

# Mindfulness to the Fore

## THE MEANING OF PARIMUKHAM

The Pali Canon's descriptions of mindfulness of breathing start with a standard introduction:

“There's the case where a monk, having gone to the wilderness, to the shade of a tree, or to an empty building, sits down folding his legs crosswise, holding his body erect, and establishing mindfulness *parimukham*. Always mindful, he breathes in; mindful he breathes out.”

The question is, what does *parimukham* mean in this context? As it turns out, it's a controversial point.

The suttas, or discourses, don't explain or define the term. A later text in the Abhidhamma, Vibhaṅga 12:1, interprets it as meaning the tip of the nose or the “sign” of the mouth—*nāsikagge vā mukhanimitte vā*. According to the commentary to this passage, the “sign of the mouth” is the middle portion of the upper lip. The Vibhaṅga's interpretation of the word is a strictly literal one. If you take it apart into its root and prefix, *pari-* means “around”; *mukham* means “face” or “mouth.” This would mean in practice that you should start breath meditation by establishing your mindfulness on the tip of the nose, on the upper lip, or around the mouth.

However, this interpretation doesn't fit in with the way the suttas actually use the term *parimukham* or other key words associated with meditation practice. In other words, even though the suttas don't explicitly define the word *parimukham*, the ways they use the term, and the contexts in which they use it, show implicitly that neither “tip of the nose” nor “around the mouth” would be the best meaning to adopt for the word.

What's interesting is that the commentaries to the suttas and even to the Abhidhamma seem to note this fact. So—in what's a rare move for them—they differ from the Vibhaṅga on this point and offer their own interpretations of *parimukham*, stating that it refers to the *manner* with which mindfulness is established in relation to its object, rather than the physical point where it's focused.

In fact, when we look at the suttas, we'll see that the question of what spot in the body is ideal for focusing your awareness while doing breath meditation is a total non-issue. Instead, it seems that the commentaries are right in saying that *parimukham* indicates the manner with which you establish mindfulness when you start meditating. However, even the commentaries' definitions for the term are not quite in line with the suttas. They indicate that *parimukham* refers to the relationship between mindfulness and its object, whereas the suttas suggest that it refers to the relationship of mindfulness to other mental factors prior to choosing an object. It's meant to take the lead in the training of the mind.

To understand this point, we have to look not only at how *parimukhaṃ* is used in the suttas, but also at the meaning of two terms in the suttas that establish the context for understanding how it's used: *cittassa ek'aggatā* and *sabba-kāya-paṭisamvedī*.

#### CITTASSA EK'AGGATĀ

The first term, *cittassa ek'aggatā*, is the suttas' standard definition of concentration. Now, some modern schools of meditation teach that concentration practice is radically separate from mindfulness practice, which would mean that because *parimukhaṃ* describes mindfulness, the meaning of *cittassa ek'aggatā* would have no bearing on what *parimukhaṃ* means. But in the suttas, the relationship between mindfulness and concentration practice is very close. As the Buddha indicates again and again, the practice of right mindfulness is meant to lead straight to right concentration (SN 45:1). The four establishing of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*), which are the definition of right mindfulness, are the themes of right concentration (MN 44); the fourth level of right concentration, the fourth jhāna, is where mindfulness is purified (DN 2). And as we'll see below, the fourth jhāna is where the fourth step in the Buddha's instructions for mindfulness of breathing is fully realized (AN 4:38; AN 10:20).

So, given that right concentration is where mindfulness practice is aimed, any understanding of mindfulness of breathing requires knowing the state of mind at which it's aimed.

*Cittassa ek'aggatā* is another term that the suttas don't explicitly define. Modern scholars often translate it as "one-pointedness of mind." But there are good reasons for holding that "one-pointedness" is not the best translation for *ek'aggatā* in this context.

First, let's look at the parts of the compound: *eka* means "one"; and *-tā* is a suffix turning an adjective (in this case, *ek'agga*) into a noun. That much is uncontroversial.

The issue is around *agga*, which many people translate as "point."

To begin with, *agga* has many other meanings besides "point." In fact, it has two primary clusters of meanings, in neither of which is "point" the central focus.

The first cluster centers on the fact that a summit of a mountain is called its *agga*. Clustered around this meaning are ideas of *agga* as the topmost part of something (such as the ridge of a roof), the tip of something (such as the tip of a blade of grass), and the best or supreme example of something (such as the Buddha as the *agga* of all beings). AN 5:80 plays with these meanings of *agga* when it criticizes monks of the future who will "search for the tiptop flavors (*ras'agga*) with the tip of the tongue (*jivh'agga*)."

