

2010-01-24 Breath Meditation

Sat, 8/15 9:43AM • 35:34

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

breathing, breath, people, breath meditation, contracted, preoccupation, attention, breathe, mind, stay, life, interfering, sensations, feel, four noble truths, meditation practice, body, relax, involved, many different traditions

SPEAKERS

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So, last two weeks that I've been here I've been talking about the Four Noble Truths and the core teachings of Buddhism. And today I'd like to bring it home in a sense, bring it in really close and talk about the roles of breathing functions, the breathing, meditation on the breath has and how useful it is and how it's a window into, or a vehicle into understanding how to live with the Four Noble Truths in our lives. Breath meditation is something which is common in many different traditions, not just Buddhism. But it had played a central role in much of Buddhism down through history. It's been more than probably most important forms of meditation practice. And it traces itself all the way back to the Buddha. He gets Very clear and clear was a very, very detailed instruction on breath meditation. And the records. Indicators suggest that this was a key practice for the Buddha himself that he himself practice breath meditation, focusing on breath, being aware of his breathing. And I had a teacher in Japan, who told me that breath meditation was all you needed to do, to go all the way to enlightenment. It was so central to this whole enterprise. So powerful and useful. I have spent the last I don't know how long 35 years I guess, accompanying my breath or being accompanied by my breathing, and it's something that it's been kind of a constant through all these years of practice, not just meditation, but also in daily life where the breath is being aware of my breathing is something I do a lot has been very useful. Breathing has been a great, great companion great friend for me. I hope I've been a good friend for it. And, and a wonderful teacher, I feel like I've learned a lot by by paying attention to my breath. It's been a great support for me in my practice. And it's something that I cherish quite a bit the capacity to be present for my breathing, feel my breathing as it's happening in the body. Now, there's a lot of different functions to focusing on breathing. And so I want to list some of them, especially for those of you who can't imagine what's so interesting about breathing and find it inherently boring or whenever. So, one of the useful things with breathing is that if you focus and experience your breathing. Your attention is focused on breathing goes without saying. But what's what's important about that is it's not focused on something else. And so, oftentimes, our attention is focused on what being called preoccupations. We're caught up in certain drama, certain stories, certain events in our lives, certain memories, certain planning, certain judgments, certain upsets, all kinds of all kinds of activities of the mind that we do. Some of them are beautiful, their mind does and some of them are not so beautiful. Some of them can bring a tremendous amount of stress and pain to ourselves. And when you take this precious resource, we have attention and, and move it away from the preoccupation to something else. Then it takes some of the energy away from preoccupation or takes away Some of the identification with it, some of the attachment we have with it, the more fully the attention can be shifted and placed on something else, the more fully we let go of the attachment, the magnetic kind of attraction that keeps us glued to some of these preoccupations.

And so coming to the end breath is something that's very easy for most people very easily available to come back to the breath. It's always pretty much always going on, you're breathing in, breathing out. And so you come in and, and the more fully you connect to that breathing, you've you have lessened or perhaps even cut through some of the identification some of the attachment with our preoccupation. It might only be instantaneous, it might not last very long, but it's very powerful, even for a moment to interrupt the normal course of what the mind is caught up in preoccupied With and shouldn't underestimate the tremendous power that it has, in beginning to shift the inner inner ecology of the mind. If you just let your mind do whatever it wants, pretty quickly, you'll be in trouble. I think and maybe I shouldn't speak for you, but but I know I would be. I think that if we just kind of get lost in our, in our world, it ends up world in a world of fantasies and desires and aversions and all that. And luckily, reality interferes a lot. You have to go to the death room, you have to, you have to, you know, you walk around and you have to notice the door. So all kinds of things you have to kind of reality kind of keeps us connected to reality. And so that is some degree of protection from being preoccupied or concerned with, but it's not enough to do a dramatic job. And so often we need some help. And meditation practices is one of those boys that can Help us to begin extracting ourselves from that tremendous gravitational pull into our preoccupations. Our preoccupations are of many different sorts. And some of them are very deeply rooted in us having to do with some of the deepest values that we have things that we think are most important. But what we think is most important is not mainly not what's really important. So for example, if we think that having status is really important, then we'll operate that way. And but if you cut through the status, seeking part of the mind, and connect, suddenly breathing, it gives you a reference point to begin questioning that drive for status. But if you're just living in the world of status, it's like it can be status seeking, they can seem such a such a natural activity of the mind that we think that's the way the world was built up was to everyone should have status, I should have status. Just it's a lot of other things. I mean, there's a lot of things that people pursue in their minds, that sometimes we're fed where we're, we're lessons from our society. This is what's really important. At my son's school, I think this week, I think it is. There's a be some kind of lecture by some fun to use, and a lot of time exploring and researching this topic, about how the media affects women's girls, teenage girls self image for their body, and how tremendously much suffering and suffering comes on with how teenage girls are concerned with how their body looks, depending on all these images that they get the messages they get. And so that's a certain kind of preoccupation that people go to is their body, how their body looks. And it can seem especially when it's a young age, that this is the nature of the universe, that this is how what you're supposed to be concerned about. An invisible in the mind that you're kind of caught up in this But the more fully you can drop into something like the breathing and cut through it, then you see that that's not necessarily part of the hardware to think that way. It's software that's been added. And it's optional. Whether we stay involved with that software, those kinds of thoughts and activities. Since the breath is happening in a regular rhythmic kind of way, it's it's easily available to come back to come back to come back to, and many times, not many times, usually, always, we have to do this over and over and over again. And each it might seem that each instant of coming to the breath, letting go over preoccupations is insignificant, but it's actually I think, very significant. Because it begins to soften in less than the grip these other things have. You might not see how much it softens the grip initially, but drop by drop. As the Buddha said drop by drop. The water jug is filled with water drop by drop, bit by bit, the mind begins to soften and relax its grip onto things. If we, you know, too, so I think for most of us, we've spent a lifetime letting our mind having free rein. Just pursuing whatever preoccupation it's concerned with at the time.

