

2013-10-28 Breath Meditation

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SPEAKERS

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So yesterday I, we had a retreat, and at our retreat center, we have taught a week long retreat together with Richard Shankman. So we need a bit louder out there. The How's that? Louder now? That louder because it's pretty loud in here for me. That's good. But Deborah, the rest of you out there, can you hear me out there? Yeah, yeah. So it's Tom, you're gonna have to move. So the theme for this last week was something called anapanasati mindfulness of breathing in and breathing out. If you go back to the most ancient record, of Buddhism that have that claim to be perhaps the closest we get to what actually the Buddha actually taught and what he actually did. There's only one meditation practice the Buddha refers to as, as a practice that he did. And that's mindfulness of breathing meditation on breath. And down through the centuries. It's one of the probably one of these extra sounds today.

So, down through the centuries, meditation on the breath is probably probably qualifies as one of the most, if not the most popular Buddhist form of meditation. Certainly popular in many different Buddhist traditions. I was introduced to it in Zen. And probably started meditating, focusing on my breath when I was 20, 21. And I'm still doing it. And it takes a long time to learn how to breathe. The and one of the nice surprises about my now almost 40 years of meditating on my breath, is it gets more interesting. So you think, can you do the same thing, you know, one, two breaths and maybe three breaths, you kind of, you kind of get the idea you're breathing. But to do it, you know, day after day after day after day, months, for years, it would stink think that it gets kind of boring after a while. But in fact, it's the opposite. It gets more interesting for me as time goes along. And it isn't because the breath in and of itself is interesting. Breathing in and of itself is interesting, but rather the whole process of breathing is resides at the hub of so much of our lives. And as we connect to our breathing, that hub opens up to, to a wide spectrum of our life and becomes a wonderful lubricant for our lives, becomes the kind of the thing that keeps us fluid and relaxed, can keep us fluid and relax through whatever's going on. You probably all know, you know, the common phenomena of holding one's breath, if we're tense or afraid. And if you take in a yoga class, it seems like one of the most common things yoga teachers will say is, remember to breathe, you know, you're not breathing. What do you mean I'm not breathing, I'm still alive. But in fact, you know, with the kind of these postures in yoga, sometimes we do hold you some must hold our breath. And then sometimes it feels too heavy and we talk in our language. So various expressions of where it feels like when we finally can breathe. You can finally breathe out to us, you know, finally, you know, everything's going well. things you're worried about. No longer worrying and you breathe out or, or your tension is gone and you can feel your breathing relax again that if we focus on the breath, pay attention to the breath, we have to know where we're holding when we're holding. And it's more a little bit more difficult to hold the breath or constrict the breath. If we're paying attention to it, it tends to lubricate or open it up. If the breathing is more open, goes more fluid that keeps everything else more fluid. It's harder for the mind, to get attached to cling to resist to get kind of obsessed in something and the mind is not obsessed, his mind is much more at ease. So in the

Buddhist tradition, it said that the meditation practice on breathing can lead to full awakening. I had a teacher in Japan who said that the mindfulness of breathing meditation and breath is in and of itself enough to lead to awakening. So very powerful practice. And I would say that probably some of the greatest joy and pleasure that I've had in my life has come from meditating on the breath. And some of the greatest experiences of peace well being, compassion and love, comes in the wake of the practice of meditating on the breath is very, very powerful, wonderful thing to do. It doesn't it's not the right practice for everyone. So just keep that in mind there is a treasure treasure, treasure chest full of different meditation practices for different people, different ones so suited for the various people. Now if you go back to the earliest teachings, there are some particular instructions for how to practice with breathing. And the most detailed meditation instructions in the early Buddhist tradition.