The second cluster of meanings for *agga* centers on the idea of "dwelling," "meeting place," or "gathering place." A hall where monks gather for the *uposatha*, for example, is called an *uposath'agga*. The spot where they gather for their meals is called a *bhatt'agga*.

So the question is whether *agga* in the context of concentration has a meaning closer to summit (and thus, possibly, “point”) or to gathering place.

Here, the best guide is furnished by the similes the Buddha provides in various suttas (such as DN 2, MN 119, and AN 5:28) for the four *jhānas* that constitute right concentration.

*The first jhāna:* “Just as if a dexterous bathman or bathman’s apprentice would pour bath powder into a brass basin and knead it together, sprinkling it again & again with water, so that his ball of bath powder—saturated, moisture-laden, permeated within & without—would nevertheless not drip; in the same way, the monk permeates & pervades, suffuses & fills this very body with the rapture & pleasure born of seclusion. There is nothing of his entire body unpervaded by rapture & pleasure born of seclusion.”

*The second jhāna:* “Just like a lake with spring-water welling up from within, having no inflow from the east, west, north, or south, and with the skies supplying abundant showers time & again, so that the cool fount of water welling up from within the lake would permeate & pervade, suffuse & fill it with cool waters, there being no part of the lake unpervaded by the cool waters; in the same way, the monk permeates & pervades, suffuses & fills this very body with the rapture & pleasure born of concentration. There is nothing of his entire body unpervaded by rapture & pleasure born of concentration.”

*The third jhāna:* “Just as in a lotus pond, some of the lotuses, born & growing in the water, stay immersed in the water and flourish without standing up out of the water, so that they are permeated & pervaded, suffused & filled with cool water from their roots to their tips, and nothing of those lotuses would be unpervaded with cool water; in the same way, the monk permeates & pervades, suffuses & fills this very body with the pleasure divested of rapture. There is nothing of his entire body unpervaded with pleasure divested of rapture.”

*The fourth jhāna:* “Just as if a man were sitting covered from head to foot with a white cloth so that there would be no part of his body to which the white cloth did not extend; in the same way, the monk sits, permeating the body with a pure, bright awareness. There is nothing of his entire body unpervaded by pure, bright awareness.”

Now, obviously these similes indicate that concentration is a full-body experience: “[T]he monk permeates & pervades, suffuses & fills this very body with the rapture & pleasure... There is nothing of his entire body unpervaded by rapture & pleasure... There is nothing of his entire body unpervaded by pure, bright awareness.” If your awareness were restricted to a single point, you’d have no way of knowing whether rapture and/or pleasure had pervaded the entire body in the first three *jhānas*, and your body certainly wouldn’t be permeated with a pure, bright awareness in the fourth.

- There’s an opposing interpretation here, stating that the word “body” in these similes doesn’t mean the physical body, because a person in *jhāna* has to be oblivious to the physical body aside from the one focal point of concentration. Instead, “body” is meant metaphorically as a term for the “body” of the mind.

However, it's hard to understand why, if the Buddha really did mean for concentration to be a state of awareness restricted to a single point, the similes would have occurred to him in the first place as a useful or appropriate way of describing the jhānas. And it would call into question his skill as a teacher if, wanting to convey that jhāna was an exclusively one-pointed concentration, he used these similes of fullness and extensiveness to describe such a narrow experience.

But putting that question aside, we can simply note that in MN 119 the Buddha gives the similes for the jhānas immediately after his discussion of six ways of focusing on the physical body. If he had meant "body" to mean "physical body" in the first context, and "mind body" in the discussion immediately following it, he would have signaled that he was redefining his terms. But he didn't.

So unless we want to assume that the Buddha was careless or devious in his meditation instructions, it seems best to interpret *agga* in the compound *ek'aggatā* as meaning "gathering place": All the factors of jhāna are gathered around a single object or theme, but awareness embraces the entire body so that the body can be filled with pleasure, rapture, and a pure, bright awareness as these qualities are developed in the course of deepening concentration. Given that the state of concentration is said to be a dwelling (*vihāra*), and that a person enters and dwells (*viharati*) in concentration, this meaning of *agga* seems to be the most appropriate for the context.

