

# Dharmette: The Breath as Your Best Friend

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsda1 on September 28, 2011

One of the most helpful aspects of our life in meditation and outside of meditation is our own breathing. This is so much so that I like to think you want to make your breath your best friend or your teacher. If you want to have a really reliable spiritual teacher, you don't have to look much further away than your own breathing. If you want to find a really reliable support, you can find it in your own breathing. If you want to find a really reliable healer, you can find it in your own breathing. If you want to find a way to lubricate your life, you'll find it in your breathing. If you want to have access to wisdom, you'll find it in your breathing.

Breathing is a great thing. It's recognized in many cultures and spiritual traditions that the breath is a pretty special thing. There are many words for breath that are quite significant. Buddhism has that. In fact the heart of much of Buddhist meditation is often meditation on breathing. One of the reasons why breathing is so significant is that it's not just a mechanical thing. It's not just a matter of getting oxygen in and carbon dioxide out, doing that efficiently, and that's breathing. Breathing is deeply connected to our emotional life, motivational life – what we're motivated by and interested in – and our physical and bodily life. Breathing is the nexus, the meeting place of so many different aspects of our inner life and sometimes of our outer life as well. You can feel and see sometimes how your breathing changes depending upon what is going on in the environment. Maybe it's happening through the filter of your reaction to what's going on in the environment. Even with something as simple as you're walking in the sun, and then you come to the shade. And in the shade you can sometimes feel a change that comes over you now that you're in the shade. It's as subtle as that if you're paying attention. Or you're walking down the street, and suddenly someone starts walking towards you. You can feel your breathing change, because perhaps the person is scary or attractive.

Strong emotions have a big impact on how we breathe. If you get really angry, then you tend to breathe much more in the chest, and you don't breathe out as much or as fully. Sometimes if we're scared, it affects our emotions in different ways. Love and compassion affect breathing differently. The breath can get held depending upon the relationships and attitudes that we have towards what's going on. Sometimes it gets held in different parts of the body, such as the chest, the diaphragm, or the belly. As you're breathing, you can sometimes feel how the breath is being interfered with.

I use the breath a lot. I try to pay attention to my breath throughout much of the day. I try to make it a regular, constant companion. Sometimes it's the first indication I have that something needs attention, like I feel my stomach get a little bit tight because I'm aware of what's going on in my belly as I breathe. It can be an early warning system where you quickly notice the physical change. I can notice a physical change faster than I can a mental change, because the mind is so tricky and fast.

Watching the changes in the body as you breathe can reveal a lot of what's going on for you and what your relationship is to the world. If we breathe consciously and with mindfulness – even if we don't try to change our breath – the fact that we're aware of what's happening to our breath tends to lessen a little bit the full impact of the holding or reactivity we may have. We're not quite as caught in the reactivity if we're aware of the tension or the holding, or whatever's going on with the breathing.

If there is holding, tension or limitations in how you're breathing, then just breathe into that sense of limitation in the chest or the belly. Just breathe into it like you're massaging it. Don't expect the tension to go away, because expectation gets in the way. If you just breathe in and out, in and out, it can be comforting and settling. Eventually something can give.

Staying in touch with your breathing as you go into difficult situations can provide protection from getting caught up in the reactions, emotions and ideas that might kick in. By having the breathing as a companion, part of your attention stays in the present moment; it stays on something more neutral. Because you're grounded there, you have an anchor. You're less likely to be pulled off and get lost in your thoughts, reactions and emotions in what's going on around you. It's like ballast that keeps you grounded, keeps you in the present moment, and keeps you from spinning out. The more likely the tendency is for you to spin out in situations, the more useful it is to just keep breathing. There are some times when breathing is like a lifeline. You can hold onto it for dear life, because

the spinning-out mind is so incredibly powerful that if you don't have a lifeline, watch out world! You're coming, and you'll say and do things that later you may regret.

Breathing in a regular mindful way tends to be relaxing. If you're tense, frightened or in a lot of pain, many times the advice you're given is to breathe deeply. A friend of mine fell off the roof at Green Gulch and broke his arm. The fire department came to take him to the hospital. While he was lying there in pain, a big firefighter came over. Now this was Green Gulch, a Zen Center, and my friend had been a Zen student for years. The firefighter said, "Just breathe." [Laughter.] My friend rolled his eyes. I thought that was a good sign. It's a common thing to just breathe.