And it has never been in mind is very seldomly gets checked, never seldom gets any kind of, you know, you know. And so when we start doing it with with some breath meditation, is we begin offering an alternative to the usual habit building activity of the mind. And if the habit is to create preoccupation with might spend 2030 4050 years doing that, and so it takes a while to break the habit. But actually, the

habit is broken much faster than it was built up, and the proportion of how many vine moments you spent last and preoccupation versus how many mind moments it takes to regain your mind. It goes really fast, the regaining part, if you just do the practice, so even though might seem insignificant, it actually goes relatively fast compared to the whatever the other way you've been. That makes some sense. Okay. So it cuts through, that cuts through, it's very helpful. And related to this. Coming back to the breathing can often be a way of leaving ourselves alone. Because if we're not caught up in our preoccupation, if we're not caught up in our judgments and our versions and our fears, if we're not judging ourselves or criticizing ourselves or trying to engineer ourselves or make something happen within ourselves, and make and just kind of come back to something so relatively simple, like the breathing we leave the most part Meeting ourselves alone, or we're no longer interfering with ourselves. If you're judging yourself, I'm a bad person. Or if you are trying to have certain kinds of experiences, engineers, certain kinds of states push away certain things, then you're not leaving yourself alone. You're interfering with the natural flow natural kind of process that wants to happen within us. And what I've found is that, letting go, letting go of that one of the biggest problems people have is the way in which they interfere with themselves. In zen, sometimes they say it's having a head and top of your head. You know, it's the kind of director to too many cooks in the kitchen. Right? It's a problem, right? So most of us have too many cooks in our, in our brain. And so if we can just get simpler and simpler and not be so actively involved Doing so many things all the time. And just resting and being still just being, being rather than doing as they say. It allows for something else to happen. That can't happen if we're always doing. One of the things that can happen is that is that we begin resting. Because the doing is often doing is okay. It's a great thing to do, sometimes some things, but often the way some people do, it's kind of erotic. And all you know about life is doing doing doing, then you can't really allow the heart the mind to rest in some deep way. So by not not interfering with ourselves by kind of no longer being actively involved in all kinds of doings and manipulations and creating and planning and all that we leave ourselves alone. And it's been my experience, and I hope it's experience of other people as well. That as we leave ourselves alone more and more the various inner mental processes that go on, tend to move towards health. If we don't get involved with things, if we don't pick them up, don't try to push them away. Don't try to get involved and justify them. So even something as that's very, you know, seemingly unskillful unhealthy likes to say it's a murderous rage. You know, you shouldn't be a murderous rage, should you. But if you can sit in meditation and relax, and just a lot and get out of the way of the rage, don't interfere with it. And don't get involved in it. Don't justify it, don't get involved in the story of how are you going to, you know, do whatever you're going to do. Then stop interfering with it, then it tends to move through and process on its own, it tends to unravel or dissolve or do what it needs to do. There's kind of almost like an inner inner intelligence that needs to happen that is there and allows it to happen. So nothing to fear with this and allow it to take its place, there's an art to do that because, or it takes a while to learn that because the tendency to get involved is so subtle. So breath meditation coming back to the breath. The breath, for the most part is not, you know, being involved with the anger, the breath is something else. So if you can just kind of be with the breath, then the mind can leave the other thing to itself.