#### SABBA-KĀYA-PAṬISAMVEDĪ

This, then relates to the second term that establishes the context for *parimukham*: *sabba-kāya-paṭisamvedī*. This word appears in the third step of breath meditation instructions as listed in MN 118 and other places in the Canon. It means "sensitive to the entire body."

"[1] Breathing in long, he discerns, 'I am breathing in long'; or breathing out long, he discerns, 'I am breathing out long.' [2] Or breathing in short, he discerns, 'I am breathing in short'; or breathing out short, he discerns, 'I am breathing out short.' [3] He trains himself, 'I will breathe in sensitive to the entire body.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe out sensitive to the entire body.' [4] He trains himself, 'I will breathe in calming bodily fabrication.' He trains himself, 'I will breathe out calming bodily fabrication.'

The question is, what does "body" mean in the phrase, "sensitive to the entire body"? Looking at this in terms of the similes for jhāna, it would seem obvious that "entire body" here means the entire physical body.

However, the *Visuddhimagga* (VIII.171), a commentarial text, insists that "body" in this compound cannot mean the physical body, and instead must mean the "body of breath," and that the entire compound means being sensitive to the entire length of the breath.

There are three reasons, though, for not accepting the *Visuddhimagga*'s interpretation here.

1. The first is that these four steps for mindfulness of breathing appear in MN 119 in the context of other meditation practices, all of which focus on the physical body. If the Buddha had meant “body” to mean “physical body” in the context of those exercises, but something else here, he would have said so. But he didn’t.

2. The second reason is that the Visuddhimagga’s interpretation of step 3 in the Buddha’s instructions makes it redundant with steps 1 and 2. It’s hard to understand how you could discern whether the breath is long or short in those steps without being aware of the full length of the breath.

3. The third reason is that the Visuddhimagga’s interpretation leaves a huge gap between steps 2 and 4. Step 4, as the above passage shows, is to train yourself to breathe in and out calming bodily fabrication. Now, AN 4:38 and AN 10:20 explain what this means:

“And how is a monk calmed in his bodily fabrication? There is the case where a monk, with the abandoning of pleasure & pain—as with the earlier disappearance of elation & distress—enters & remains in the fourth jhāna: purity of equanimity & mindfulness, neither pleasure nor pain. This is how a monk is calmed in his bodily fabrication.”

In other words, the purpose of step 4 is to lead the mind to the fourth jhāna. As we saw above, when you’re in the fourth jhāna, your entire body is permeated with a pure, bright awareness. As we learn from other sutta passages, the fourth jhāna is also the level of concentration where the in-and-out breaths stop (SN 36:11; AN 10:72). In practice, this requires two stages: developing a full-body awareness (as implied in the similes for the first three jhānas) and then getting the mind so quiet and still that there’s no felt need to breathe.

Step 4 focuses on the calming of the breath. If we were to follow the Visuddhimagga’s interpretation of step 3, the Buddha’s breath meditation instructions would be missing an important step: how to get from simply detecting the length of the breath to a full-body awareness of the body not breathing in and out. But if we take the Canon at its word—it doesn’t say “body of breath,” as some translations gloss it in light of the commentary, it simply says “body”—then the essential step is right there in step 3: You go from discerning whether the breath is long or short to training yourself to be sensitive to the entire body. Then in step 4 you train yourself to calm the in-and-out breaths so that you end up in the fourth jhāna with the entire body permeated with a pure, bright awareness.

- This interpretation of *sabba-kāya-paṭisamvedī* has been challenged by citing the simile that the Buddha uses to describe the first four steps of mindfulness of breathing when they are given in the Satipaṭṭhāna and Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna Suttas (MN 10; DN 22).

“Just as a dexterous turner or his apprentice, when making a long turn, discerns, ‘I am making a long turn,’ or when making a short turn discerns, ‘I am making a short turn’; in the same way the monk, when breathing in long, discerns, ‘I am breathing in long’; or breathing out long, he discerns, ‘I am breathing out long.’ ... He trains himself, ‘I will breathe in calming bodily fabrication’; he trains himself, ‘I will breathe out calming bodily fabrication.’”

The turner here is a traditional version of the modern lathe worker. Videos of turners who still practice the traditional method of turning wood show that their eyes are intently focused on the point where the blade of the cutting knife meets the wood being turned. From this fact, it has been argued that the simile is making the point that, when doing these four steps of mindfulness of breathing, one should have an intense one-pointed focus like a turner, and not be aware of the whole body.