Could be set depending how you interpret the text, but could be set To be around breathing. And that's what I want to do this evening is what we did on the retreat. There, they talked about 16 steps to focus on the breath. And it begins. Before the first step. It says a person goes to the forest, under a tree, or to an empty building. So our building qualifies as an empty building and TNF for meditation. And you go there, and we go, and the first thing to do is to sit upright. And the expression sitting upright, I take both as literally useful and also as a metaphor. Literally useful is generally good to sit if you can, with your spine, your back a little bit straighter than you normally would. There's something very powerful about the posture, human posture, and this is part of what they recognized in ancient India. When the yoga cocinas the postures that people take, and it's understood that the cross legged physician is in our center is actually a yogic posture to take. For those sitting in the chair. The yogic posture of meditation is that to sit upright, don't rely 100% on the backrest of the chair, only really use the backrest enough so that you don't continue injuring your back if you have a back injury. But there's something very significant about sitting upright and being self reliant, the energy, the sense of independence, there's a sense of presence that comes when we sit upright. There's a kind of a loss of some sense of presence, when we kind of collapse into a chair. And then in this upright posture, then it's also a metaphor for being somehow independent for being for being an upright person, for being willing to face and be present for what our experiences of our life are. And then these instructions are to to establish mindfulness And here established mindfulness doesn't mean that we direct the mindfulness to anything particular. But rather that we create a sense of presence or awareness that's available to be here and take in what's going on in our experience. So some people say that they relax their preoccupations with the concerns of the day or their fantasies or their emotions. If they relax, then in that relaxed state that follows, we're naturally going to be aware we're going to establish awareness. And then it says, then it begins the 16 steps of what to do and each step involves breathing mindfully in and mindfully out. And that's the constant that goes through all 16 steps. And this constancy of the breath, staying with the breath over and over again, no matter what goes on, staying with the breath, being with a breath I've been in difficult conversations and meetings and different things, where it's would have been easy to get tense. And I make it a practice to stay with my breathing, stay present. And you might think that statement by breath, I'm not going to be present for the meeting what's going on. But I'm actually much better present than if we get caught up my emotions, my preoccupations and my distracted mind. It keeps me kind of, as I said earlier, fluid or relaxed in situation, staying with the breath, breathe, breathe mindfully to what's going on, keep it constant. It's can be very comforting to have the constancy of the breath as your companion is something you're we get with time, focusing on the breath becomes a comforting refuge, and becomes some place we can go and feel connected, feel grounded, feel like we're in the present moment, and not as easily pulled into our concerns pulled into the events around us in a way that's not useful. So having this constancy likened sometimes to the ballast of a boat, you're not going to be knocked over too easily if you have a good ballast, and that breathing, the constancy of it is the ballast that keeps you kind of on course keeps you from getting caught up. So each of these 16 steps, but they all have in common. It says Breathing in and breathing out, breathing in mindfully

breathing out mindfully, that's what's coming. And then it's, then it directs know 16 steps to pay attention to 16 different areas of our life. And these 16 areas are divided into groups of four, and they're called the four tetrads, the 16.