And so, there's a very, it's quite, I think, significant to discover how trustable it is to get out of the way of the inner life as it wants to kind of flow and developed. Sitting in meditation is one of the safest places to do that. Because you don't have to make hopefully many decisions when you're meditating. You don't have to figure out what to say to someone or what to do or you know, you can sit there you're committed and sitting still more or less. So you know, you're not going to punished someone else. And so it's okay to let the energies course through us and see what happens as a result. And it isn't just difficult things that can arise but also there's beautiful emotion states that can also come through us. And they are best, their best kind of, or at least that's their best, but it can be very significant to allow them to move through us without interfering with them as well. To feel it have love come up for

example, and not get involved with it, not reject it to joy arise, not get involved in it. Not not kind of, you know, begin kind of leaning into it, but also not rejecting it, and just let it just let it be and then move through us. And coming back to the breath is a way of staying more neutral and weren't equanimous or more kind of a non interfering with experience. So some people talk about breathing with an experience. So if there's anger there Joy, read with it, meaning you stay connected with the breath, where there's some awareness of the other thing going on. And by staying with the breath as you're paying attention to something else, it can be a little bit of a check from the mind getting involved and caught up in whatever it is that's going on for us. So I like to think of breath meditation is one of the ways in which we learn to leave ourselves alone. Another aspect of breath meditation is that it's for some people, it's a wonderful object, for developing stronger mindfulness and stronger concentration. There's something about the rhythm of breathing, the fact that it's kind of something it's in flux, it's changing that thing for many people, it's easier to stay, to develop concentration to stay interested in it. If something is unwavering, unchanging, sometimes can be much harder sometimes to just kind of zero in your attention and keep it Focus right there. Also, sometimes when you focus on a single object of attention, especially initially people doing it, there tend it tends to have an effect on the breathing, and the breathing tends to get held. I'm gonna do it now. But sometimes I've done the exercise with people to have them kind of just focus really intensely on some object right in front of their, they're sitting here, most people find that they really zero and hold their attention really fixed. Don't let any waver from that one spot, it affects their breathing, kind of contracts or gets a little bit locked up though. It's harder to get the breath locked up, when the obvious you're looking at is in movement is flowing, especially when the breath itself and so if you stay with the breath, and stay with the alternating sensations and the rhythm of the breathing, it tends to be very useful objects for kind of increased focus on what's here. The increase Focus leads to greater attention, greater mindfulness, we can see more clearly what's here. As we see, the greater the detail of the breathing, the mind wants to become stronger. And that increased mindfulness then can translate into heightened mindfulness in daily life as we leave. But also, this increased focus on the breathing can also translate to increased concentration. So it's not just simply a matter of interrupting the normal identifications and preoccupations of the mind. It's also a matter of beginning to settle the attention, rest the attention on a place that's useful for it to rest on. And as the attention gets stabilized and finds rest and stability on the breath, the brain the mind becomes calmer and calmer. It's still there and Still generally, certainly concentration is a process of stability of stilling of communists. That is can be very, very satisfying. habit 10 happened. So the breath becomes a great object for that. It's not true for everybody. And it's very important to say that there are a small percentage of people for whom the breath is not a very good object for doing all this work. I don't know all the reasons why that might be. But sometimes there's some kind of obvious reasons. People who have had some kind of life crisis like drowning or being choked.

And so there's somehow they've been challenged around their breathing in some dramatic way. It can be very difficult to have them focus their attention in the breath, because some of that early or some of that kind of fear gets triggered triggered, and so they might go into a panic. People who are really hype Berg committed to controlling everything Probably none of you right? can find that when they when they're focusing on the breath. And as soon as they focus on it, they start trying to control the breathing. And so they're trying to adjust it and control it. And if that effort to control the breath is too strong, you can't relax it, then perhaps the breathing is not a useful place to be. Sometimes it is. Sometimes even a controlled Breath of the can can be a great subject of mindfulness and concentration. As long as you don't get upset about controlling it. You stay very relaxed about the fact that you're controlling it, then it'll all work out usually but but then a control breathing sometimes is an indication to step back and do another meditation practice.

