

Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam

of Vasubandhu



Volume III

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What is the nature of the loathsome? To how many spheres does it belong? What is its object? By whom is it produced?

Ilc-d. The loathsome is non-desire; it is in ten spheres; it has the visible of Kāmadhātu for its object; it is generated by humans.⁷⁹

Its nature is non-desire.⁸⁰

The ten spheres in which the ascetic can be found in order to produce them are the Four Dhyanas, the four *sāmantakas* (preparatory stages or thresholds of the Four Dhyanas, viii.22), *dhyānāntara* and Kāmadhātu.

Its object is the visibles of the sphere of Kāmadhātu. "Visible" signifies color and shape. This means that it has a "thing" and not a "name" for its object.

Only humans generate it;⁸¹ not beings of the other realms of rebirth, nor much less beings of the higher spheres. Also, among humans, the inhabitants of Uttarakuru do not produce it.

As its name, "the loathsome" (*aśubha*), indicates, it is a visualization of a repulsive or unclean thing: thus it has the repulsive for its "aspect". [It does not have the aspect of impermanence, etc.: it contemplates a visible thing as horrible and not as impermanent, etc.]

In the past, it had a past object; in the present, it has a present object; and in the future, it will have a future object: in other words, its object is contemporaneous to it. When it is not destined to arise, its object is tritemporal.

Since it is an act of attention on an imaginary object, it is impure.⁸²

Accordingly as it has been, or not, cultivated in a previous existence, it is obtained through detachment or through cultivation (vii.41d, 44b).

Such are the characteristics of the loathsome.

12a-c. Mindfulness of breathing (*ānāpānasamṛti*) is *prajñā*, belonging to the five spheres, having wind for its object, and it is cultivated by beings in Kāmadhātu.⁸³

Āna is in-breathing, the entry of wind; *apāna* is out-breathing, the leaving of the wind. The mindfulness (*smṛti*) that bears on both of these is *ānāpānasamṛti*.⁸⁴

[Mindfulness of breathing is by nature *prajñā*, a knowledge bearing on in-breathing and out-breathing.] This *prajñā* is called mindfulness, *smṛti*, the same as the applications of mindfulness (*smṛtyupasthānas*), because this knowledge of in-breathing and out-breathing, *ānāpānaprajñā*, is provoked by the force of mindfulness.⁸⁵

It can be cultivated in five spheres, namely the first three *sāmantakas*, *dhyānāntara*, and Kāmadhātu, because it is associated with indifference (see viii.7, 23, etc.).⁸⁶ In fact, says the School, agreeable and painful sensations [in Kāmadhātu] are favorable to imagining: thus mindfulness of breathing, which is the opposite of imagining, cannot be associated with happiness or with suffering. On the other hand, the two agreeable sensations [of the Dhyanas] form an obstacle to the application of the mind to any object, and mindfulness of breathing can only be realized by this application.

But according to the masters who believe that the fundamental Dhyanas include the sensation of indifference (*Vibhāṭā*, TD 27, p. 134bl), mindfulness of breathing can exist in eight spheres, by adding the first three Dhyanas: higher spheres are no longer spheres in which one breathes (see viii.7).

The object of the mindfulness of breathing is wind.

Its support is Kāmadhātu, that is, it is cultivated by humans

and by the gods of Kāmadhātu, because imagination abounds there. It is obtained either by detachment or by cultivation. It is attention bearing on a real thing (*tattvamanasikāra*).⁸⁷ It belongs only to the Buddhists.

12c. Not to outsiders.

In fact, on the one hand, the teaching of mindfulness of breathing is absent among them,⁸⁸ and on the other hand, they are incapable of discovering the subtle *dharmas* by themselves.

12d. It has six aspects, counting, etc.

It is perfect when it is endowed with six operations: counting, following, fixing, observing, modifying, and purifying.⁸⁹

i. Counting. One fixes the mind on in-breathing and out-breathing, without effort or contention; one lets the body and mind be as they are,⁹⁰ and one counts from one to ten only in the mind. One does not count to less than ten, nor to more than ten, for fear of contention and of mental distraction (vii.11).

