

# 2005-10-16 Mindfulness of Breathing

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

breath, breathing, relax, breathe, people, belly, attention, attitudes, diaphragm, relaxed, ribcage, fixated, meditate, meditation, feel, deeply, guided meditation, teacher, mindfulness, sensation

## SPEAKERS

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So in engaging in Buddhist life in Buddhist practice, it is very important to have a teacher. It's very important to have spiritual friends. And it's very helpful to have an ally for your practice. And one of the most significant teachers, spiritual friends and allies you can have is your own breath, your own breathing. mindfulness of breathing is one of the most significant forms of Buddhist practice. It's one of the most universal, you find it in many different Buddhist traditions. And there are many teachers who have said that the whole path of practice can be accomplished. Through mindfulness of breathing, mindfulness of breathing can be your teacher, your friend and your ally. The we know that the many different spiritual traditions have played a lot of emphasis on the value of breathing and breath. And you see that even a language that's where the soul the spirit is often connected to the breath. I love the story in Genesis, where the, you know, I think the meaning is that human beings are made of the Earth from the earth, we are of the earth. Because of that, you know, someone shaped us out of clay. And then that clay shape was breathed into, and it was the breath of God that brought life. And so the breath and the spirit of life is deeply embedded not just in Judeo Christian traditions, but in many, many different spiritual traditions. And I'm very fond as some of you have heard too many times. For me, I love the idea that the word spiritual has its genesis in Latin of the meaning of breath. Like the word respiration, we have the word there, it's very clearly. And so the expression spiritual inspiration has the word breath in both words. And, and the word animate, you know to animate life is also in Latin aneema connected to the word meaning air breath. The even as I'm talking now, taking a pause, I connect to my breath and feel my breath feeling what's done to me to give this talk so far, a little bit excited about talking about the breath. I see how it's affected my breathing changes how my breathing is just to do that. I check in and then it kind of changes a little bit and relaxes. So How is it for your breath sitting here today? This morning? How's your breath? How's your breathing? Are you you've been paying attention to it or you've been ignoring it. Your breath can only be your teacher. If you pay attention to it, the it's very easy to go through life without ever even noticing that you're breathing. And, but I think the value is a spiritual values of the breath occur when there's awareness of breathing. So there has to be some way of checking into it and being aware of it, letting it the breathing, the

