

# 2015-09-06 Mindfulness of Breath

Thu, 9/17 11:07PM • 34:01

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

breathing, breath, life, breathe, buddha, people, meditate, diaphragm, mind, ease, important, learned, meditation practice, attitude, relax, meditation instruction, exhale, attention, situation, thoughts

## SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

Been in that can you hear me? All right, everyone. Okay, great. Okay. So, to go back to basics, and I'd like to talk a little bit about mindfulness of breathing. It's also kind of a preparation for the Dharma practice day that we have on Friday and the series we have this year, we have a series every once a month, much of the year on some kind of Buddhist practice topic. This topic this year is going to be about the Buddha's instructions on how to meditate with the breathing. And he has a 16 step program for how to work with the breathing, right from the beginning, all the way to liberation. And we'll go in the course of these next eight months, we'll go through these different 16 steps in that program and bit by bit. And so today I thought I would just kind of open up and the topic of mindfulness of breathing or breathing. For me, I've been practicing meditating on my breath for 40 years. And it's been a central part of my meditation practice, and something that I've come to cherish. And I find that after 40 years, that the breath breathing keeps becoming more and more interesting. You, you think they would get, you know, pretty routine and boring after a while, but what can you learn after 40 years, but I find it to be a wonderful foundation for a life living a life to be connected to the breathing and the breath. The breathing can become a refuge for us, a place of safety, a place of wisdom, a place a reference point for understanding our lives in a very deep way. And it's an experience of breathing is so central can be so central, that sometimes it might be more useful to identify with your breathing than any other thing. So there's maybe we have maybe many identities that we carry around with us. But there are times when it can be really resting and being connected to the breathing, that all the other identities, we have all the other issues of our life that we might have. They're kind of like, peripheral or they're maybe still important, but they're more like, you know, the clothes, you're aware, in a certain kind of way, then then the experience of breathing because the breathing becomes the center. And everything kind of seems to radiate from that and arise out of that, and provides a source of well being that is portable, into all the different challenges and situations of our life. That gives us more a little bit more balance of mind. In those situations, and certainly I think that breathing, the experience of the body breathing is probably a better place to identify with than with your mind. You know, the minds are wonderful, I like minds and think they're, you know, don't want to be critical of these wonderful minds that we have. But the mind is oftentimes our thinking mind or cognitive mind, our mind often gets priority. You know, we think a lot for example, and, and you can see that sometimes when you sit down to meditate and say your meditation subjects is going to be breathing. And you can sometimes feel if you're not very settled, the strong tendency to not stay with the breath, almost as if the mind gets pulled up into the mind and the awareness gets pulled up and gets lost in the mind. Sometimes I've thought my mind is like a vacuum cleaner. For awareness, and, and so it just kind of, you know, it just did, there goes my poor little awareness a little bit I have, you know, gets pulled up there and I'm involved in thinking about something one, you know, something and, and so that sense of like that's where it's important to be is in the world of our thoughts and plantings and expectations and memories and fantasies and whatever is going on there in the mind. And I think I have a vibrant, very warm relationship friendly relationship

with the world of thinking. But it's not, I don't really think of it as that's who I am. I don't think of it as a center of gravity for my life, though sometimes it becomes that way because of the vacuum cleaner.

But I think of the breathing as a center of gravity is the heart the center and it's a very important place the one of the ways of Perhaps seeing how what an honor important place breathing has in the teachings of the Buddha is that when his son was a teenager would have had a son. And during much of that his son's upbringing, it seems that the Buddha was actually the primary parent. We don't have much stories, but that was like, he might not have actually been an active parent, but his son when he was about seven said, join the monastic order. So he left his mom and joined his monastic order. And so he was under the care of his father. And when he was when his son was about, they think about 14 there's a story that he was off walking on alms, alms rounds, and because he was a monastic monastic, you know, for the food of the day. And it seems that from the story The that his son Little bit like his father, like the Buddha. And so he had certain conceit about his looks. And you know, it's not that uncommon for some teenagers to be a little bit concerned about how they look. So the fact that the Buddha son would have those kinds of thoughts, as you know, as a teenager, maybe it's not so unusual. And, but somehow the Buddha understood that and so he said something to assign about, you know, that I forget exactly what he said, I can tell you what he said. So we can get it right.

