

2012-02-06 Breath Meditation

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SPEAKERS

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As for a talk today I would like to talk about breathing. Breathing. Some of you breathe regularly. And I have been meditating on my breath, being mindful of breathing for almost 40 years now. That's a long time. And it's been a really important part of my life. That this, this breathing of mine, it's been a wonderful companion wonderful help support for me. It's been a refuge for me. It's been very meaningful for me to spend so much of my adult life, paying attention to my breathing. And after 40 years, you think that I'd got gotten bored. It's a long time, not much goes on breathing in and out. And, but I actually find it more and more interesting. The longer I do it, partly because the benefits I receive from tuning into my breath being my breath just keeps growing with time. And, and so I wanted to share with you a little bit some of the benefits I felt from tuning into my breath paying attention to my breath, centering myself on my breathing. One of the first things that occurs to me is that the breathing is a very simple process with the body. The diaphragm contracting, making more space in the torso for air to go in, the ribcage expands, stomach goes out, and the air goes in. Then the opposite happens in the air goes out. And there's a rhythm to very simple process physical, physical logical process. That is, because it's physical and physiological. It's it's not a story. And it's not a concept. And it's not about the past, it's not about the future. Breathing only happens in the present. You don't say I'm going to get around to breathing, you know, next week. You know, breathing. If you're if you're aware of your breathing, you're aware of the present moment. And what I found so many times, is that by tuning into my breath, and paying attention to it, it cuts through a fair amount of nonsense that my mind is involved in. It cuts through some of the ways My mind is caught up or attached. Some of the times that I've been anxious sometimes I've been caught in, in, in aversion or anger, sometimes caught in greed and wanting things to be a certain way that usually those kinds of caught upness have to do With stories and concepts and ideas, my mind kind of spins out and wonders. And sometimes, it's like amazed that there's no way out. If I'm in if you're in a certain kind of certain kind of thoughts, I'm trying to figure things out and figure out my life or figure out how to deal with this relationship or that or this. Sometimes, you know, there's just no way there's no way out there really. But you can cut the Gordian knot. You can just kind of snap out of it. At least I can sometimes, and I find that just tuning into my breathing is a wonderful antidote to being caught up. It's like stepping away. It's like tuning into something else. And it cuts through. To some degree, my preoccupation when I'm caught in, and it gives me a different perspective. It shows me that more is going on, than what I'm thinking about. So I find that that simple act Chewing into my breath, a great support for me from you know not being so caught up but kind of cuts through related to that is that it also protects me It protects me from the nonsense that my mind is capable of. So the you know I can I'm, you know my mind kind of wandering off and thinking about something. But if I'm with if I tuned into my breath and staying my breath, I'm less likely to wander off into the thoughts that arise. I might think a thought, but because I'm little bit focusing on my breath, I have more choice about Should I follow that thought or should I not? And I said, You

know, I don't have to. So I'm protected from some of the feelings, some of the impulses some of the intentions. When I'm kind of centered. Focusing on my breath.