And, and these groups of four have something in common, there's a structure to them a little bit, and part of the structure is the end. Each of the four, the fourth one ends with some friends. There are some experience that's in the family of, of phenomena we call letting go. And there's many things connected or associated with letting go. And but somehow they're connected to letting go all of them. And so, the first one of those groups of four is the foundation for the letting go, that's the fourth one. So the first one directs our attention to some foundation, some area of our life. We establish ourselves in we get to know it, we kind of go through the next two steps, and then there's some aspect of letting go. The so the first tetrad begins by simply know you focus on your breathing and you simply know the experience of breathing. You get to know it better. If they say it then it kind of kind of Some ways, maybe uninspiring way that it says when you're breathing in long, no, you're breathing in long. When you're breathing in short, no, you're breathing in short. When you're when you're when you're breathing in Long You know you're breathing in long when you're breathing out long. No, you're breathing out long when you're breathing in short, no you're breathing in short when you're breathing out short no you bring out your you know, it's people get pretty tired quickly if that's all they do is that was short, that was long. And at the retreat, someone read, you know, some point raise their hand, wait a minute, short, long. My breath is medium. What am I supposed to do? I'm left out. the idea is not to only recognize whether you're breathing, have a long breath or short breath, but you start becoming to use the breath as a place to train the mind to be present. And anybody who meditates can recognize how easy it is for the mind to wander off. And so you keep coming back. And not only trying to be present, but in that present moment experience that he has to develop our capacity to see more clearly what's going on. And that's the hallmark of mindfulness meditation is to begin to see and understand what's happening. And so the first so it's begin and that happens by beginning to look and recognize what the character characteristics are of your breathing. Is it short? Is it long is it fast? Is it slow? Is it shallow? is a deep Do you breathe in a jerky way? Do your breathing a smooth, smooth way? Do you breathe? We're part of your body is active and activator energized when you breathe. Some people breathe more in the chest. Some people in the movements more in the belly. Some people mostly feel the sensations of the air going in, not through the nostrils. What goes on what kind of movements what kind of activity of breathing happens for you? How do you understand it? And there are when I was in Burma, practicing this practice in Burma. I had to go and for an interview with a teacher every day, and every day he expected me to fill in the details of how I was experiencing the breathing and all the different sensations that came into the breathing. So if you do this day after day after day, all day long, you know, started to be dozens of sensations, you know, that I was aware of, as I breath as I breathed. At first there was only one, you know, in out was kind of all I could tell when they started coming alive. And there was a kaleidoscope of many, many things going on as I breathe. And it got very fascinating to turn in and become aware of that. So it's a training in being present, and a training and sharpening our capacity to see the details of what our experiences. Part of that training and the details is to begin, not only to be present, but sees to stop the often incessant conceptualizing that the mind makes the commentary the judgments that the kind of gender generalizations we make about our experience, and they get underneath the generalizations to actually feel the experience itself. So we get to know the breath. Then the letting go part of this whole exercise, the last part of the first tetrad is to relax your body. So you use your breath to get established to be here.

Then it tells you get to know your body, open up the awareness and feel your body and then relax your body. And I think this is often a common thing that if you start to being in the present moment, concentrated focused, stop being so distracted. It's pretty common for people to start thinking through a

heightened awareness of what's going on in the body and worry height what it takes to pick I'm aware of and kind of happens naturally. If your body is tense, if there's holding in your body that you become aware of it. And then the instructions are relaxed your body, soften it. That's pretty nice, right? If you're tense. And so that first tetrad ends, the letting go practice is that learning is the practice of relaxing the body, let it be soft, can relax the, the belly and relax the shoulders. The face is all over the body that can be small muscles, large muscle groups, that it's possible to relax, not to relax in such a way that you lose the uprightness because the upright posture is a way to stay alert. If you relax and collapse, you probably fall asleep. The second tetrad begins by sort of the foundation for it begins. It begins by saying feel well being feel some sense of joy. are good feelings and that that is a foundation. The last step in that second tetrad is relax your mental activities. So the first one, the first step has been relaxing the body. Now it's relaxing the mental activities. So if you keep this meditation going at some point you become aware that your mind is active. And you might be thinking about things you don't need to think about. Not only thinking about things you don't need to think about but you're thinking about them incessantly actively energetically with attachment. There might be a lot of other activities in the mind, that besides just the thoughts themselves, there might be emotions and feelings and desires and aversions and grumpiness and all kinds of things that go on in there. And, and so this process of the second tetrad is to have some some sense of well being joy. begin to appreciate what's going on in your Mind, and the joy is important. So when you start recognizing what goes on in your mind, you don't get depressed. Because self knowledge is seldom a good news. You know, we start seeing what you know what goes on what makes us tick. And so how do you get a sense of well being the first and that's the first step. One way to do it is to appreciate the good feelings that come when you relax your body. If you hold if you make, if you hold your hand really tight and intense fist for quite a while, and then you release the fist, you probably feel a sense of relief lightness. Kind of warm the nice feelings in your hand. Just from that releasing that goes on. As we begin relaxing the shoulders, the muscles and everything kind of begins to soften in meditation, then there can start being could be quite subtle at first, some feelings. feel kind of good inside is feeling so well being. And it's not always automatic that people begin taking that in registering it and feeling that those feelings of well being or joy or relaxation, the goodness that comes with relaxation. And so here, the instructions are to start feeling the consequences of getting relaxed and concentrated. And those consequences that have to do with feeling something good, feeling nice inside. Some people who meditate and or Buddhist practitioners somehow feel that they're not allowed to feel the good things in meditation, you're supposed to always be kind of, you know, that's, that's, that's maybe dangerous of being a might get attached might get attached to them or, you know, you're only meditating if you're suffering. You know, really kind of bearing down and trying hard. But in fact, the deeper movements of freedom for the mind in meditation unfold much better when we cultivate a sense of Well being joy happiness. So the second tetrad has to do with developing the joy the happiness doesn't have to be much more to come up with enough so that when you look at your mind and mental activities and what you see whenever you see there you're less likely to get upset, depressed discouraged by what you see because you know it's we're mixed bag right?