And he said, whatever kind of material form, whatever shape whatever The word actually is better translated as appearance, and it's Rupa. But I think in this context appearance is a better translation than what's here. Any appearance that you have, whether in the past and the future or the present, internal external and all that should be seen with wisdom, how this is not mine, this I am not, this is not myself. So, you know, wherever you look, this is not who you truly are. Powerful teachings are going to be unpacked and disgust some other time. But Rahula took that as a reprimand, given you know, he was maybe having some thoughts of conceit, so, he went back to camp. And when the Buddha returned, after some little, little story the Buddha gave him meditation instruction. And they met at the heart of that meditation instructions was meditation, mindfulness of breathing, and mindfulness of breathing. What he taught him was the 16 steps that the reading that we're going to do this coming year and on on Fridays. And so this is one way of seeing how central this was to the Buddha was a yoga teacher to assign the primary meditation practice. And it's probably in the stories we have with the Buddha's own meditation practice. It seems like this is the primary practice he practiced was meditating on the breathing. One of my Zen teachers said that everything you need to learn about Buddhism can be discovered through the breath, the breath will take you all the way through they kind of central importance to it. So one of the interesting questions for all of us is what is our What is your what is our relationship to our breathing are we Absent from it, meaning that we don't really attend to it and take care of it. If in some way, the breath is our breathing is a primary it can be a primary identity for us a primary home or a refuge. How often are you paying attention to it? How often do you attend to it? How often do you rest and the breathing in such a way that the breathing can be a refuge for you? And you have a vacuum cleaner in your mind, where you get pulled into other thoughts, concerns, feelings, in such a way that your presence of mind your awareness is not that strong. And, you know, so what is your relationship to your breathing? And what have you learned about how you breathe over your lifetime so far? Have you paid enough attention to how your breathing that you've noticed the rhythms and the different ways that you're breathing and the effect that breathing has on you, the effect that you have on your breathing and the effect the breathing has on you? It's There's a fascinating relationship you could watch. If you meditate, you can watch sometimes very subtle shifts in the muscles of the diaphragm and the speed and the rhythm of breathing, based on what emotions out there present, what thoughts arise. And you can see that also in daily life as well. The wonderful movements of fight and flight has a great impact on our breathing. So, you know, and some people live their lives in fight or flight to the anxious and tighten tense and that affects the breathing. Breathing can get shallow and can get tight and constricted and can get fast variety of ways in which breathing is kind of influenced by the

emotional attitude or in which we live our lives and if we have a chronic attitude of anxiety, and mood, chances are that affects how we breathe, and then we don't get enough oxygen perhaps or the breeze. Isn't that supportive for us as it could be opposite to the fight and flight tendency is the human capacity for approach and sooth, not great approach and suit.