I find the breath is a safe place for me to be and occasionally It's good for me to be safe. And where I'm safe from is me. And that situation right I mean, I mean maybe you are all safe to each other to yourself. But the general idea and Buddhism is that is that the person you have the most of fear is yourself. And it might be a little challenging to hear that especially in many terrible situations people are in, but the person you have the most responsibility over protecting yourself from is yourself and the attachments that clinging the versions they the you know, all the kind of contortions and contractions and, and that the mind the heart can make. And so, coming being with a breath, I find sometimes is a protection. Sometimes if I'm really well centered on breath. The image I have for myself, is kind of like that of a boat. Going through the water and, and the bow of the boat just plows through the water and the water rushes or washes, or falls off to the side of the boat and back to the lake. And boat just keeps going. Sometimes with with my breathing, it feels as we understanding with the breath and keeping the course and thoughts and feelings might come up. But I'm not going to pick them up, I'm just gonna let them muck and I'm not going to push them away either. Exactly, shouldn't let them kind of just fall away by themselves. Or another image that I've given to students sometimes is imagine that your breathing is like an umbrella. And your thoughts are like the rain. And you just keep your keep your umbrella up and open and let to imagine all the thoughts and the emotions and all the other stuff that might pull pull you away, just kind of wash off wash off. So it's a protection from those things from getting involved. And so the more you can stay with your breath, the more you're protected from getting involved in things now some things you might want to get the mind wants to get involved in it. Quite nice to be involved in and maybe useful I need to need to do to be involved in. So please, if you need to, it's important. But it's really good to have the ability to say, No, thank you. I don't want to do I don't have to pick that up, I don't think get involved with that. And I found for me that there's a kind of power that comes from being able to stay on the breath that supports that choice that I have. So I don't have to get, you know, involved into some of the various funny things my mind can come up with. Related to that also now is staying with my breath. Keeping my attention focused in the breath is a way of me leaving myself alone. And this I find very helpful, because I could be trying to fix myself, I could be trying to judge myself, I could be trying to have commentary about what's going on. I could be trying to resist something I can try to be holding on to something. There's all these things. I can do that somehow Rather interfere with the natural unfolding of what's happening in the present moment. And sometimes it's a beautiful thing to get involved and shift things and change things. But I find that there's something very profound for me that happens when I get out of the way. And don't do much at all. Meditation for me is one of those places where I try to mostly Get out of my own way. And don't try to do a lot. I don't try to fix anything, I don't try to solve anything. I just tried to let that what's there can be, and some things just fall off the side of the boat just kind of fall away. Some things you know, aren't that, you know, fall away so easily. But some things just need to be left alone, so they can settle. Some things need to be left alone so they can be resolved. Some things need to be left alone so they can be seen more clearly. And I have been amazed in my 40 years of meditation practice the wisdom That my inner life seems to have when I get kind of quiet and leave myself alone when I'm not trying to control or judge or expect or need to have something happen in that in that space of just allowing, allowing peaceful allowing, without being caused by like picking anything up and getting involved. There seems to be an inner knowing or inner processing inner wisdom that allows things to unfold in what seems to me. I've seen over 40 years of watching myself to be very wise very meaningful.

There are times when I've had strong emotions that were difficult. And it was just simply quietly being my breath leaving leaving the emotions alone, not doing not judging, not judging myself or having them that's something began to kind of shift and change around them. That couldn't have happened. If I was

trying in there to kind of fix it to make it better. Just Leave it alone and let let something know what to do. Sometimes I've been surprised that the emotions or the issues that are there take unusual routes different than what I thought was supposed to happen. So for example, sometimes you have a little I have a little emotion, like maybe I'm irritated. And I've been surprised that as I allowed for it to be there, it grew into anger. So conventionally you might think, well, that's mistake. Something is wrong. But I've learned to trust in the in, in, in, in the situation of meditation, trust what arises and how it unfolds. there's a there's a it No, there's a wisdom. There's a knowing there's a unfolding. That is very meaningful. And if it gets stronger, like anger, it probably for good reason. And let it take its course and see what happens. The course is good. If I leave it alone There's over and over again, I've seen this. So I find that focusing on the breath unless, unless I get, for the most part for me, is a way of leaving myself alone. The breath is a simple phenomena, I'm always breathing, I just tuned into it. I keep my mind concerned with my breathing, rather than concerned with. You fill in the blank, whatever you're concerned with, and usually what people are concerned with, it doesn't have to do with the present moment. And usually the way we're concerned even if we are concerned about the present moment, the way we're concerned, is usually not so neutral, or economists. We're often in reactive mode to it. And so to learn how to tune into the breath and let the energy of attention just simply be with breathing. Breathe in, breathe out. Breathe Then breathe out and see if you can let that experience of breathing in and breathing out. Feel your perception field of perception, feel your awareness as much as you can. Because the more experience of breathing fills your perception, there less space there is in your perception for your anxiety, and your neurosis, or your attachments or other things if you're doing so. So, learning to focus on the breathing has these benefits. Now it takes a while to do and what I found also in my 40 years of meditation, that it has not been a linear path for me of being not so able to do it, and smoothly, sailing better and better, better, better, just the straight curve. It's been all over. You know, there have been times where I've gotten very concentrated and very still and can really stay with a breath. Are there times where my mind is my Much more busy and anxious and chattery and whatever, and I can hardly be with my breath at all. I tried to meditate. The morning before my son was born, my first son, I wasn't able to focus my breath very well that day. Are the other concerns were quite strong. That day was reasonable, right? And I'd already been meditating for, you know, 25 years to that time, by that time or so long time. Other times, so it was, it was going up and down for me over time and for many different reasons. And I find that also in the course of a month, that my ability to stay focused on the breath goes up and down over time, because of the different things that goes on my Some days I can sit down and I can stay with my breath really easily. And other days, it might take me 30 minutes before I really start getting connected to my breathing. Because you know how I've been living my life, the activity who knows all the things Why it is, I don't worry so much about how well I'm doing the breath meditation. That's one of the benefits of doing it so long.