inhalation and exhalation explanations occur in the field of awareness. So already then things started to change because you're starting to be aware and seemingly, the breath is responsive to that awareness. Seemingly the breath is responsive, just about everything in your environment. All kinds of different situations and reactions and feelings you have somehow seems to impact the breath. The breath is Very sensitive Oregon, provided that you are relaxed to begin with. If you're uptight and tight and tense with your breath, the breath has very little opportunity to be influenced by situations and change that may be adaptive. I like to use the idea of h2o as an analogy for the breath. The h2o can take different forms. When h2o takes the form of water, it's quite malleable, it's quite it can take the shape of any container that you put it in. If you push on the water it gives quite nicely and it makes kind of a ripple wave that kind of goes out nicely. And you know, water has wonderful properties of resilience. But as soon as that water, h2o becomes ice, then it loses some of that a lot of that most of that Resilience malleability, shaped fullness. And if the what if the ice is really thin, it's actually quite brittle breaks really easily. And if it's really solid, then you can hardly move it you can't shape it at all unless you take a chisel. And so the same thing with our breath. There are times where it can be quite fluid and not as fluid as water. But as with the way the breathing moves through our body, the way our body responds to the breathing, the way there can be a lot of fluidity, the body can respond and shaped quite quite a bit by the breath. Or if the if they're breathing or torso or ribcage or diaphragm or stomach or health tight, then you know, you're not going to get much movement in the body and the benefits, the rhythmic benefits. The rhythmic way in which the body can can respond to breathing is not going to go very far because it's going to meet that resistance of being frozen. One of the things that I've begun to notice now that I've been teaching for many years, is that there are some people who have been practicing meditation for many years. And for some reason or other, I don't quite understand. They seem to have never really learned how to breathe well, are naturally. And some of that is certainly my fault. Because I haven't talked about it very much. And, and in our tradition, when we talk about mindfulness of breathing, we always, almost always make it very clear. This is not the kind of yogic breathing. You're supposed to change your breath enough, but it really is supposed to bring mindfulness to your breathing and just be mindful of the way it is. And so that can lend itself to some idea that oh, well, I'm not supposed to change my breath or do anything about my breath. However, I think that before a person learns to meditate Well, they should have Learn how to breathe well as a foundation. And breathing Well, for me mostly means they start freeing up their breath. Now generally, if you practice mindfulness, breath tends to become freer as you do it. So it's a wonderful kind of, kind of mutual relationship. The more free your breath becomes, the easier it is to meditate, the more stronger develop your meditation becomes, the more your breath becomes freer. But some people, I think they should spend some time actually freeing up the breath, as a way as a foundation to really get good meditation going. There are many different kinds of meditation practices. You know, some have nothing to do with the breath at all. But even then, I think it's helpful as preliminary to have the breath kind of relaxed and flowing. Sometimes in our tradition, some people like to follow their breath at the nostrils. And that's a fine place to watch the sensations of the air going in and out. But again, I think as much To do that after person is freed up the torso, the ribcage, diaphragm, the belly, the back rib cage the shoulder blades little bit so that the body feels like it's kind of like a bellows like a balloon that expands and contracts like something is really can move and, and kind of like water like.

So that's wonderful diaphragm of ours, when it moves, it can really kind of move through the whole day, the effect of it can move through much of our body. I don't know a lot about the physiology of breathing, as some people here might know a lot more. But the impression I have is that what I understand is that the diaphragm which is apparently Big Muscle, or connected to muscles is a big muscle. And muscle actually muscle is one of the few muscles in the body which is not connected to a bone and it's connected to many other muscles and through tendons and ligaments, I guess. They kind of spread out in many different directions from that place in the diaphragm, but right. Close enough if I can directly directly Catch the ribcage is attached also the psoas muscle it's also attached interdigitate and so anyway My impression is just the doctor itself is attached to many different parts of this port Tor, Tor, Tor, Tor sec cavity. thoracic, classic, the ancient thoracic and so as we breathe, you know, it really is really relaxed to the ribcage is really relaxed and that breathing can affect many different things. And what's very interesting to do is to watch how the breath changes depending for example on our reactions and responses to the world to our emotions or thoughts. And I'd like to give you have you do one small exercise to give you some sense of this. So you might sit up straight so that you're bellies little bit relaxed and, and then place a hand on your belly, just kind of round your diaphragm and feel the movement and your diaphragm. It helps if you can relax your belly there and feel the movement in your diaphragm. Lifting and following the movement back and forth. As you relax and feel they're gonna get a sense of what that movement and fitness sensations are. And then it's keeping your hand there to notice how things change. Open your eyes, and then stare intently on the spot in front of you. Really steered really fixate the eyes really intently and really kind of bore into that, like a laser bore into that spot that you're looking at. And as you bore in, does that change your breathing at all? Notice how you might change your breathing diaphragm area when you fixate the attention that way. And now your eyes still open. See if you can soften your gaze to be aware of a peripheral vision, whole room the whole space around you very open. It's not really fixating anything with your eyes, but kind of stay aware of really wide sphere what's going on. And as you have a wide case, does that change your breathing there? Okay, so you can stop. Some of you nodded your heads. And I'm sure that for some of you that exercise didn't show much. That's fine. Everyone's different, but often, there's We see a tendency that when we fixate the attention some way that it affects the breathing. Often some people probably experience the breath got tighter, or shallower or maybe lifting up a little bit to the attention. And when they when you relax the gaze, it relax the stomach area from the there's nothing wrong with that many situations appropriate. But what happens often is that we can live a life that's fixated, we can be preoccupied with certain thoughts and ideas. And we could be kind of always in some part of our mind kind of locked in. They're fixated on that. We can be fixated on certain emotions. And even though they can almost be in the background of our attention, foreground, we can be wary of all kinds of things in the background. There's something that's going on there, whether some part of the mind is fixated and held. And that fixation of part of our attention part of our own mind, is going to affect our breathing. Held held are breathing in different ways. And I have a great what I think is a nice kind of List of the way certain emotions tend to affect the way some people walk and breathe. Anger. The breath tends to have shallow inhalations and strong exhalations and tension throughout the body. Fear rapid, shallow and irregular breaths with tight knots in the abdomen. grief and sorrow spasm attic, sobbing superficial breath with hollow empty