It can be hard to feel like it's okay or warranted to just stay with your breathing. I mean: we have really important things going on in our life, right? We have really important emotions, reactions and stories to get involved in or be impacted by or overwhelmed by. "You can't believe what I'm about to be overwhelmed by. This is really juicy or important. I can't do this breath thing. Breath is kind of silly. It's a little physiological thing going in and out. It can't be as important as a life event." But I think that what's important is not necessarily breathing. What's important is the mind that stays open, relaxed and grounded, not caught by what goes on. Breathing, staying in the present for the breath, is one of those tools or assistants that keeps us from getting caught, lost or reactive. It keeps us a little bit more relaxed and present in different situations. The breath can teach us what's going on. It can be a grounding and relaxing phenomenon.

Breathing can also connect us to other people. There are times when you can tune in not only to your own breath, but to other people's breath, and breathe together with them. You want to be careful when and how you do this, because it can be a little invasive, especially if they notice you doing it. The situation where I learned this to be most effective was when I was with someone who was dying. We couldn't talk, or maybe there was no more conversation to be had. But tuning into their breathing and perhaps breathing with them seemed to create an intimate connection with them. I don't know if it really did. But there is something very tender – a feeling of being very present and involved – when I'm with someone who is dying and I'm tuning into and breathing with their breath. I don't know how much they're affected by it, but it feels to me like there is an impact. I've also done it sometimes when people have been in distress. Again I'm not sure what the impact is, but I have the sense that somehow something in them tunes into the fact that there is some harmony or attunement going on. There is a coming together in the rhythm of breathing at the same time. So when people are very much in distress, it's one of the things we can do for them.

The last thing I want to say about breathing – paying attention to the breath, being connected to the breath – is that people can have attitudes about life that are in the background or at the foundation that they carry with them into everything they do. They're not so conscious of these attitudes. It's not like they're thinking about them. In fact, consciously, the main thing going on hides the fact that in the background of what they're thinking is an attitude, policy or orientation that's always there. For example, there might be an orientation: "I can never get enough in life; I'm always deprived." Or there might be: "I need everything I have; I can't let anything go because it's frightening to let things go." Or it could be: "Life is too much; it's too oppressive. It's always coming at me. Just leave me alone." There are a whole slew of these kinds of attitudes.

If you get really quiet in meditation and tune into your breathing, occasionally you can see how these attitudes play out in subtle ways with your relationship to the breath. People who might feel that they can't get enough sometimes are really eager to breathe in. They might not allow themselves to breathe out all the way, because they're so quick to want to breathe in again. Or people who don't want to give up anything breathe in, but then they don't want to breathe out – there is a little holding going on. Or people who are afraid or think that it's scary to be out of control don't want to breathe out all the way. So at the end of the out-breath, there is kind of a hesitation, an unwillingness to breathe out all the way. Sometimes people space out and get involved in thoughts at that point. Sometimes they don't let themselves breathe out all the way, because it's too frightening. And then there are people for whom life is too much and want to be left alone. They can breathe out just fine, but they don't want to breathe in. Their attitude is "Don't bring any of this on. This is oppressive to have to breathe." It might seem kind of bizarre to think that these kinds of attitudes are there in the breath. But I've seen often enough on retreats, especially if people get quiet and subtle enough and they're paying attention to the breath, and – lo and behold – there is something going on at some point in the cycle of breathing in and out. It points to some of the subtle background attitudes that people carry with them. The fact that it's subtle and in the background doesn't mean that it's unimportant. Sometimes it's at the foundation or cornerstone upon which everything else is built.

I'll say one more thing. The breath can bring a tremendous amount of pleasure, delight and satisfaction. Just tune into the breath and have the breath be relaxed and open. Really be there with it. The analogy I've been using lately is that staying with the rhythm of the breath is like stroking a cat, and the pleasure is like the cat purring. So at some point, you start purring.

Enjoy your breathing.