And then what's interesting is we need to cope becoming familiar with our mental activity, our inner life. And instead of judging it, instead of attacking it are the instructions are relaxed your mental activity, just lighten up. Soften the mind, the mental activity quiet the quiet the thinking that you get, if you can. The third tetrad, the foundation of the work begins Now, and it's more subtle. And now not Don't, don't feel the mental activities, but now tune in to the state of your mind, or the quality of your inner life, the general state of consciousness that you're in or the general mood of your heart, kind of the more the state that we're in. And this becomes a shift some people are so focused on the activities of the mind their desires, their wants, their concerns, that we don't really notice that well the quality of quality of our inner life. The quality of our inner life, the state of our mind, is one of the most precious resources we

have. And it's something cultivate and care for well if we're going to care for ourselves. And so now the instructions are noticed this notice the state of your mind and then instructions are no or develop some satisfaction, some sense of being pleased or happy with your practice with yourself with what's going on. So again, the emphasis here again is feel good about what's going on. And then concentrate the mind, the state of mind is now that we can even kind of sense of the wider mood or atmosphere of the inner or the heart of the mind. Let it start getting unified, gathered and collected. So that it all kind of feels like you're in a bubble of awareness, a bubble of presence, so we're not scattered in the minds not kind of jumping around and easily distracted. We began settling, settling down getting composed. So a settle, settle and steady the mind. So feel the mind, steady the mind. And then it's very interesting that Then the fourth part of this the letting go family of activities, it says, start becoming aware. As you breathe in, breathe out, start becoming aware of how the, how the mind is liberated or free. Not that you have to be a totally liberated Buddha. But as you kind of settle in and steady the mind and no longer caught up in the particular concerns that you have, and the state of the mind becomes more open, more expansive, more spacious. A meditative mind feels quite expansive big. They talk about big mind and it starts becoming a mind that is not caught by its concerns, not caught by what we want or we don't want what we're afraid of what we're worried about. And that feeling of not being caught, not being hijacked, or how hostage by all these inner forces of desire and aversion and fear and restlessness and doubt is a kind of liberation a kind of experience of the mind not being caught as an instruction is get to know what it's like for the mind not to be caught in the smallest ways, whatever way you can start appreciating what this is like. Because the appreciation of what it's like for mine not to get caught. It shows you the way supports you to go become freer and freer in meditation in your life. It shows you the path. So then in the fourth tetrad, again we're still just breathing in and breathing out and some of this happens kind of more naturally is the right word, but confused kind of follow as we get more and more concentrated and settled. The fourth tetrad begins with noticing impermanence noticing how things change, notice a change in quality of things. And the context for noticing that is to be aware of that in a mind that is relaxed, open and spacious. With the mind is relaxed, open and spacious bit start becoming aware that all the events, the activities, the experiences, we have moment by moment, are changing and fleeting.