However, the videos also show that the turner has to be aware of much more than just the point where the blade of the knife meets the wood. Unlike modern lathes—where a machine turns the wood, and lathe workers are responsible only for where they place the knife and with how much pressure—the traditional turner also has to turn the wood himself. He does this with a bow whose string is wrapped around the wood. So in addition to being aware of the knife, he also has to be aware of how long or short a turn he makes with the bow, which will determine how deep or shallow his cut will be. And videos of these craftsmen show that the way they use their bows is very subtle and complex. To know whether they are making a short or a long turn—the main focus of the Buddha’s simile—they have to be aware of how their arms are moving the bow.

In other words, the simile of the turner is actually an illustration, not of an exclusive one-pointed awareness, but of full-body awareness.

- Another sutta passage cited in support of the Visuddhimagga’s interpretation of *kāya* in *sabba-kāya-paṭisamvedī* is the following explanation from MN 118 as to why the first four steps of breath meditation develop the body in and of itself as a frame of reference for establishing mindfulness:

“I tell you, monks, that this—the in-&-out breath—is classed as a body among bodies, which is why the monk on that occasion remains focused on the body in & of itself—ardent, alert, & mindful—subduing greed & distress with reference to the world.”

This passage, according to the argument, defines what “body” means in the third step of breath meditation: the in-and-out breath. Therefore, “entire body” must mean the entire temporal length of the in-and-out breath as felt at the nose.

There are many reasons for not accepting this argument, some of which we have already cited in pointing out the general problems with the Visuddhimagga’s interpretation. But here we can cite two more:

1. This passage from MN 118 is not offered as a definition of “body” in the third step. Instead, it’s offered as an explanation as to how all four of the first steps of breath meditation develop the body in and of itself as a framework for establishing mindfulness. This passage is found only in the few suttas that analyze the relationship between the sixteen steps of mindfulness of breathing on the one hand, and the four establishings of mindfulness on the other—such as MN 118 and SN 54:13. It appears in none of the many passages in the Vinaya and suttas that list the sixteen steps without reference to this relationship, such as the origin story to Parājika 3, SN 54:6, SN 54:8, SN 54:9, SN 54:11, and AN 10:60. So the context of the explanation doesn’t point to the third step.

But even if, for the sake of argument, we were to take this explanation as defining “body” in the third step, the fact that it is referring to all four steps means we would also have to take it as defining “body” in the fourth step, which, as we pointed out above, would make no sense. Given that the whole compound *kāya-saṅkhāra* in the fourth step means the in-and-out breath, how could *kāya* in the compound also mean in-and-out breath?

2. Also, if we were to take *kāya* in *sabba-kāya-paññā* to mean in-and-out breath, why would “entire in-and-out breath” be limited to just the temporal length of the in-and-out breath as felt at the nose? After all, the in-and-out breath can be felt in many places in the body, most obviously in the shoulders, chest, diaphragm, and abdomen. Some people are so sensitive to the in-and-out breath that they can feel it throughout in the entire body. Given this fact, how could “entire in-and-out breath” mean only a very small part of the actual expansive in-and-out breathing experience? Because the first four steps of breath meditation aim at inducing a state in which awareness fills the body, it makes more sense to interpret *sabba-kāya-paññā* as an instruction to develop a full-body awareness as you breathe in and out.

#### PARIMUKHAM

Which brings us to the issue of *parimukham*. The above discussion should be enough to indicate that the issue of which part of the body you must be focused on as you start being mindful of the breath is a total non-issue. Because you’re working toward a full-body awareness in right concentration, the spot where you begin should be a matter of personal choice.

In fact, when we look at how the word *parimukham* is used in other suttas or passages in the Vinaya, we can see that it’s highly unlikely that *parimukham*, in the context of meditation instructions, refers to a particular part of the body at all. This is what we find:

*Parimukham* appears in Cullavagga (Cv) V.27.4, a Vinaya text, where it’s listed in a passage discussing ways in which body or facial hair should not be “dressed.” Judging from the terms around it, it could either refer to the place where the hair grows, or to the style of dressing the hair itself. The commentary to Cv V.27.4 translates *parimukham* in this context as “chest.” But because the context here is not meditation, and because the term as it stands in the Canon could be interpreted in different ways, this doesn’t give us much to go on.