I just do my best. I come back and try it again. Come back, come back. And so a lot of breath meditation involves just coming back, coming back. And every time I believe every time you come back from you know, you wonder often thought you're concerned with thinking, or there's a lot there's often a lot of momentum. There's a lot of habit energy in the mind, to think about concerns. And that habit, energy has been reinforced for a lifetime. Every time that you let go of your preoccupation, and come back to your breathing, you weaken the habit. And you weaken the habit much faster than you built up the habit. Though it doesn't seem that way. Because it's imperceptible, how slow it either but just Imagine, you know, I mean, you've you've been giving your mind a free rein to be preoccupied for, you know, 2030 4050 years. You know, just you know, all your waking hours, who knows, maybe even your dreams, you know, you have free rein to do whatever you want. And, and you spend, you know, 45 minutes in meditation every day, if you do that long, the ratio of how many hours you spent mindless, and how many hours you're trying to come back to be or the breath, the ratio is, you know, it's phenomenally different. Even so, in those 45 minutes meditation, every time you come back, you

weaken the habit energy to some degree. And you'll feel over time the difference it'll change, you actually get more and more capable overall and general trend, the ups and downs that you're able to probably you're able to stay more focused on the breath more and more over time. So I think that it's actually very efficient, even though if you don't, if you don't do that math, of comparing how many hours you've been mindless and how many times you might, it might seem like this is going really slow, but the math is in your favor. So a lot of just coming back. It's also then about centering oneself on the breath. So not just coming back and being with the breath, but then hanging in there with it. Some people are very good at the movement of coming back and being with the breath for a moment, but then the mind wanders off very quickly. Partly because there's no commitment to stay and hang out. I know for a while for me. I thought I had done my meditators duty by simply letting go of my thoughts and, and coming back to the breath. It didn't occur to me that I had to stay there. I'd done my work so I relaxed and if I relax, then the mind wanders off. Again, relax here i what i mean by relax is kind of left me on my guard like, you know, stop doing the practice. And so for me it was a very important thing in doing this meditation practice, to learn the art, of sustaining the attention on the breath hanging in there, resting with it, coasting with it. Being massaged by it, hanging out with the experience of breathing in and breathing out, breathing in and breathing out. And one of the things that I learned the more I could do that I learned this pretty early on, to ponder you know, small degrees is that that hanging in there and staying with the breath is relaxing. It relaxes and relaxes because they because your habit energy, your your perception, your energy of attention, is not being used to feed our preoccupation with anxiety, anxieties, neurosis, it's being it's feeding, focusing on Breath. We're letting we're not, we're not reinforcing things that are stressful. We're actually taking the energy away from stressful activities of the mind. And so the mind has a chance to relax. As the mind relax, the body relaxes. And so the ability to sustain the attention of our breath with the breath is pretty relaxing. And most people know that one of the, one of the interventions for people having a panic, panic attack is to breathe deeply. For a while by first interview with Buddhist teacher formal interview with a Zen master. I went to see one on one in the small rooms. I was, you know, an old I was pretty young, my early 20s I was really intimidated by this great authority figure. I was just a little punk and I was so intimidated or scared That I couldn't speak. And so the Zen master, you know, after a little while, he