And so, in that changing nature of things, some of those things we begin getting disinterested in distance is interested in pursuing being involved in. So for example, in meditation, it might take a while, but at some point, you'll get sick of your thinking. Enough of this and you'll start losing interest, these thoughts that come and go, but then they come and go again. And they come and go again. And so at some point, he started recognizing this incessant nature of some of the concerns we have. And there's a tendency of losing interest. Relaxing around that way. Some of the things that some of the particular events in our life that we've been obsessing about for a long time, we begin to lose our interest in them. So there's something about there's something about seeing the incessant arising and passing a phenomenon over and over again, that helps the mind become disinterested, not because we're becoming kind of disinterested also can mean a negative connotation. The I like to think of it as becoming disenchanted in the experience, and with that, this interest, there starts to becoming a lessening involvement in the things that were attached in, in our mind. And then at some point, we're no longer involved no longer caught no longer attached to some of the things we were caught up in. To say that you have a lot of desire. And your mind is driven by desire. And you see yourself always desiring, desiring, or say that you're driven by the weather by the need to, to prove yourself or have an identity or a strong, strong emotions and thoughts about self self criticism or self aggrandizement or how to prove yourself how to defend yourself how to justify yourself. There's all these things that be gone in the mind. They rise and they pass and we start becoming disinterested in them, and then apart to become disinterested in them because we see the difference between a mind that's caught and a mind that spacious and not caught. At some point, some of the things we were concerned about are so

thoroughly not they're not there. And we have an experience of a mind or heart or way of being not caught. And then comes in a very special moment. And this is the last step of the 16. And this is we make a decision or the heart makes a decision. I'm done with that. I'm done with that enough. So you know, you've been obsessing about certain kind of thing, so anything at all, and it seemed very interesting, compelling for a long time. But you go through this process of getting getting disinterested in it. In this process of being appreciated. You have something much better going on you have a relaxed, open spacious mind and heart. And then is that the thing you were obsessing about you stop obsessing and when you really feel how good it feels, Not to obsess, then this wonderful moment of soft often called relinquishment, we enough of that is the nice, I'm done with that. And I imagine that most of you have come some point in your life and thought I'm done with that. And sometimes maybe it's only after the fact, you look back and say, I haven't done that for a long time. But I don't want to do that again. You know, you know what, you know, like some of the things you were concerned about in high school. You know, some of us, you know, I'm done with that. You know, no more of that. So, those are the 16 steps. So they all each of the tetrads ends with a kind of aspect of letting go. Two of them are called relaxation, relaxing the body relaxing the mind. The third one is apprec appreciating mind which is not caught. So it's let go enough that the mind is not caught and that things feel spacious, open, relaxed, being aware what that's like. And the fourth one ends with having let go enough or thoroughly enough, that we see that we have some choice about whether or not we invest ourselves into those things again in the future.

And in that seeing that choice, there can be a choice to I'm done enough of that. It might come back Of course, but it's it's a to actually steal that turning of the heart, the turning of the mind. And I'm not going to do that anymore. I don't want to be involved in that anymore. That's a huge deal to come to that point. And then it might take practice in a while to really kind of shed it or not get caught in there again. All that process is done by breathing in and breathing out, breathing in and breathing out. So I hope that I don't know if this is going through 16 stages like this is interesting for a talk. It was interesting for our seven day retreat, where we kind of did it slowly, over the days, it's kind of once, you know, a few steps at a time. And we did them as kind of a guided meditations. So that kind of, you know, so it wasn't just kind of listening to a long list going on and on. And I think it was quite quite meaningful for many people. I found that very meaningful for myself this practice of breathing. So I don't know if I was able to convey that to you. And for that, you don't have to remember all this that I said, except keep in mind that this whole process does involve relaxing, relaxing the body, relaxing the mind. Sooner or later, appreciating what it's like to have a heart mind, which has let go deeply and well. And that from the vantage point to having let go deeply and well, to make a decision, I'm done with certain things. I'm done with that.