I find that the rhythm of breathing, breathing in and out that rhythm, it can be very soothing, but also very calls to attention to to be stay present there. That rhythm of breathing. Also you can experience a different ways that breathing but I tend to focus on my breathing experience of breathing in my torso, my chest in my belly, and it's very physical, the whole experience. I'm not following the breath when I meditate, but rather what even though we say you know, follow your breath. It's not following the breath, the air, but rather it's being attentive to how the how the body experiences breathing. So there's physical movement in the body. For example, there's a variety of different sensations that occur in the body as we breathe. There's examples you Breathe in, the diaphragm gets pushed down in the belly gets pushed out, the or the chest gets expanded. As you breathe, breathe out, then the chest collapse it'll make the contracts and then diaphragm goes up gets released in the stomach is pulled in. And with that comes experiences of pressure, release of pressure, tightness, tightness, release of tightness and tightness, stretching, to release so that there can be sensations of smoothness. As we breathe in as we breathe out, there can be sensations of feeling full. There can be sensations of kind of stillness, stopping sometimes at the end of the outbreath. It can be a gap, and you kind of feel this kind of stillness there for a moment. There's a variety of things to experience and feel and get pulled into the world of these sensations. And as we experienced them physically, I also find that it's kind of like a massage from the inside out, because when I'm feeling my breath and getting kind of tuning into all the different sensations, all the different movement that goes on in my body, it's kind of like getting a wonderful kind of nourishing massage, stretch and release and stretch and release. And it's free. And it works very nicely kind of to settle to relax different parts of the body. It's quite remarkable. How much of the body you can feel gets affected physically, by the oscillation, you're breathing in and out. You can kind of sometimes feel the pressure or the stretching or the movement, way down into the groin or up into the shoulders even down into the arms. Some people reported that some people report they can feel throughout their whole body. each breath there's kind of energy or sensations that flow throughout the body, as it expanding tracks or something.

So that's one function of the breath is to get concentrated. In other function to the breath is to be a teacher for us, to help teach us what is going on in our life what's going on with us. The breath they say is or is closely is both conscious and unconscious activity, you can have conscious control over your breathing, but it's also unconscious and done automatically. And so it seems to be a bridge between these two different worlds of what's subconscious unconscious, and what's conscious. It's a bridge between our some of our emotions, we have emotional life, and our physical life. And it's a bridge between being aware of to be able to become a better aware of kind of our mental emotional life and what goes on in reactive life. So for example, I'll notice how on the more sensitive I can be with my breathing, the more I'm aware of a wide range Ways of breathing. So there's sometimes my breath is very soft and relaxed, open, expansive, and sometimes it's contracted. And then when it gets contracted, it's indication to me, you know, something's going on. So for example, I might be a little bit afraid of something concerned about something when my kids is balancing on the railing of our deck, and that affects my breathing. And so then I noticed, oh, you know, I've gotten a little bit more contracted a little bit worried here and feel a little bit tight. And then I get them off the railing and I can see my breathing, my breathing kind of gets more relaxed and fluid. Driving is very interesting for me to watch my breathing as I drive, because this can be sometimes very subtle shifts, but there's only subtle shifts that happen so as I drive, my breathing depending on what's happening, please car pulls up behind me and you know, effect by breathing little bit. And then if, you know, there's a sudden kind of someone suddenly cuts me off and away, it's dangerous. My breathing, it's changed for a few breaths after that. And so there's a lot to notice and all the shifts and changes and how it reflects back at, certainly in my emotions, but also to my reactions and responses to the world. And some of those reactions are more kind of primal, like someone cutting you off from the freeway. And some of them have to do with my evaluation, my judgments, my values, my beliefs, my attachments that I have. And

