

2017-04-30 Mindfulness of Breathing

Sacredness of Breathing

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SPEAKERS

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So it's somewhere other it said that good things come in threes. So I would like to give a third talk on mindfulness of breathing. And the hidden mind and maybe title, this talk, mindfulness of breathing, sacredness of breathing. There's something very special about connecting to the breathing and being mindful of it. I think of breathing as the meeting place of the sacred and the profane. The meeting place of that which is most intimately ourselves. And that which is most not ourselves. The powerful meeting place, powerful things go on, and it's kind of like, connected to so many aspects of life, this, our breathing, to be connected to breathing is to be connected to these different aspects. Rene Rainer Maria Rilke wrote this poem, he you who let yourself feel enter the breathing, that is more than your own. I like this little verse. First, he kind of points to you to us, you and you who know how to feel it can feel septoria booking the capacity to not think but to feel you who let yourselves feel something you allow yourself to do. There has to be permission or willingness to feel what's this life to settle and be here. And then he writes, enter the breathing, I think of diving in kind of enter into the world of breathing. And initially, it might seem that breathing is you're going inside of yourself within yourself to a smaller subset of who you are, by going into the be the breathing, feeling the breathing. Enter the breathing that is more than your own. So we go in, feel it and become something bigger than what we think of is our own. So this breathing is closely associated with life. We need to keep breathing more than almost anything else we do more than drinking, eating, working many things. And yet, we take it so much for granted, we hardly give it much attention. Breathing is closely connected, associated with our inner life, with our innermost intimacy, with what some called the soul or the spirit within the important role of breathing is embedded in our language. Maybe some of you don't know that the Greek coming from Greek the word psychology could be translated as the study of breathing. Because psycho comes from the word for in Greek of great breathing, but also for mind and soul. So usually, we think study of the mind, but this intimacy, this close connection between the soul or the mind that which is innermost, and breathing, in many languages, breathing that has you know, represents both spirits spiritual, coming from Latin, means of the breath, like respiration, re spire, speed odda and in flocking to the breathing. So that which is spiritual has something somehow association with breathing partly because the breathing is connected something bit, sometimes something something much bigger than ourselves, maybe it's something sacred. So the word inspire inspiration also has the word breathing in it, but in Latin apparently meant the breathing into us, of the Divine breathing into us of the gods. And so the word spiritual inspiration, has breathing in both words, kind of kind of night, this emphasis on breathing or you can see that the language it's there. There's in the end of inspired, I think in Latin means in but breathing goes in and out. And you know, the divine coming into us as a divine coming out of us as we breathe that which is sacred. That was a special.

There was an interview with Alan Ginsberg, the poet and Alan said if I get hot, poetically the bowels heat up. He was interviewed by his poetry, if I get hot poetically, then you you get hot poetically. The vowels heat up and the interviewer said, Could you explain getting hot poetically? And he said, I mean inspiration in a literal, literal way, as deep breathe breath flowing out, unobstructed Lee, as long vowels and as unobstructed Lee as long vowels musically I mean inspiration in the literal way as deep breathing flowing out, unobstructed as long vowels as music. So, is it inspiration is it in or is it out rocker rotor these reverse breath you invisible poem that's probably enough. Just you breath you invisible poem, pure continuous exchange with all that is flow and counter flow. Where rhythmically, I come to be an exchange with all that is flow and counter flow and breathing in and breathing out. We're rhythmically I come to be to Ride the rhythm of your breathing, to be connected and know that you're breathing, to feel your breathing, to feel the rhythm of the chest, the belly expand, contract, writing your breath. And one of the things that happens when we start tuning into our breathing and let it be a regular part of our life. Part of the of our mental attention, the energy of the mind no longer flows into our attachments or preoccupations are ways in which we get lost in thoughts and fantasy. And part of our attention is grounded in something that can be nourishing, comforting, reassuring settling. Many people use the rhythm of breathing as a way to help them when they're anxious. One more word for in our language that has breath in it is conspiracy people we breathe with. So this morning, we've had a conspiracy here. And it's a dangerous conspiracy. Maybe it's a bit subversive to just breathe and pay attention and not be a consumer until other things we could do instead. And here we are breathing together. But we're also in breathing together we're exchanging air together. And how much of the air we breathe in that's been in the other people in the room for the day. know, I grew up one of the early memories I have of going for a walk with my father was somewhere in the countryside. And he was talking about the air that we breathe in and that there are so many particles, you know, I don't know billions of particles in one gulf of air that that and the way that air spreads and exchanges is through space over time. He said that the air that you're breathing in he said he literally said that has the particles of air that Julius Caesar breathe in and out. This is distinctly that has to be the case there's so much buzz so the this conspiracy of air that we breathe in air that we breathe out, breathe out, not only has they're sitting here together, but as the air of our ancestors. You know that we breathe in, breathe out. And kind of a wonderful reflection is that you know, it's one of the things we most need to do is to breathe. You know, we can't go many minutes without breathing. We can go hours without drinking or hours without days without eating. But breathing we have to do and we take it so much for granted. But you know there's a vast, not quite infinite supply of air and the demand or demand is pretty small. So wonderful kind of balance right? The supply and demand on the air. It's pretty cool.