feeling and belly. I often think of a grief and sorrow. It's very high. The interest in breasts are very high up at the top of the chest. And sometimes they don't really relax all the way. Also with depression, I've noticed the ones when I was depressed that my chest was Extended and I couldn't really let go and exhalation couldn't relax all the way and it was held. And then when I finally was able to release my chest, I don't know what came first. But anyway, correlating with releasing my chest so exhalation could relax all the way. The depression went away. That was once. impatience, short, jerky, uncoordinated breaths, intention in front of adjust. Guilt and self judgment, restricted, suffocating breath, and overall sensation of being weighed down. boredom, shallow, lifeless breath and little sensation anywhere. Love compassion, kindness and wonder. Deep comfortable breathing, open, energized, receptive feeling throughout the body. Sometimes I've done I've talked to people many times I've talked to people about their breathing. And there's some interesting things I've discovered among some people that have deeply held attitudes about life. attitudes in life can be deeply held or expressed in the way that they relate to breathing way breathing occurs. And maybe you have to be very still, in order to kind of see the attitude sometimes embedded in the way some people agreed, very calm, very still in the mind to see everything a lot of stuff has to fall away. So you can some of these subtleties, can. But sometimes very profound issues, but subtle things can be seen. I've known people who discovered that they were reluctant to let go, reluctant to exhale, maybe find it be then they got to the top of the in breath, and there was kind of this very subtle, reluctant to breathe out. Because they had something like they had something they didn't want to give it up. So it's very subtle, you know. And then I've known people who when they get To the near the end of the out breath, don't really want to breathe out all the way. Because they breathe maybe halfway or two thirds of the way out. And then they breathe in. Because the out breath for some people is a time of letting go. Losing control. And losing control is not good, right. And so there's a look in the last lost loss of control right there. And so some people will not let themselves breathe out all the way. I've known people who love the breathing out and the stillness of the end of the out breath. And then did not want to breathe in. Because breathing in was kind of a burden. It's kind of like the world impinging on them. You know, like, you know, stay away, please. And so there was kind of this little reluctance about breathing in. So maybe that's what I can remember right now. And that's the first time I kind of started hearing these kind of reports was when I did a guided meditation. For people I guided meditation and dying directly out of Stephen Lyons book and it has to do with you can really kind of letting go and letting go and letting go letting go of your body letting go of emotions let go of all kinds of stuff in this guided meditation and then finally letting go because they should last breath letting go of your breath also just letting go of your breath. And it's coming out of that into people being guided can go very, very deep in their meditation practice in this kind of guided letting go very still. And everything's gone gone, in a sense except that breath and its people first started reporting to me this kind of they saw these attitudes around the breathing, when that was always left. So who knows what's gonna happen when you die? But you're gonna have your last breath. And exactly, you're gonna discover your attitude that you have there. Oh so Some of you don't have attitudes in your breath, I'm sure. Breath just breeze itself. It's very natural and easy. Nothing there. So I've been paying attention to my breath for 30 years, I still feel I have a tremendous amount of to learn about my breath. And in some ways not to be discouraged, but actually encouraged you. I feel like a novice still at it. And I find it increasingly