There are three faults to avoid: a. to omit counting, by taking two for one; b. counting too high, by taking one for two; c. counting in a confused manner, by taking in-breathing for out-breathing, and vice versa. The counting that avoids these faults is correct. If, in the course of this cultivation the mind becomes distracted, then one should count anew from the beginning until absorption (*samādhi*) is attained.

ii. Following. Without contention, follow the progress of the air which enters and leaves until it goes into two senses: does the air breathed in occupy all of the body or does it go into only one part of the body? The ascetic follows the air breathed in into the throat, the heart, the navel, the kidneys, the thigh, and so on to the two feet; the ascetic follows the air breathed out to a distance of a

hand and a cubit.

According to other masters,⁹¹ he follows the air breathed out to the "circle of air" (*vāyumanḍala*)⁹² which holds up the universe and to the Vairambha Winds.⁹³

This opinion is not admissible, for mindfulness of breathing is an attention to things as they really are (*tattvamanasikāra*).

iii. Fixing.⁹⁴ Fix the attention on the tip of the nose, or between the eyebrows, or in another area all the way down to the toes; fix the mind; see the breath held in the body like the thread of a pearl necklace;⁹⁵ state that it is cold or hot, unfavorable or favorable (*Vibhāṣā*, TD 27, p. 135a15).

iv. Observing. Observe that "These breaths are not only air, but the four primary elements, and again physical matter derived from these four; and the mind with its mental *dharmas* rests on them": in this way the ascetic discovers the five *skandhas* through analysis.

v. Modifying. The ascetic modifies the mind that had the air as its object and now directs his mind to better and better *dharmas* [for example, to the *smṛtyupasthānas*, vi.14, and the *uśmagatas*, vi.17, etc.] up to and including the transworldly *dharmas* (vi.19b).

vi. Purifying. The ascetic enters the Path of Seeing (vi.26) and the Path of Meditation.

According to some other masters (*Vibhāṣā*, TD 27, p. 135a27), modification is progressive elevation from the foundations of mindfulness (the *smṛtyupasthānas*) up to Vajropamasamādhī (vi.44c). Purifying is the Knowledge of Extinction (*kīrayajñāna*), the Knowledge of Non-Arising (*anutpādajñāna*) and the Right Views of the Arhat (*arhatsī samyagdarśi*, vi.50c).

There is a summarizing stanza: "One teaches that the mindfulness of breathing has six aspects: counting, following, fixing, observing, modifying, and purifying."

13a. In-breathing and out-breathing are like the body.⁹⁶

The two breaths, being part of the body, belong to the same sphere as does the body.

In-breathing and out-breathing do not exist among beings in Ārūpyadhātu, among embryonic beings, among non-conscious (*acitta*) beings, and among beings who have entered into the Fourth Dhyāna: their existence therefore presupposes a body [and bodies do not exist in Ārūpyadhātu], a certain body [a body has cavities, which embryonic beings do not have], a mind [which is absent among non-conscious beings], and a certain type of mind [which is absent in the Fourth Dhyāna]. When the body has cavities in it, and when the mind belongs to a sphere in which there is breathing, then there is in-breathing and out-breathing (*Vibhāṣā*, TD 27, p. 132bl).

There is in-breathing at birth and at the moment when one leaves the Fourth Dhyāna. There is out-breathing at death and at the moment when one enters the Fourth Dhyāna.

13b. It belongs to living beings.

It belongs to living beings, and not to non-living beings (i.10b).

13b. It is not taken up.

It does not form part of any sense organ (i.34c-d).

13c. It is an outflowing.⁹⁷

It diminishes when the body increases; cut off, it recovers: therefore it is not an increase (*auṣpacyikā*, i.37), and it does not arise from retribution. In fact, the physical matter arisen from retribution does not recover after having been cut off (i. English translation note 156).