That's not meant to be an aversion towards things, but rather a movement of wisdom. You've had seconds, and then thirds and then fourths and you're bloated and full. I'm done. You know, that's not a version. It's like that just so you've watched television for 16 hours straight. You know, or just, you know, I'm done. You know, you realize that After 16 hours watching the shopping channel or something, and then I'm done, you know? So I mean, I'm just being silly with these examples, but you know, you probably have your own obsession or thing as you're doing that. You know, it's often something that you don't really want other people to know that you do. You know, if there's, if you have something that you're rather not other people know, that goes on in your mind. I venture to bet that if you do this process of deep relaxation, meditation, you'll come to the day where you'll feel done with it. I don't want to do that anymore. So we have five minutes. Do you want to say anything about this or ask questions about it or

sometimes, um, I'll read or usually usually stuff I find in books about being completely disgusted with

with 16 hours of TV, 16 hours of TV, non stop

life craving, wanting things. And sometimes when I read it, it just sounds really nihilistic. And it sounds like there's actually a lot of aversion. It's like, like, they go on like, you know, disgusted and it's like rotten core. On and on like this, like, in Buddhist texts, are they really just alluding to this, this just enough? setting us to more? Well, you're saying sounds more neutral to sort of?

Yeah, so what Phil is pointing out is that there are some of them that classic Buddhist texts, ancient texts that does us kind of see Mainly very negative language, like the word disgust, being disgusted with certain things. But that's it partly that's a problem of translation. There have been even like there's one translator change his translation he had for a while he used revulsion. But then he's changed it now and I think he has much better translation and that is disenchanted. So you have to be a little careful with the English words disenchanted means that you've been enchanted you're caught in a spell. So it's good to get disenchanted. But some of the language that's seemingly very negative and world negating or body negating and very things which is there, sometimes you have to look at the context in which it's being taught. And the and there are passages in the texts, where they say look upon the body, as disease as a boil, as you know, this disgusting and things like that, but the context of it is deep meditation, where there is more joy, happiness and pleasure than most people will ever experience is tremendous, tremendous feeling of well being. And in that internet context context to some of that language being used. Because partly I believe, partly because the contrast is so great. And in when when there's such purity of mind, and the mind is going further, it just doesn't feel good at all, to do some of the things that you're doing before. So if you have been seven days on retreat and you spend you know, four or five days finally kind of taming the mind. So it's not just wild running all over and then fine minds finally settled in the present moment. And then as it settles more and more in the present moment, his mind starts feeling more and more joy, peace, happiness, sense of purity, ease, and becomes more and more so and you feel like this thoughts but the thoughts just kind of whisked by you don't feel like you're so interested in them and caught by them and then I just feel so peaceful, calm and there's a deep deep sense of rest. Sometimes on retreat, people have a feeling of rest that they've, you know, they some people are exhausted from a lifetime of mental activity. And so they have deep breaths, deep purity deep everything. And then, you know, your sixth day of the retreat is really good. You Never had it so good before. And your best friend comes to their trade center and says, you know, I'm taking you because we're going to go to a tailgate party Candlestick Park with, you know, all my biker friends. And we're gonna, you know, drink beer and listen to heavy metal music. And I don't know if we didn't discussed it as the right expression for that. But you know, it might have been fun, you know, when you were back in your old days distracted and caught up in your thoughts and, you know, and kind of feeling lonely, you want to be with your friends. But after 60 of the retreat, it's like, oh, you know, half I don't want to do that. So, those very dramatic language that you're referring to, is in the context of that kind of meditative experience. And it's been, it's taught not so much to have any aversion to the world. Rather to protect and enhance and continue developing this beautiful state of party mind that can be had to help with the relinquishment, you know, I'm dealing with certain things. So I don't know if that helps you with the question, but the context is important for those kind of language. That makes sense.

And does actually, that happened to me. I went to a daylong this weekend that was invited to a party afterwards and it was no that would be way too different.

Great. Didn't take sec didn't take six days for that. One day here is enough. So okay, well, I hope this was okay. And the I was also inspired by this 16 steps. There's this practices we did during the retreat.

And I didn't know how talking about 16 steps would work. Good evening when I'm tired. It was a long week. So hopefully, it was Something that was meaningful for you and, and that you'll give your breath a second chance. Thank you