And so if you kind of open up in a friendly way to your life and do things which are soothing or compassionate or caring, that has a very different effect on the breathing, and tendency tendency for then is the breathing becomes more relaxed, the diaphragm relax becomes breathing itself becomes smoother, more fluid, and, and it doesn't is not held to so tight. So these attitudes we have about life are embedded in our breathing and some people who are regular meditators and are developing a strong capacity for mindfulness and seeing the subtlety of what goes on in their breathing and the relationship in breathing and our psychology can discover very subtle effects of Are some of our psychology on the breathing. I've, I've known people for whom they get anxious, every time there's an exhale, because they very subtly don't want to let go fully, it's kind of frightening or losing control the end of the exhale. And so they don't want to let go fully. So there's a little teeny little tinge of anxiety that maybe is invisible in ordinary life. But when you sit down and meditate for sometimes Oh, look at that. There's a Genesis of some anxiety and that fear of losing control of the end of the outbreath. And that relates to maybe an attitude of loss of fear of loss of control, and all kinds of areas of their life, not just in the breathing, but that's where it gets revealed. Or I've known people for whom they were fine breathing out. But there was a subtle attitude as they breathe in, that the world is oppressive. Don't let anything come my way. I don't want to take anything in, you know. And so there's a reluctance to Breathe out, breathe in. And I've known people who have a reluctance to breathe out, they breathe all the way in, and they have all this good stuff, the oxygen, and they want to like any bit go. And so there's a little reluctance to, you know, breathe out. And it might seem kind of, you know, almost silly or kind of small point. But the point being that this sometimes is just a little hint of a larger attitude that plays out in our psychology and how some people live their lives. Fear, you know, resistance to things coming our way. Fear of letting go, fear of, you know, wanting to hoard and to keep things and not let you know, give things away. So some I've known people for him that had an aha moment in watching the breath and seeing that and that was kind of a key because if they can learn to overcome that and breathe through it in a nice way, sometimes it begins loosening up the, the way we might be stuck in our psychology or in our mind around these kinds of attitudes. One of the wonderful things about breathing is the exhale. Because in order to exhale, the diaphragm relaxes the inhale, the diaphragm contracts and kind of pushes down to the stomach, that kind of down towards the pelvic cavity. And the exhale, that diaphragm a great big muscle. It's one of the strongest muscles in our body, apparently, it relaxes. And so there's a way of writing that relaxation, kind of staying with the relaxation and writing it feeling it relaxing with it, letting the relaxation by diaphragm kind of maybe open kind of have it ever have your attention in the torso in that area. And as you feel the relaxation of the diaphragm, you can if you if you can feel it, kind of open to it more or receive that relaxation or make make room for it. So we can have influence and effect on us. Let the breathing affect you. Rather than you affecting the breathing, let their breathing be the steering the steering wheel of your car. Don't let the person in the back seats there your car they breathe, you know, so and you know the mind is more the backseat thing, oddly enough, but if you let the breathing be the front seat driver to stay there and, and let them and just being with time The idea is that as you learn to stay with your breathing, be attentive and mindful of your breathing. Your attention of breathing affects the breathing. If there's a lot of self consciousness around it takes a while sometimes, sometimes it's possible to contract more and get to kind of tight around breathing with that self consciousness. But with time The hope is that the very act of being aware of breathing, helps it to relax helps her to let go of the places where breathing is held or contracted or something. And then breathing can be open and smooth and relaxed. And then as as breathing becomes more easy, relaxed, open fluid. It becomes it's kind of like a treasure. It's I think it's one of the great personal treasures you could have.

I first discovered it, not through meditation, but I was living on a farm, a small little dairy farm and waited for about six months when I was 20. Working on the farm working all day, and it was wonderful work for me. And somehow living that kind of wholesome life. Something shifted and changed in my breathing and my breathing started to become the refuge for me or, wow, this feels really good. I didn't know that breathing could feel so free. And then sometime later, I discovered the same thing through meditation, that there can be a freedom and meditate in the breathing kind of moving through and that freedom can seem like a you know, the other The body and the torso, the diaphragm can seem like a completely petty thing, given all the important things that we have in our lives, all the really big issues that go on in our life and now we're talking about this, this silly little kind of movements and little muscles and diaphragms. And my god, you know, I'm dealing with, you know, major life crisis. There are big important issues in our life that we want to address and want to kind of deal with. But I think that the if, if the, if we have discovered how to have a free, easeful breath, then that becomes a, a support for engaging and all the other difficulties in our lives. So one of the great practices that I discovered is or learned, or discovered I learned was well, it didn't take me Now, I don't want to take credit for it. It's like I said, I discovered so oh off offer credit to Ajahn Amaro, maybe the wonderful Theravada monk who has this wonderful meditation instruction, that I don't know if it's directly connected the breath, but all connected. And he says, set yourself at ease. And then notice what takes you away from it. Isn't that nice? Set yourself at ease and notice what takes you away from it. And if you do that, then slowly your possible your connection to ease will grow and become deeper and fuller. And the deeper and fuller it is, the better you'll notice what takes you away and then you kind of, you know, work your way through what, that's what it takes your way. So the same thing with breathing at the breathing is such a good resource as you become aware of your breathing and you start having some beginning some glimpses. I feel so what it's like to have a really relaxed, fluid, mobile breath, just kind of breeds itself. And if you know this kind of sense of freedom or a lot of ease in the breathing, then that becomes a reference point to notice when the breath freezes when the breath locks up or when the breath kind of gets fast. When you start losing that easeful breath that is a really important point. That's a really That's it. That's it give you an opportunity to see what goes on you. What needs attention, what needs to be looked at more carefully. What was it that happened in you, that caused you to lose that ease? What happened there? Look at that, and then see, was it really necessary? Was this really important what I lost my ears for? Can I go back to that ease or do I need to kind of look at something else and do it intentionally and consciously. What it what what needs attention now that I see that and the deeper the sense of ease and the breathing the deeper relaxation and openness there is there, the better reference pointed it becomes, for all the movements of the mind that takes us away from ease. Why sacrifice your ease? Is the great question. Maybe you do maybe you should sacrifice it sometimes. But why sacrifice it for what are you sacrificing it when you have this great treasure inside. So the treasure of relaxed open, easy breathing. And the final thing I'll say is that the relaxed this treasure of relaxed, open, smooth, free breathing comes along with a relaxed open mind or heart. Generally, our minds and our hearts work much more, much better, much more intelligently, much more creatively with much more empathy when they're at ease and relaxed.