13c-d. It is not observed by an inferior mind.⁹⁸

In-breathing and out-breathing is observed by a mind of its own sphere or by a mind in a higher sphere; but not by an *airyāpathika* mind, nor by a *nairmāṇika* mind of a lower sphere.

We have spoken of the two teachings, the visualization of loathsome things, and mindfulness of breathing. Having attained absorption (*śamādhi*) by these two portals, now, with a view to realizing insight (*vipaśyanā*),

14a-b. Having realized stilling, he will cultivate the foundations of mindfulness (*smṛtyupasthāna*).⁹⁹

How is this?

14c-d. By considering the twofold characteristics of the body, sensation, the mind, and the *dharma*s.

By considering the unique characteristics (*svalakṣaṇa*) and the general characteristics (*sāmānyalakṣaṇa*)¹⁰⁰ of the body, sensation, the mind, and the *dharma*s.

"The unique characteristics" means its self nature (*svabhāva*).

"The general characteristics" signifies the fact that "All conditioned things are impermanent; all impure *dharma*s are suffering; and that all the *dharma*s are empty (*śūnya*) and not-self (*anātmaka*)."

What is the unique nature of the body? The primary elements and physical matter derived from these primary elements (i.12,

Study and Practice of Meditation
Tibetan Interpretations of the Concentrations
and Formless Absorptions

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Since Ge-luk-pa scholars typically regard calm abiding as a meditative stabilization and special insight as a wisdom consciousness,^a juxtaposition of the two passages might have suggested that the types of breath meditation discussed in the *Treasury* (and also in Asaṅga's *Grounds of Hearers*) not only, in their initial stages, serve to pacify discursiveness and calm the mind but can also, in their higher developments, lead to special insight and beyond; for the first passage, with its reference to the four mindful establishments, associates mindfulness and wisdom, and the second passage states that cultivation of the four mindful establishments—preceded, in one mode of practice, by mindfulness of breathing leading to the attainment of calm abiding—leads to the attainment of special insight. But somehow, the juxtaposition was not made.

There may be two reasons for the Ge-luk failure to associate Vasubandhu's and Asaṅga's presentations of the higher stages of breath meditation with special insight. The first reason is that the main Ge-luk presentation of special insight is not drawn from the Indian source texts for the topic of the concentrations and formless absorptions; rather, it is Tsong-kha-pa's *Prāsaṅgika-Madhyamaka* presentation, based on Chandrakīrti's *Clear Words*, in the *Middling and Great Exposition(s) of the Stages of the Path*. The second reason is that practice traditions related to Vasubandhu's or Asaṅga's presentations of breath meditation were probably not transmitted to Tibet.

The practice tradition suggested by the *Treasury* itself—and also by Asaṅga's *Grounds of Hearers*—is one in which mindfulness of breathing becomes a basis for inductive reasoning on such topics as the five aggregates; as a result of such inductive reasoning, the meditator progresses through the Hearer paths of preparation, seeing, and meditation. It seems at least possible that both Vasubandhu and Asaṅga presented their respective versions of such a method, analogous to but different from modern Theravāda insight meditation, and that Ge-luk-pa scholars were unable to reconstruct it in the absence of a practice tradition because of the great difference between this type of inductive

sutri, p. 602. See also La Vallée Poussin, vol. 4, p. 158 and Pruden, vol. 3, p. 925. The Tibetan version of the *Autocommentary* is closer to Hsüan Tsang's, as given by La Vallée Poussin and Pruden, than to Shastri's.

