a meditator when this concentration by mindfulness of breathing has been fully developed. (SA 3:264,29-265,2)

³⁰ *Appaṭikkūle paṭikkūla,saññā vihareyyan ti.*

³¹ *Paṭikkūle appaṭikkūla,saññā vihareyyan ti,*

³² *Paṭikkūle ca appaṭikkūle ca paṭikkūla,saññā vihareyyan ti.*

³³ *Paṭikkūle ca appaṭikkūle ca appaṭikkūla,saññā vihareyyan ti*

³⁴ *Appaṭikkūlañ ca paṭikkūlañ ca tad-ubhayaṃ abhinivajjetvā upekkhako vihareyyaṃ sato sampajāno ti.*

21 (2) Therefore, bhikshus, if a monk should wish:

‘May I, with the subsiding of thought and examination, enter and dwell in **the 2nd dhyana**, which has internal confidence and unification of mind, is without initial application and sustained application, and has zest and joy born of concentration,’
—this very same concentration by mindfulness of breathing should be closely attended to.

22 (3) Therefore, bhikshus, if a monk should wish:

‘May I, with the fading away of zest, dwell equanimous and, mindful and clearly aware, experience joy with the body;
may I enter and dwell in **the 3rd dhyana** of which the noble ones declare:
“He is equanimous, mindful, one who dwells happily,”
—this very same concentration by mindfulness of breathing should be closely attended to.

23 (4) Therefore, bhikshus, if a monk should wish:

‘May I, with the abandoning of pleasure and pain, and with the previous passing away of joy and displeasure, enter and dwell in **the 4th dhyana**, which is neither painful nor pleasant and includes the purification of mindfulness by equanimity,’
—this very same concentration by mindfulness of breathing should be closely attended to.

THE 4 FORMLESS ATTAINMENTS

24 (1) Therefore, bhikshus, if a monk should wish:

‘May I, with the complete transcendence of perceptions of forms, with the passing away of perceptions of sensory impingement, with non-attention to perceptions of diversity, aware that “space is infinite,”
enter and dwell in **the base of the infinity of space**,’
this very same concentration by mindfulness of breathing should be closely attended to.

25 (2) Therefore, bhikshus, if a monk should wish:

‘May I, by completely transcending the base of the infinity of space, **[319]**
aware that “consciousness is infinite,” enter and dwell in **the base of the infinity of consciousness**,’
—this very same concentration by mindfulness of breathing should be closely attended to.

26 (3) Therefore, bhikshus, if a monk should wish:

‘May I, by completely transcending the base of the infinity of consciousness aware that “there is nothing,” enter and dwell in **the base of nothingness**,’
—this very same concentration by mindfulness of breathing should be closely attended to.

27 (4) Therefore, bhikshus, if a monk should wish:

‘May I, by completely transcending the base of nothingness,
enter and dwell in **the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception**,’
—this very same concentration by mindfulness of breathing should be closely attended to.

CESSATION OF PERCEPTION AND FEELING

28 Therefore, bhikshus, if a monk should wish:

‘May I, by completely transcending the base of neither-perception-nor-non-perception,
enter and dwell in **the cessation of perception and feeling**,’

THE ARISING OF INSIGHT WISDOM

29 When, bhikshus, the concentration by mindfulness of breathing has been cultivated and developed in this way,³⁵

29.2 if he feels **a pleasant feeling,**

he understands: 'It is impermanent';

he understands: 'It is not to be grasped';

he understands: 'It is not to be delighted in.'

sā aniccā ti pajānāti,

anajjhositā ti pajānāti,

anabhinanditā ti pajānāti.

29.3 If he feels **a painful feeling,**

he understands: 'It is impermanent';

he understands: 'It is not to be grasped';

he understands: 'It is not to be delighted in.'

29.4 If he feels **a neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling,**

he understands: 'It is impermanent';

he understands: 'It is not to be grasped';

he understands: 'It is not to be delighted in.'

30 If he feels a pleasant feeling,

he feels it detached;

if he feels a painful feeling,

he feels it detached;

if he feels a neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling,

he feels it detached.

30.2 When he feels **a feeling terminating with the body,**

he understands: 'I feel *a feeling terminating with the body.*'

When he **feels a feeling terminating with life,**

he understands: 'I feel *a feeling terminating with life.*'

He understands:

'With the breakup of the body, following the exhaustion of life, all that is felt, not being delighted in, will become cool right here.'

THE PARABLE OF THE OIL-LAMP

31 Bhikshus, just as an oil lamp burns in dependence on the oil and the wick, and with the exhaustion of the oil and the wick it is extinguished through lack of fuel,

so too, bhikshus, when a monk [320] feels a feeling terminating with the body,

'I feel *a feeling terminating with the body.*'

When he feels a feeling terminating with life,

he understands: 'I feel *a feeling terminating with life.*'

He understands:

'With the breakup of the body, following the exhaustion of life,

all that is felt, not being delighted in, **will become cool right here.**'"

—evam—

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³⁵ From here on (to §31), a pericope, as at **Assaji S** (S 22.88/3:126), SD 42.8, and **Gelañña S 1** (S 36.7/4:213), SD 76.8 (forthcoming). Also at **Parivāraṃsana S** (S 12.51/2:82 f), with the parable of a freshly baked hot clay pot (SD 11.5).