so all that inner life, landscape, inner mental life can have some bearing on how we breathe. And so as we begin connecting to our breath and feeling all the shifts and changes, sometimes that's a window into the changing what's going on in your mind. One of the things that I often look at is am I attached If something if my breathing has gotten a little bit contracted, and if I relaxed my breathing, or if I find that breathing, relax, breathing is a great lubricator for the mind. Everyone should be lubricated. And so as I stayed with our breathing, it's hard to get C's up. It's hard to get tight and contracted, certainly can happen. But it's harder. It's also harder to stay there. Come back to the breath, breathe, relax, wherever the tightness in the breath, relax it, soften it, and then it's, it's harder. It's harder to be stay caught in something. If the breath is relaxed and soft. It's easier to stay caught in some preoccupation, if the breath is contracted and tight. So the breath is a go as a wonderful teacher. And I carried with me that attention to the breath in as many of my daily activities as I can, as a way of checking in knowing what's going on with me. It's very reassuring to stay with The breath that connect to the breath, to be in touch with it that feels very intimate, very close in, feel very present, kind of present being present from the inside out to the world around me. The, the language of the Buddha the Pali language, the word for assurance, that's translate into English as assurance, to be assured, feel reassured, literally means to breathe easily. Isn't that nice? So when you feel reassured, does that translate into how you breathe? You breathe in easier way. So the breath as a teacher, so we see how we get contracted, we see how we get held.

And we can see when you if you pay attention to that, you see how unsatisfying It is to be that way, or actually uncomfortable it is and how it's kind of stressful or the stress built into breathing that way. And how when we relax That stress or that contraction, that it's more satisfying to breathe, to have a soft open fluid breath that kind of flows in and out expands out in and out like wonderful. bellows is very, very satisfying. And sometimes more than satisfying, it's can be blissful, to kind of use, we kind of just resting in the middle of these beautiful bellows that expand and contract and open and close and move through us. And so you can see right there in the experience of breathing, the difference between being contracted and releasing that contraction. And in doing that, see the difference of how satisfying unsatisfying one is and how satisfying the other is how stressful one is, and how unstressed The other is, how suffering is found in one and the release of suffering is found in the other and that is the nature of the Four Noble Truths is to see How there can be contraction how there's grasping to something thirsting for something, and how that leads to suffering or distress or unsatisfactory feeling. And how if we let go of that contraction that grasping that thirsting, that there's really really release then that dissatisfaction that stress and feel more satisfaction or ease or peace or well being. And so the breath or breathing can be a doorway or window into something that the Buddha called the Four Noble Truths, the truth of stress, the truth that there is a cause of that stress in our grasping or clinging, and that it's possible to release let go of that grasping and thereby let go of that stress. The breath makes it very practical, very immediate. It makes it also not so philosophical. If you read philosophy books on Buddhism don't give you the wonderful philosophy of the Four Noble Truths. And that's nice if you're a philosophy major. But if you're a human, which I guess that didn't come out, well.

I better go back and look at my mind. Why it came out that way. I apologize to all the philosophers. I'm embarrassed. And that affects my breathing. Anyway, in our role as humans, you know, it's very different than our role as philosophers, we're all philosophers, and we're all humans. And rather than looking at it through the role, our role and we're philosophizing, you're looking at it through the role, our role as we Are as humans, it's very human immediate to breathe. Have you ever been at a deathbed, at the deathbed of someone watching them die? And if you noticed how interesting they're breathing is and how at times everything gets reduced to their breath, their breath, not even yours. And the whole thing is their breathing. Have you ever been present at a birth and seeing the first first breath? quite something to watch the beginning of a breath, the first breath arise. Breathing is closely connected to

being alive. And in many different traditions. The word for breath is also used to kind of point to something essential about what it means to be human to be alive. So, as you know, we say in English Do you know one way of Latin Latin is English we say response respiration. It comes from spiritus which also means both spirit but also means to breathe in Latin. So, when we say inspire, we say to, you know, to, to bring in the spirit to bring in the breathing, to expire, I think means to also last breath that goes out here at IMC, we are a conspiracy. And because conspiracy means to breathe together as far as I can tell. And so in many languages, kind of they point to that and one of the cute ones or interesting ones that some some scholars have claimed is that what's the who knows German here? Is it. attempt is that means self I would self in German, self, self and self attend. But I don't know the answer to that debate that breed to breed. I've met in breed. Anyway, there's a speaker scholar say this because the indo European kind of connection between words, that word for itself and one language and word for breath, the German, either one I forget where to go, it has the same root did it anyway, the breath is very central. And key, it's kind of at the heart of what it means to be human and to take an interest and in the breathing is the give us a chance to discover the tremendous richness well, of wealth really, that's found in the experience. breathing. I hope that all of you will find your breathing very wonderful and valuable to connect to to live with to come back to and they becomes really good friend for you companion as you go through your life.

So thank you very much and happy breathing. Thank you.