^a Paṇ-chen Sö-nam-drak-pa, "Concentrations," 155b.6–156a.1; Jam-yang-shay-pa (followed by Kön-chok-jik-may-wang-po) gives "meditative stabilization" and "wisdom" as the key terms in the definitions of "calm abiding" and "special insight," respectively (Jam-yang-shay-pa, *Concentrations*, 110.6 and 162.3; Kön-chok-jik-may-wang-po, *Condensed Statement*, 557.3 and 563.6).

meditative reasoning based on observation and the types of meditative reasoning using consequences (*thal gyur*, *prasaṅga*) or syllogisms (*sbyor ba*, *prayoga*) with which Ge-luk-pas were familiar.^c Thus, although Ge-luk-pa scholars give detailed interpretations of the systems of breath meditation set forth in Vasubandhu's and Asaṅga's texts, they may not fully account for the higher stages of breath meditation set forth in those texts.

According to the *Treasury* (6.12d and its *Autocommentary*),^b meditation on the exhalation and inhalation of the breath has six aspects, or stages:

- 1 counting (*grangs pa*, *gaṇanā*)
- 2 following (*rjes su 'gro ba*, *anugama*)
- 3 placement (*'jog ba*, *sthāna*)
- 4 investigation (*nye bar rtog pa*, *upalakṣaṇā*)^c
- 5 change (*yongs su sgyur ba*, *vivartanā*)
- 6 purifying (*yongs su dag pa*, *parisuddhi*)

Following the *Autocommentary* closely, Gedün Lodrö explains the first, counting, as "the ability to withdraw the mind inside and count the breaths from one to ten single-pointedly without confusing the order."^d

The second, following, involves observation and recognition of where the breath goes in the body; the meditator examines whether the breath fills all or only part of the body. The *Autocommentary* lists some of the places in the body into which the meditator follows the breath—"the throat, the heart, the navel, the kidneys, the thigh, and so on to the two feet," and "out to a distance of a hand and a cubit."^e Lati Rinpoche seems to explain this as a *method of breathing*—"breathing in all the way to the feet and breathing out to a distance ranging from a fathom or a hand's span, depending on the strength of

^a See *Meditation on Emptiness*, pp. 360–61, 431–32, 443–53—and indeed, the entire work is an extended presentation of the use of reasoning in meditation.

^b Vasubandhu, *Treasury of Manifest Knowledge and Autocommentary*, 6.12d (P5591, vol. 115, 245.2.4–245.3.8; Shastri, part 3, pp. 899–900; La Vallée Poussin, vol. 4, pp. 154–56; Pruden, vol. 3, pp. 922–23).

^c "Investigation" is an English translation of the Tibetan *nye bar rtog pa*; a more literal translation of the Sanskrit *upalakṣaṇā* would be "characterization."

^d Gedün Lodrö, p. 115.

^e Vasubandhu, *Autocommentary on the Treasury of Manifest Knowledge*, 6.12d (P5591, vol. 115, 245.3.1–4; Shastri, part 3, pp. 899–900; La Vallée Poussin, vol. 4, p. 154; Pruden, vol. 3, p. 922).

the individual"^a—rather than as an aspect of *mindfulness* of breathing—that is, as part of the process of *observing* the breath. Gedün Lodrö introduces from Tibetan meditational physiology the notion of analyzing the “many coarse and subtle channels (*rtsa, nāḍī*) through which the breath passes,”^b which is not found at this point in the *Autocommentary*.

As Gedün Lodrö notes, the third way of meditating on the breath, placement, involves examination of “how the breath brings help or harm to the body.”^c Lati Rinpoche, paraphrasing the *Autocommentary*, explains the meditator’s method:

...one observes the breath abiding like a string for a necklace from the tip of the nose to the bottom of the feet. Then one considers whether this abiding wind is harming or helping the body, or whether it is hot or cold.^d

Thus, Lati Rinpoche explains placement in terms of observation of the breath, although he had explained following in somewhat different terms.