inspiring. No pun intended. Increasingly interesting. I know that for not people new to this all this, they can't imagine what's so interesting about the breath. In fact, the breath seems inherently boring. Just the mechanical things, physiological things. We used to get enough air in there, you know, and why do we focus on the breath Part of it is that the breath isn't the breathing is not just something we do to get air and you know, the diaphragm and these muscles in our torso that connected to breathing, all get kind of geared up or getting engaged in response to different emotions, different ways we respond to the world. And so our attitude or emotions or reactions or responses to what's going on, then are connected to that the muscles of breathing and the muscles of the torso. And so as we pay attention to the breathing, the breathing part of the way it's a teacher for us, it can reveal so much of what goes on in our life. It's kind of like an open book for you to kind of learn and read what's going on. Sometimes very subtle levels, but in your inner life. The breath is also very helpful I find the way in which can help paying attention to the breath can help cut through ways in which the mind is attached. preoccupied, identified with something. And just a simple act of coming and turning the attention away from its preoccupation and connecting it to the breath, just that movement. Coming back to the breath and back to the breath is counter to the usual tendencies of the mind often when the mind is often caught by things and preoccupied. And before people start paying attention with their lives, some people will spend a lifetime being preoccupied and not know it. The tendency of the mind to be wrapped up in his thoughts. So just in that simple act to come back to the breath and cut through so much. And then to learn to stay with the breath. Just stay with two three breaths, five breaths, 10 breaths, 100 breaths, kind of stay with the rhythm of breathing, breathing in breathing out staying there is a phenomenal, the useful act of learning to leave ourselves alone. And most of us would benefit a lot if we just left ourselves alone. Some people are their own enemy because of their inner attitudes, ideas, were responses. They're all you know, not good enough. I'm not this guy. And I'm not that way self self critic inside. You know, all these attitudes we have about ourselves which are can be so detrimental to our inner life to our life. And, and if we just leave ourselves alone, we get so much relief. Now kind of pile, suffering upon suffering with the way we think about ourselves and feel about ourselves and stuff. And so just stay with the breath of breath, in a sense can be seen as a neutral object. We can learn to stay longer, you can stay with a breath, the more you leave yourself alone to precious energy, a precious resource of attention is going into into the breath, rather than this precious resource of attention going to feed or neurosis. And so go back to the breath. just deal with a breath for a long time. Rest with a breath, get absorbed in the breath and you find yourself great benefit of just leaving yourself Hello. As you probably many of you know, breathing well, deeply is very relaxing can be very relaxing, very calming. The first time I had an interview with a Buddhist teacher was with a Zen teacher. And I was in my early 20s. And I went into this little room and sat down because then you have interviews like this, you sit cross legged like this. The teacher here she's sitting cross legged in front of you. It's very present there. And there I was at the Zen teacher for the first time. I was so nervous, I couldn't speak. And the teacher very kindly looked at me and said, Go, breathe deeply. And as I breathe deeply for a while, after a while when I could speak, come a long way. Now I could speak in front of all of you and still breathe. Just breathing deeply. People have panic attacks are taught to breathe deeply. Sometimes to get brown bags and breathe into the brown bags blow it up. So breathing can we can learn to leave ourselves alone It can tell cut through, you know, a preoccupation certain things. And