So, learning to have this relaxed, easeful breathing is not meant to be an escape from our life. But hopefully it creates the context, the situation for kind of a human intelligence, human capacity, that we can go into our lives with wisdom and kindness and compassion and creativity in a much better way than if we're tense. So that's my little talk about breathing. We have quite a bit of time left before the end 20 minutes and I wanted to end early because rope, you know, we're a smaller group here today than usual for Sunday. And it's an opportunity to, for you guys to have a little conversation among yourselves. And things really important from time to time that we have this for a variety of reasons. One reason is that we can get to know each other more. And that's really important to protect the time. The

other is that very few people have a chance to have some kind of common good, maybe in depth or in the conversation around these kinds of topics with other people have similar relationship to it. And so the to speak, what's going on for us to hear ourselves speak on these topics, has a big impact on us speaking, and to hear other people speak about it and kind of explore it can be very helpful in many ways. So we're going to take about maybe 1015 minutes for you to have a conversation and then we'll come back as a whole. If you don't want to do with your full course you're more than welcome not to do it and go at that point or go outside and come back for the final or closing, or you're welcome, just sit here quietly and we mindfully read, and what you know, listen to all the talking and then you know, whenever you want to do, but my request is you stay because it's really everyone's important part of the community. And this is important for, you know, nice thing to do. Most people who don't want to do this kind of conversation usually, really appreciated once it's done. I mean, not that it's over, but that they did it. Okay, so hopefully your game. So this is the topic. So I'll offer a few different questions. And a couple two or three. And you can just answer whichever question you like, or whatever it elicits in you. There's not like a it's not a test you have to answer just right. It's more like to evoke something in the territory of breathing, for you to share and talk about and as you talk about it with your groups of form groups of three and four. The Art of this kind of conversation is don't say hello Don't go on and don't say everything you could say on the topic. Because you don't have much time, sit, say just enough to get your point across something that's valuable for you. But you want to make give plenty of time for everyone else in your group to have a chance to do the same. And what's really nice is if actually, in the time you have, it kind of goes around, or run around, and you hear other people so that you get new ideas and new understandings and to share back to them. If you just did a long monologue, you know, then you might not be influenced in a good way by what you hear from other people. Hopefully it makes sense. So the simplest question is, what is your relationship to your breathing? That's the simplest question. A little bit more involved question would be maybe. What have you learned over your lifetime, about the value of paying attention to your breathing? So what's your relationship to your breathing What have you learned about the value of paying attention to your breathing? And then the last question may be a little bit more tricky. And this is if your breathing is really who you are. That's, you know, nothing else, you know, that's really who you are. What is your breathing, tell you about yourself. So whatever you'd like to say on those topics or related to those topics, this is not you don't have to say you know, something. You don't want to talk about just whatever you're comfortable with your partners. So groups of three or four and I'll ring a bell and about, you know, 15 minutes or so.

So I wonder some if a few people would be willing to say a little bit what that was like, and especially do you learn anything? Was there some surprises in the conversation for you or understand yourself better in some way? Or was it like there's a mic up there and a mic down here. And they're making the back.