Gedün Lodrö, developing his earlier reference to analysis of the channels in the body, explains placement as involving the straightening of channels which, up to that time, had been “bent or contracted.” According to him,

The beginning meditator imagines the wind moving through all the coarse and subtle channels of the body and considers if it is helping or harming. Initially this is an aspiration, but with practice unsuitable winds can be stopped and a wind developed through the force of meditation can be directed through the coarse and subtle channels down to the feet. At this time the coarse channels straighten out.^e

Thus, Gedün Lodrö seems to understand placement as something other than observation; he interprets the *Autocommentary*’s reference to “a [straight] string in a rosary,” or necklace, as referring to “a rosary grasped at two ends and pulled taut,” and, therefore, as alluding to the process he describes—perhaps because of the implicit analogy between

^a Aronson, “The Buddhist Path,” p. 39.

^b Gedün Lodrö, p. 116.

^c *Ibid.*, p. 116.

^d Aronson, “The Buddhist Path,” p. 39.

^e *Ibid.*, p. 40; Gedün Lodrö adds that he does not think the Vaibhāṣikas’ method (as he understands it) affects the subtle channels.

the taut rosary and the straightened channels.^a

All accounts of the fourth way of meditating on the breath, investigation, agree that it differs radically from the first three: whereas the first three involve counting and observation of the breath itself, the fourth involves an inductive analysis, based on observation, that leads to the experiential discovery of the five aggregates. According to the *Autocommentary*, which summarizes the meditator’s process of analysis and states its conclusion, “Not only are there just the winds (*vāyu*); there are the four great elements (*mahābhūta*), along with the [secondary] materiality (*rūpa*) resulting from the great elements [and] the minds and mental factors based on these; thus [the meditator] investigates [and characterizes] (*upalakṣyati*) the five aggregates.”^b

Gedün Lodrö notes that the first three and the last three meditations on the breath differ in function, but it appears that neither he nor Lati Rinpoche recognizes that the fourth meditation involves experiential discovery through inductive rather than deductive analysis. Rather, Gedün Lodrö suggests that “the first three...are primarily for beginners attempting to achieve or deepen calm abiding,” whereas “the last three meditations are primarily used for developing proficiency in the calm abiding one has already achieved or for attaining special insight”; his categories overlap, since he also suggests that “the second and third can also be used by those with calm abiding for cultivating special insight.”^c Summarizing and extending the brief analysis given in the *Autocommentary*, Gedün Lodrö explains that the first “three ways of meditating on the breath all involve meditation on the breath itself, which is a tangible object (*reg bya, spraṣṭavya*),” whereas the fourth involves “putting aside the examination of [breath as] wind” and investigating “what is and is not of the nature of the five aggregates in relation to wind.”^d Lati Rinpoche, who also briefly summarizes the analysis given in the *Autocommentary*, notes that “when considering the breath in the above way, one is investigating its mode of existence.”^e However, he too does not seem to consider the possibility that the meditator discovers the mode of existence of the breath through an investigation begun inductively through mindfulness.

According to the *Autocommentary*, the fifth stage of mindfulness of

^a *Ibid.*, p. 40.

^b Vasubandhu, *Autocommentary on the “Treasury of Manifest Knowledge,”* 6.12d (p5591, vol. 115, 245.3.4-8; Shastri, p. 900; La Vallée Poussin, vol. 4, p. 156; Pruden, vol. 3, p. 923).

^c Aronson, “The Buddhist Path,” p. 40.

^d Gedün Lodrö, pp. 116.

^e Aronson, “The Buddhist Path,” p. 40.

breathing, change, involves "modifying the mind that has wind as its object of observation," so that the meditator "practices with respect to higher and higher virtuous roots up to the supreme [mundane] qualities" (*jig rten pa'i chos kyi mchog, laukikāgyadhārma*) of the path of preparation.⁴ The *Autocommentary's* descriptions of the fifth and sixth stages are brief and do not give specific practical instructions or describe the meditator's actual procedure in detail. Thus, the literal wording of the text, especially with regard to the fifth stage, is ambiguous. It can be read to imply that the meditator—who, up to that point, had been observing the breath and, on the basis of that observation, drawing conclusions concerning the aggregates—either changes the object of observation in some way, or attains the four levels of the path of preparation, or both.