the breathing is a mental, tremendous place to begin reconditioning ourselves, changing ourselves. And this changing ourselves. Things can be very important, very helpful. Even though we say a lot in mindfulness, strict mindfulness practice. Don't do anything to change yourself. Just be mindful. I think as a preliminary before you get to that point, that's an advanced practice before you get to the point where it's good to change yourself. So try to cultivate it when you first sit down, free breath. And if you've never done that, maybe spend a few months exploring your breath, getting to know it, and see what you could do to relax there. And relax all the muscles connected to breathing. I find it very interesting, the way the breathing can function as a massage from the inside. Sometimes I feel held because I feel some maybe some tension here in my chest because I'm holding something or my belly, my back ribcage or shoulders or whatever. And it's very interesting to me to feel where the holding is. And every time I inhale, this kind of like very gentle kind of pushing against it. I find it very good actually. Sometimes it's a certain kind of funny with I'm enjoyable to push against the tension with the breathing, very gently, not pushing hard, but just normal breath. And just being aware, being very aware of that. There's a relaxation, letting go very aware. And it's wonderful to feel that kind of getting a massage. And to work that in slowly begins to relax and open up. It's very nice. And then there is that wonderful belly where there are some people hold a lot Attention in their belly. And I have for years would hold my belly tight. And for years I would focus a meditation not focus but beginning of meditation and relax it. And I was really after I got pretty good at relaxing the belly. Yes, I'll go to relax. And then we'll tighten up again, usually about a second later. But you know, I've got relaxed, that counted. And then now I can be pretty relaxed most of the time. It's just pretty relaxed. And, and it helps lower the center of gravity when you meditate to have your belly relax. I've met people for whom they've, especially women, who were taught as young women, girls, maybe by their mother to hold their belly. They have to hold your belly and because it's unbecoming to hold your belly, they have your belly, hanging out. Hold your belly. And I met one woman on retreat, who said that she talked about how he meditated. She kept having to yawn. And take big breaths. She couldn't understand it was getting in the way of her meditation. So I didn't know what was going on either. So but I thought, well, let's explore this as a guided meditation around your breathing. And so I heard you close your eyes to meditate. And just as a way of warming up to do the guided meditation on our breath, I just told us to relax and relax your belly and immediately burst into tears. And then she said, Oh, you know, I've never been allowed to do that. Because I was always supposed to hold my my woman was in her 60s. Maybe I should I don't know how much I should tell you stories. This woman had been in it was a retired or ex, Buddhist ex Christian nun. And I was putting on a retreat at the convent where she had been a nun for 2530 years. And she came to the retreats, you'd love to know in the comments that she had been quite senior there. And so we were always there at the opening evening and some of the non slip they they're kind of our hosts, they were kind of telling us how it worked there and where we could have grown, we were getting meditated and things. And we had rented the facilities and having nice conversation with these two nuns, and then in my office woman who had been, you know, senior nun admonished that comment for many years. And I didn't know that yet that she had been a nun there. But as soon as she walked in, the two other nuns who were talking to me started attention. You know you can see their breath go in, you know stomach books. Anyway, this ex nun finally learned to relax your belly should relax their belly 20 years earlier, I wonder how that would have affected the rest