For the last several months, I've been increasingly concerned from a health standpoint about stress. Well, how do I know I'm in stress, and I figured out several months ago, that my breath is tells me when I'm in stress, I really don't have any other sign. So I have been watching the breaths, particularly for that purpose. I watch it and meditate. too, but there, it's just trying to relax. I use it as a signal for my stress. Nice. Great, thank you.

I learned so much from the others in my group. It just emphasized for me the wisdom collectively here I learned a new approach to meditating on the breath while driving. And with my eyes open and new way to sit while breathing and a new concept of the opening of the heart. I mean, it's group is amazing.

Nice, wonderful job all should have been in that group.

I'll just echo that. Because the people that I talked to had different ways of kind of connecting to the breath. Maybe they didn't start with the breath. In some cases, they started with something physical and it took them to their breath. And that was interesting. It's great. Yeah.

The way that yes, that's a great thing that some people have other meditation practices they do, or they're avenues for practice, like the body or something. But sooner or later, I think the breath begins to stand out.

So usually when I'm sitting to meditate, in no time at all, my mind is off to the races. And so one of the techniques I have is counting to 10 to one one to 10, nine to one, one to nine. Sometimes I need extra help. So I put my tip of my thumb at each finger joint, each count. So I know it's not optimal, but Cuz the attention you give to the counting or the finger takes away from actually noticing the breath, but

it's better than the alternative.

And after a while, maybe a long while, you know, I settled down enough to be able to grade it. And I, and I love it when I finally can. Thank you, Bill.

This side of the room? Yes.

I find it amazing that we can breathe both voluntarily and involuntarily. And when I follow my breath, sometimes I'm making it happen and sometimes I'm just watching it happen. And that seems kind of paradoxical and weird and discomforting at times to

Andy. Yeah, it's it's a it's an amazing thing that the breath Kind of a bridge between conscious and unconscious, being in control not in control. It's a fascinating world. It's, that's part of the richness of it.

I love the idea of paying attention to my breath whenever.

I hadn't thought about that before. Yeah, yeah.

I learned something really interesting. This week, I went whale watching. And I never knew this that whales and dolphins never stopped breathing. And they never sleep so that they are breathing all the time. And when I'm getting this backwards they never sleep from the time they're born until the time they die and then their brain is awake. Sometimes the left half sometimes the right half and, and I thought that connected to breathing but now I'm saying it I don't think it does. Which only shows you the both halves of my brain are asleep.

Pretty interesting if it would be interesting if we can turn off our brain, half our brain to let that sleep and then the other half and then we have to be careful what activities we do with vending which half of the brain is active. Yes, one more here, over here. Move the mic

are our family went on vacation for a week. And during that time, I experienced two hours of extreme fight or flight. very stressful. And I was really grateful that for my practice here because I was able to use the breath and I also did Personal body scan, but primarily use my breath to get through those two hours because I had no other means of dealing with the situation. I couldn't call anyone or text anyone. Great. And it didn't mean I was still in fight or flight the entire two hours, but it certainly helped to mitigate the situation.

You didn't actually hit anyone. Pardon me. It kept you from hitting anyone. Yeah,  
yeah, exactly. It's very helpful.

Yeah, I can I know. It's very, very helpful and, and to have that thing, very difficult situations to breathe deeply, come back to the breath and relax with the breath. And sometimes that's the only thing that can kind of keep us from something unfortunate. So I'll end with a little breathing story when we've got but first I want to say I try not to use the word breath when I do this, but I can't help myself somehow just so easy. It's the breathing. It's mindfulness. breathing. The breath, I think is the air that goes in and out. And I don't really pay attention to that except sometimes the sensation, but it's the experience of breathing, which is really the heart. I say that because some people listen to me and give me instructions and mindfulness of breath. And they're like trying to follow the air. And it's really the breathing. But I'll tell you a story. When the very first time I had a formal meeting with a Buddhist teacher, and method one on one. And I was probably 22 or something. I was so nervous, sitting there in front of him, that he had to tell me Gill, breathe deeply. So, yes, breathing can help in times of real crisis and imagined crisis. So thank you all very much.