Lati Rinpoche's interpretation includes both meanings:

"Change" involves the transformation of the object of observation from the breath to the paths of preparation. One now observes the heat stage of the path of preparation through to the stage of highest mundane phenomena..., changing the mind in to the four levels of the path of preparation.⁵

Similarly, in his interpretation of the sixth stage of mindfulness of breathing, purification, Lati Rinpoche states that "one transforms the mind into the paths of seeing and meditation."⁶

Gedün Lodrö, however, emphasizes the change of object of observation, both in his lectures on calm abiding and in his comments on the sixth chapter of the First Dalai Lama's *Path of Liberation*.⁷ Although he explains, in the latter context, that observation of the path of preparation by someone who has attained calm abiding can lead to attainment of the heat level of the path of preparation and, subsequently, to attainment of its remaining levels—peak, forbearance, and supreme mundane qualities—he seems to imply that, if a meditator attains the path of preparation during the fifth stage of breath meditation, or the paths of seeing and meditation during the sixth, those attainments are the successful result of having taken those paths as objects of observation: "while one contemplates the paths as objects of observation, one

⁴ Vasubandhu, *Autocommentary on the "Treasury of Manifest Knowledge,"* 6.12d (P5591, vol. 115, 245.3.6-7; Shastri, p. 600; La Vallée Poussin, vol. 4, p. 156; Pruden, vol. 3, p. 923).

⁵ Aronson, "The Buddhist Path," p. 40.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁷ Gedün Lodrö, p. 117; Aronson, "The Buddhist Path," pp. 40-41.

is also subjectively cultivating them."^a

The two contemporary Tibetan commentators, Lati Rinpoche and Gedün Lodrö, explain the first three stages of Vasubandhu's system in practical terms, for the most part, since the first two, especially, are practices a beginning meditator might use to overcome discursiveness, and the third still involves direct observation of the breath, although it also involves drawing conclusions from that observation. However, they do not state that, in the last three, the meditator progresses through the Hearer paths of preparation, seeing, and meditation by using mindfulness of breathing and inductive reasoning based on such mindfulness, even though Vasubandhu's *Treasury of Manifest Knowledge* and its *Autocommentary* explicitly lay out such a correspondence.

Moreover, neither scholar posits a relationship between the attainment of the heat stage of the path of preparation at the beginning of the fifth stage of Vasubandhu's system of breath meditation with the attainment of special insight. Although such a correlation would have been consistent with the synthetic system-building methods of Ge-luk religious scholarship, and although Kön-chok-jik-may-wang-po, in his *Condensed Statement*, twice states the commonly held Ge-luk assertion that the attainment of the heat stage of the path of preparation and the attainment of special insight are simultaneous, he does so only in the context of meditation on emptiness or selflessness as such meditation was understood by Ge-luk-pas.^b It appears that neither Ge-luk-pa textbook writers nor modern scholars such as Lati Rinpoche and Gedün Lodrö were in a position to conclude that the first moment of the fifth stage of Vasubandhu's system of breath meditation coincides with the attainment of special insight and that, therefore, the first four stages must be a method for cultivating special insight.

THE PRESENTATION OF ASAṄGA'S GROUNDS OF HEARERS

Asaṅga's *Grounds of Hearers* has been, for the most part, unexplored by Western scholarship; an examination of the theories of meditation and practical instructions set forth in it would require a separate study. It

^a Aronson, "The Buddhist Path," p. 41.

^b Kön-chok-jik-may-wang-po, *Condensed Statement*, 552.2 ("the attainment of the wisdom arisen from meditating on [emptiness], of the special insight on [emptiness], and of the heat [stage of the] Mahāyāna path of preparation are simultaneous") and 575.6 ("a state arisen from meditation which analyzes the object, selflessness; the mental contemplation [arisen from] belief; [and] the heat stage of the Hearer path of preparation...are attained simultaneously").