More relevant to our purposes are the many places in the suttas where *parimukham* describes how mindfulness should be established when meditating. The first thing to note is that it’s used not only in the context of breath meditation, but also in the context of other meditation themes. Some suttas use it to indicate that someone—the Buddha or a monk—is meditating, without reference to what his meditation theme is (as in Ud 3:4 and Ud 5:10). It’s also used in contexts where the monk is described simply as abandoning hindrances—again, with no reference to the breath or any particular object of meditation (as in DN 2, DN 25, MN 27, MN 38, MN 39, MN 51, and many other passages.)

Most telling, though, are cases where someone is meditating and he *cannot* be understood to be consistently focusing on one particular part of the body. For example, in AN 3:64, the Buddha describes his practice of doing *brahma-vihāra*, sublime-attitude, meditation with his mindfulness established *parimukhaṃ*. Obviously, if he's extending goodwill, etc., to all beings in all directions without limit, his mindfulness can't be established exclusively on the nose tip or around the mouth—or on any other part of his body at all.

Now, it might possibly be argued that the Buddha first established his mindfulness at his nose before extending goodwill, etc., to the entire cosmos—possibly, but it's by no means necessary. And even if he did start there, he couldn't have stayed there as he continued meditating.

Ud 7:8 offers an example, though, where the meditating monk cannot even be construed as starting his meditation at the nose. There, Ven. Mahā Kaccāyana is sitting with *kāyagatāsati*, mindfulness immersed in the body, “established *parimukhaṃ* within.” Because this meditation involves being mindful of the entire body, Ven. Mahā Kaccāna's mindfulness can't be established exclusively at the nose-tip or around the mouth. And because the passage refers to this whole-body awareness being established *parimukhaṃ* and within *right from the very beginning*, it's clearly not referring to a step prior to his choosing his topic of mindfulness. It's whole-body and inward from the start.

Because the suttas use the term *parimukhaṃ* in these ways when describing the establishing of mindfulness regardless of the theme of the meditation, it seems best to regard it—at least in the context of meditation—not as a place on the body with body hair, or as a style of fashioning body hair, but as having an idiomatic meaning that would apply to all meditation practices, even those where the focus can't be on one particular part of the body.

#### The Commentaries

The commentaries themselves recognize that *parimukhaṃ* cannot mean a particular part of the body when it's mentioned in the suttas in reference to meditation.

The earliest commentary to discuss the meaning of *parimukhaṃ* is the Paṭisambhida-magga, which predates Buddhaghosa's commentaries by many centuries. In fact, it is so old that the Burmese and Sri Lankans have included it in their versions of the Pali Canon. The Thais, however, seem to be more correct in regarding it as post-canonical.

This text, in its discussion of mindfulness of breathing, agrees with the Vibhaṅga that attention, at least initially, should be focused on the breath at the tip of the nose. However, it doesn't argue this point on the basis of the word *parimukhaṃ*. Instead, it offers it simply as a recommendation independent of anything in the Canon.

When it comes to explain *parimukhaṃ*, it takes the word in an entirely different direction. Dividing *parimukhaṃ* into its prefix and root, it derives what's called an *edifying* etymology for it—i.e., one that has less to do with the word's



actual verbal roots, and more to do with the meaning the commentator wants to draw from it. Its explanation (Paṭis III, 192) is this:

*parīti pariggahaṭṭho, mukhanti niyyānaṭṭho.*

which means: “*pari-* has the sense of *pariggaha* (embracing; enclosing; taking up); *mukhaṃ* has the sense of *niyyāna* (outlet/going out/setting forth).”

In other words, in this interpretation, mindfulness has been taken in hand and moved forward or out into the object.

It’s interesting to note that Buddhaghosa’s commentary to the Vibhaṅga, after explaining the Vibhaṅga’s definition of *parimukhaṃ*, directs the reader to the Paṭisambhida-magga for a fuller explanation of the term and the topic of mindfulness of breathing in general. In other words, he seems to side with the Paṭisambhida-magga against the Vibhaṅga on this point.

This fact is even clearer in Buddhaghosa’s commentaries on the suttas. Every time they explain the Buddha’s sixteen-step instructions for mindfulness of breathing, or even just the first four, they refer the reader to the full-scale treatment of the topic in the Visuddhimagga. There, Buddhaghosa explains the phrase, *parimukhaṃ satim upaṭṭhāpetvā* as meaning, “having placed (or placing) mindfulness facing forward to the meditation object”:

*parimukhaṃ satim upaṭṭhāpetvāti = kammaṭṭhānābhimukhaṃ satim ṭhāpetvā* (Vism VIII.161).