of the convent. lovely woman. It's more like she was one remember I remember fondly. So, spend some time learning to free up the chest. And that's a wonderful ally and help in daily life. Because you'll find yourself in daily life. It's completely normal and natural, that the breath will change and morph, how you breathe different circumstances. You know, you know all kinds of different ways depending how you're feeling And what's happening, what's needed in the situation. Suddenly, maybe some kids that you know, your child or someone, suddenly, you know, running across the street, or breathing is going to change. And you see that it's appropriate. But there are times we get stuck. And in certain ways we carry attitudes in our heads, which are not necessary, but she's going to carry them along with us. And it's really helpful to know, be able to tune into our breathing and recognize how it's changed. Like have a baseline relaxed breath to know what's a reference point, and then notice how it changes. And then because you've learned to cultivate relaxing breath, so learn to kind of relax it when appropriate. And so for example, if your boss is yelling at you, your breath might get tight, you know, shallow and whatever. And, but since there's no real imminent danger isn't maybe he's not about to hit you. It might actually be to your benefit, to relax your breathing at that point, and Be very relaxed and learn how to relax it, breathe deeply. And then you might be able to respond to that inappropriate behavior in a much wiser way than if you're tense. And so as you relax your breathing, it's harder as you relax your breathing, to stay uptight or angry yourself or resentful yourself or wherever you might be afraid yourself. And so as you begin working your breath, you're also learning to work to change hopefully in healthy ways, your inner emotional response and how you may be stuck in certain responses. I think of resentment, this frozen anger and so something is frozen. So what happens if and I've known people who are been here this kind of teachings and then say, you know, I don't know about this. I don't know if I want to relax my breathing. I don't know I want to have a relaxed open breath because I don't know what I have to let go of them. You know, I like you know, I'm so used to my resentment, my fear, my anger, you know, it's like how, who I am. And you're asking me to stop being who I am. By, by breathing naturally deeply. I've heard that from people, and then amazing, no, normal, are all too common. We hold on. So to learn to learn, the way that breath that comes our teachers, we decided to learn from it. We have to learn from we have to start tuning into it and pay attention to it. Pay attention to it in many different circumstances in daily life, data, attention to it. While you're speaking like I tried to do while I talk to you. Pay attention to it. You know, when you're driving. You'll notice as you're driving, that your breath, how you breathe will change. Depending on whether you're pushing to get past there quickly, can rush or if you just kind of like have all the time in the world to get where you're going. It affects your breathing. Maybe it's very subtle, but you and then you feel that effect. Then you can ask yourself, which breath you would you prefer? Is it worth it? And I think sometimes I've noticed that if I tune into my breath or I'm driving, it's not worth it, to have that, you know, the cost, the physical cost and immediate present, you know that, but it often if you're in a hurry, you're fixated on the goal, you're not paying attention to you. Come back and pay attention here. Now, the beautiful thing about the breath also, is that as the breath becomes more relaxed, more free, that then you have much more easy access to other things on this list earlier, love, compassion, kindness and wonder that the capacity to feel those things occur much more as we are relaxed and open. As we feel love, that tends to relax. We feel happiness, it tends to relax The torso and the breathing in the torso. But if the breathing in the torso is relaxed and natural, then we're much more

likely to feel not guaranteed, but you're much more available to feeling things like love and kindness and joy and happiness and other things. One of the things I've noticed, you know, it's hard, very hard to pay attention to the breath when you're speaking. And, but the, because I give so many Dharma talks, my head is induce monologue, right? I've gotten lots of opportunities to practice paying attention to when I speak. I love this posture that I'm sitting in cross legged like this. And, you know, I talk after I've been meditating. And so I've learned a lot about what happens to my breathing when I'm talking, because I try to pay attention while I give these talks. And I've noticed, for example, that when I get a little bit too, too, but when, if I get excited about what I'm talking about, or if I get a little concerned that I'm not getting something across and have to try harder, you know, or concerned, maybe you don't like what I'm saying, you know, all kinds of things go on, and I feel how it you know, how it changes my breathing in my center of gravity, my torso and my breath goes up here in my chest a little bit. I lean forward a little bit. And then if I noticed that and, and, and I settled back, I said, settle back, relax, bring my weight back on my sitting bones and back on my spine. Then I come back to being not so caught by my concerns, my worries, they'd like me my talk, or whatever goes on. So it's great. And I think that's just the breath. I love it. And I feel Like it's saved me from so much suffering and stress in my life. And I hope that I really hope that all of you will take your breath quite seriously as a friend and ally, a teacher. You'll pay attention to it, you'll explore it, you'll do what it takes to kind of free your breath to some degree. And that freedom of breath will make it a lot easier for you to go into meditation practice and go quite far richer quite well in your meditation practice. Manchus famous Chinese philosopher, said I am good at nourishing my flood like breath. This breath is extremely vast and strong. I nurture it with straightforwardness and do not injure it. And so it feels everything between heaven and earth. May your breath, be fast and strong and fill everything between heaven and earth. Thank you