realized what was going on. He said, Gil, breathe deeply. Breathe deeply so you can relax. So this idea of you know, sometimes breathing deeply, but I'm just breathing mindfully, consciously can be a great help. Or my friend we were I was living at the Zen center. And I had a friend there who was doing some work on the roof, and he fell off the roof and broke his arm. So they called the paramedics and the fire department came first. And he was laying on the ground with his broke broken arm, I think it was and he was in pain. And so the fire department came and they saw him laying there. And the first thing I said to him was breathe. And he rolled his eyes. You know, even as a student for years and year, that's what he did. He agreed to sit and breathe. And I think he will have been breathing laying there. I think one of the fun, fun I find I find it kind of fun, fun, funny, humorous, it'll make how many times yoga teachers will say, remember to breathe. Before we forget, because it's sometimes in yoga postures people hold their breath, or they or they breathe very shallowly. And it's not very helpful for yoga to to hold your breath or breathe shallowly. So it's helpful actually to have this relaxed breath. So as we begin tuning into the breath and hang out with it over time, it helps relax and some of that happens, relaxation happens, because we begin to understand how we're breathing. The breathing is a very fluid flexible changing phenomenon. How we breathe is connected. The breathe breathing and breathing is a set the juncture the meeting point at many different things. physical, psychological, emotional forces in our in our in ourselves and probably environmental as well things around us and how we how much we breathe, how strongly breathe deeply, how shallowly, how quickly and what parts of our musculature get active as we breathe, what doesn't get active, what gets held as we breathe, all related to so many different issues happening within us. And so as we begin tuning into the breath and hanging out with us, it gives a chance for you to discover how you're breathing or your breathing in a relaxed way. Or you Are you a little tense are you holding your breath? Or you're breathing mostly from your chest? Or are you holding your chest?

Are you holding your belly and when you breathe? Or is your belly relaxed and hanging forward? Is it uncomfortable part of your breath or is it comfortable? Do you breathe out all the way or do you not breathe out the way all the way The word still and quiet you get to watch and see what's going on with the breath. You can start noticing how you're breathing. Just an act of noticing it is very meaningful, I found because it mindful awareness of what it is. You often allow us what is to change. I like to think of it as kind of like mindfulness gives breathing room to our experience. And so we have room things have room to unwind to unfold, to do with expand to do what they need to do, and what better things to give breathing room for them to your breathing. And so often we don't give ourselves as much room to breathe. Because we're you know, for caught up, needed. You can see, try this. I don't know if you're maybe you're a little bit like me. If you find yourself driving on the freeway one day You're late. And there's a lot of traffic and you need to hurry and you are hurrying to get there, check your breathing and see what's going on. Or maybe, you know, don't don't do this exercise because I tell you just when you happen to be that way. Or when you're I remember once when I was a graduate student I went all the way over to Berkeley to get a special book from my doctoral work rare it's difficult to get book and somehow the catalog or something computer said they had it somewhere in the back office or something. And I really needed it then you'd think you'd get it quickly and I don't know what I don't know what's going on with me. I don't remember so long ago, but I really wanted it and they the guy was behind the desk. No, you know, and we don't have it. I know nothing doing and and so I was kind of engaged to try to get this book.