Buddhaghosa then cites the Paṭisambhida-magga definition as an equally valid alternative.

Here again, the quality or manner of establishing mindfulness is emphasized: It faces its object directly.

The commentaries to Ud 7:8, the passage related to mindfulness immersed in the body, and AN 3:64, the passage related to the practice of the brahma-vihāras, follow the Visuddhimagga in interpreting *parimukhaṃ* in this way.

The commentary to Ud 7:8, for instance (which appears to postdate Buddhaghosa), defines *parimukhaṃ* in line with Buddhaghosa’s own definition:

*parimukhanti abhimukhaṃ,*

which means, “*parimukhaṃ* = facing forward”

The commentary to AN 3:64 gives Buddhaghosa’s own definition, plus the Paṭisambhida-magga definition as an alternative. However, it slightly tweaks the latter definition, changing *pariggaha* (enclosing/taking up) to *pariggahita* (taken/seized). Why the change, it doesn’t say.

*parimukhaṃ satim upaṭṭhāpetvāti kammaṭṭhānābhimukhaṃ satim ṭhāpetvā,*  
*pariggahitaniyyānaṃ vā katvāti attho*

which means, “Having established mindfulness *parimukhaṃ* = having established mindfulness facing his meditation theme or having made it *pariggahita-niyyāna*.”

The change looks minor on the surface, but the commentary to Ud 3:4 picks it up and runs with it, giving a more forceful explanation for its meaning:

*pariggahitaniyyānasatim katvāti. niyyānanti ca satiyā ogāhitabbarā ārammaṇāni datṭhabbarā*

which means: “*niyyāna* in the phrase, *pariggahitaniyyānasatim katvāti*: This should be seen (understood) as: The object should be plunged into by mindfulness.”

Here again, this commentary is stating that *parimukham* refers, not to the place in the body where mindfulness is established at the beginning of meditation, but to the *manner* in which it’s established. In this case, the commentary is emphasizing the intensity of how it’s established: You seize mindfulness and set it forth, plunging it fully into the object.

The commentary to Paṭi III, 192—or, in the Thai reckoning, the sub-commentary to that text—shows that, at the time of its composition, many other interpretations of the Paṭisambhida-magga definition of *parimukham* had developed in the monastic community as well. This commentary’s discussion of the issue is long and prolix, but here we can focus just on the meanings it offers for *niyyāna* (outlet/going out/setting forth): concentration based on mindfulness of breathing; the setting-out from the wandering-on (*sarīsāra*); and the point of entry and exit for the in-and-out breaths. This last alternative is the only place in the commentaries where the Vibhaṅga definition of *parimukham* is even entertained, and the fact that it’s last in the list of alternatives indicates that it was considered the least likely.

Apart from this one exception, the commentaries seem to be unanimous in interpreting *parimukham* as indicating the manner with which mindfulness is established in its object, rather than the physical place where it’s established. The various commentators differ in how they define that manner, but by and large the overall impression they give is one of intensity and directness: Mindfulness faces its object directly or is seized and plunged into the object.

At present, one common way of trying to sort out the differences between the Abhidhamma on the one hand, and the commentaries on the other, is to state that, in the context of breath meditation, *parimukham* means at the upper lip and at the tip of the nose, and in the context of other meditation topics, it means the manner with which mindfulness is established. But this doesn’t make linguistic sense. Because it’s part of a stock phrase used to describe meditation practice regardless of the topic of the meditation—even when no topic is specifically mentioned—it should carry the same meaning across all mindfulness practices. If the Buddha had intended for it to mean different things in different contexts, he would have said so. Yet he never did.

There is one obvious argument for interpreting *parimukham* as meaning the tip of the nose or around the mouth in the context of breath meditation, and that’s because those are the parts of the body where the flow of the air as you breathe in and out is most obvious. Literally, they’re right in your face. Now, it’s not wrong to focus there, but it’s important to remember that the touch of the air at the tip of the nose or around the mouth is classified as a tactile contact, felt via the body in its role as one of the six external sense media. But when the suttas

classify the in-and-out breath under the factors of dependent co-arising, they don't place it under the factors of sense media or contact. In MN 44, it's listed as a type of fabrication (*saṅkhāra*), or intentional action. In MN 28, it's listed under the wind or energy property, which is one of the aspects of form (*rūpa*): the body as felt from within.