And so finally, someone else walked by and notice this conversation and say, wait a minute, I'm going to check back there. So explain to someone who's going to actually check, then, only then that I stopped being preoccupied with my tremendous need and trying to get something and turn my attention to see what was happening here with me. And to my surprise, only attended I really discovered that I was leaning across the table, kind of the kept the counter, you know, on my tippy toes leaning out across, you know, it's kind of a tense way of being and I was holding my breath. As soon as I could see that. I didn't have to really even do anything. I just the system relaxes. Sometimes you don't need to do anything. Just the awareness of what's happening. Allows something to relax. Let go We just give up we give we give up from there what we have been doing, and we just stopped doing it and something relaxes. Sometimes we it by just being mindfully aware of how the breathing is, sometimes my breathing is uncomfortable, I made it, I've been living, it's gonna be a little bit fast doing too much. And so some from me, sometimes I'm a little bit tense in my front, my rib cage a little bit held in or pressed in here. And so the habit of maybe a few hours of being this way, I can feel a little bit this kind of pushing in here and tightness here. And I can't just tell myself to relax quickly. I can just like to relax. But what I do is I just hold the discomfort, slight discomfort in awareness and mindful awareness. And because I hold it in awareness, I give breathing room to that feeling. And so then in that it's as if then it has a chance to relax on its own in its own good time. But I feel like I need to be present through discomfort who's Comfort is slowly begin to unravel. So the ability to hang out with a breath, we begin discovering what our breath is like. You might be surprised how much information your breathing will give you, but how you're reacting how you're responding to the life around you. And, and might be the first early warning sign that you're caught that you're, how you're feeling many times. In fact, what goes on with my breathing. That has been the first indication to me Gill, pay attention more carefully what's going on for you right now. I think you've gotten a little bit too caught in what's happening, because I feel a shift and change in my diaphragm in my belly, in different places I breathe. Partly I do this because of how much time I spent in the breathing. It's kind of second nature for me to notice my breathing. And I feel that's one of the benefits from all these years of focusing on breath. It's kind of second nature to notice it to tune into it and learn from that experience. The last thing that I've like to say tonight about how I benefited from being on the breath, it's kind of connected to the others. And that is that I find that focusing the attention on the breathing is a fantastic way of letting my inner life become

still. And the more I focus on the breath and let the breath relax me, settle me. Let my preoccupations fall away, no longer had been involved in a lot of thoughts and thinking that not only am I my mind gets still learned quieter and calm. But the inner life comes to learn calm, the body starts feeling calm and still. And there's this delightful, joyous stillness that comes into into place and it really satisfying, it's very rewarding when this happens. It's it has a kind of inherent satisfaction to it. That's as good as almost any other satisfaction that I can I know. You know, to have the heart, be at peace with itself is a really nice feeling. And I found that sometimes I can just stay and hang with a breath and focus get still get centered, and just kind of ride it, riot. And things get really still very peaceful, very joyous, and quite wonderful. And so rather than getting more and more boring, the longer I stay with a breath, it actually gets more satisfying and more joyous, more peaceful, more kind of wonderful experience of being alive, being present. And it becomes an important reference point, that joy, that peace, that sense of well being, for how I go out into my life. And here I'll end with a wonderful exercise.

I believe it's wonderful that if you try it, you might find you might learn a lot about yourself. it'll teach you a lot. Get yourself for your life, relatively calm on Nick calm end of the spectrum, what you're capable of doing, either through meditation or taking a nap or I don't know what you do to get calm. But get yourself somewhat as calm as you can and your range. And then get up and do what you're going to do with your day. What's next? But as you do that, notice what causes you to give up your relaxed breath. Notice when you're relaxed breathing is lost and your breathing is no longer relaxed now held. And when you that happens, stop and look what just happened. And what was I believing was so important that my breathing had to lock up that way. What was the motivation? What was the concern? What was the emotion that was operating? Now you might have very important things to do. You can't stop. But if you stop regularly, and look what just happened that I was willing to sacrifice my relaxed breathing, my easy breathing, you'll probably learn a lot. And one of the things you might be able to start doing is questioning the value of sacrificing your relaxed breath and giving it up was it to your benefit to give it up? If you do realize what you're giving up, is it worth it? To give it up? Or is it better kind of more useful and more beneficial for you and for the world around you, for you to continue to breathe, breathe in an easy way. So I offer that as an exercise. And I hope that this evening's talk might have, you know, trying to share a little bit of my experience with the breath, might inspire some of you to spend a little bit more time exploring, focusing on breathing, and discovering what value it might have for you as well. Thank you.