These facts have three implications:

1) Both fabrication and form are listed prior to sensory contact in dependent co-arising (SN 12:2). This means that the contact of the air at the nostrils is conditioned by the in-and-out breath—i.e., a result of the in-and-out breath—and is not the in-and-out breath itself. So even though the flow of the air at the nostrils may, for some people, be the most obvious way of sensing the in-and-out breath, there's no reason to regard it as having priority over other parts of the body where the actual in-and-out breath can be sensed.

2) The movement of the in-and-out breath energy, as an aspect of form, can be felt in many parts of the body, not just at the nose. So wherever you sense the energy of the in-and-out breath, it's fine to begin your practice of mindfulness of breathing by focusing there.

3) The contact of the air at the nose doesn't admit of a wide range of pleasant or unpleasant feelings. However, the in-and-out breath as felt in other parts of the body *can* be extremely pleasant or unpleasant. Think of how the front of your torso feels as you breathe easily in a relaxed mood as opposed to how it feels when your breathing is labored or affected by strong anger or fear. Because mindfulness practice is meant to lead to states of jhāna characterized by intense pleasure and refreshment, it makes more sense to focus special attention on areas of the body where the breathing process can be made very pleasurable.

As noted above, because jhāna is a whole-body experience, it makes no sense to insist that attention has to be focused first on a particular part of the body to the exclusion of others. Even if you do start with one point before spreading your awareness to the entire body, there's no reason to insist that it has to be the tip of the nose or around the mouth. There are people who get headaches when trying to focus there, so why force them to? For the sake of gaining the pleasure and rapture of right concentration, you can focus anywhere that you find it easiest and most pleasant to maintain focus.

This is why, as I said above, the issue of which particular point in the body mindfulness should be restricted to is really a non-issue.

Translating *parimukham*

We're left with the question of how best to translate *parimukham* into English.

Looking at how the suttas use the term, it would seem that the commentaries are right in interpreting it as describing the manner in which mindfulness is established. However, there is still one problem with the commentaries' definitions: They all describe *parimukham* as indicating the manner with which mindfulness relates *to its object*. However, in many of the sutta passages where it appears, no object is mentioned. In some of those passages, mindfulness is used,

not to connect to a meditation object, but to rid the mind of hindrances. In passages where the meditation object *is* mentioned—such as the in-and-out breath or the brahmavihāras, the fact that the meditator establishes mindfulness *parimukham* is mentioned first, and only then is there any reference to the object that the meditator focuses on. The only passage where the object is mentioned in the same phrase as the act of establishing mindfulness is Ud 7:8, where Ven. Mahā Kaccāyana is sitting with *kāyagatāsati*, mindfulness immersed in the body established *parimukham* within. In this special case, *mindfulness* and *immersed in the body* are part of the same compound word. But nowhere else in the Canon does this particular way of using the term occur. In all other cases, the object, if mentioned at all, comes in a later sentence.

This suggests that *parimukham* refers metaphorically, not to the relationship between mindfulness and its object, but to its position in the mind in relation to other mental factors in preparation for applying it to the meditation object. In other words, it shows how much importance mindfulness should have. Because the term contains *mukha*—mouth or face—and in some contexts *parimukham* could mean the chest, for a native speaker the word could easily have had connotations of something that is made prominent or placed to the forefront. This would mean that, in preparing to meditate, mindfulness is placed to the forefront of the mind and put in a position of leadership in eradicating hindrances from the mind and bringing it to concentration.

For this reason, it would appear that the best translation for *parimukham* would be “to the forefront” or “to the fore.” When you meditate, you establish mindfulness in the forefront of the mind, in a position of leadership among the other qualities that will engage in the meditation, and then you bring it to its object. Given that SN 48:10 defines mindfulness as a faculty of the memory —“one is mindful, is endowed with excellent proficiency in mindfulness, remembering & able to call to mind even things that were done & said long ago”— this means that when you sit down to meditate, you establish the intention to bear in mind the instructions that you want to follow, and to remember to stay focused on your task. That’s the kind of mindfulness that develops into right concentration and prepares the mind to apply its discernment to whatever is experienced in the course of concentration practice.

This interpretation of *parimukham* has the advantage of encouraging you to understand the importance of mindfulness in developing the mind, rather than limiting you to where you have to focus it. So for both textual and pragmatic reasons, it seems the best way to translate the word.