In terms of being taken care of, or supported by this wonderful planet of ours, thing we most need its abundance much greater than what we actually need for ourselves personally when I was in college, took a botany class and big auditorium and big bore Blackboard and the auditorium was kind of a little bit class was filled with sunken in to the ground. And so you came out you came out into this courtyard in UC Davis. So that day courtyard was surrounded by trees. So that day in the class, we learned about this wonderful cycles of nutrients that plants are part of. So rebuilding cycles of oxygen and co2, and the cycles of how the plants produce take in co2 and produce oxygen and until then we have oxygen for us to breathe and we depend on the plans to create the oxygen and the co2. So it's a beautiful diagram in cycles that were on the board. And I was kind of I was pulled into this discussion somehow is really kind of concentrated and kind of intensely involved in this discussion. And I left the classroom walked out to this courtyard. And I and looked at the trees of these beautiful valley oak trees that were there and on and I just stopped middle the courtyard and looked at the trees and was silent for a while and then had this reflection, that you know, I, there's parts of my body that I don't absolutely have to have, I could have one less kidney and maybe one less lung and it'll You know, one less hand or one less put, then I would might fight I'd make my way through the world probably okay. But I don't, but I

can't I can't do without these trees without these plants that are making the oxygen. And I stood there very silent, almost not thinking and kind of feeling or sensing wondering if I need them. For them parts of what intimately myself, then where do I begin and where do I stop. And this idea of not you know that there's no boundaries, not not stopping here at the edges of my skin. But kind of feeling continuous with this environment around me was a very special moment for me and intimacy of being a place in this world and being nourished and supported. Just standing there in the courtyard breathing and breathing with the trees was kind of the feeling. The Buddha emphasized mindfulness of breathing, attention to breathing, because it leads he said, to great benefit, great fruit to, to clear seeing and to freedom. So this idea that breathing focus, mindfulness of breathing, tuning into your breathing, is of great benefit, and leads to some of the things that Buddhism is pointing to clear seeing, and to freedom.

There's something very powerful about being with a breathing in the Pali language language that the Buddha spoke. One of the words that he used for assurance, or for confidence, to feel assurance, reassured is the word *assāsa*. And *assāsa* means breathing easily. And but that word breathing easily, figuratively became or mean to be reassured. When I was 21, I was when I decided I had learned how to breathe. Of course, I'd been breathing for 21 years. But I was living on a head bear I kind of arose because of the work and life I was living in a very settled peaceful there dairy farm. Kind of in a little green, beautiful valley, between two Norwegian fjords in Norway. It was kind of and I would spend every day getting up and caring for the cows and going out into the fields and it was a wonderful lifestyle. Very simple back then. Back to primitive time before the computers, cell phones and felt very lucky to grew up in that environment.

In that life, the ease I had with breathing was closely connected to a sense of vision or openness to wide space around me. So as I kind of lived that life, the kind of stresses fell away and my breathing became very easeful and kind of float in and out, I remember feeling very, I felt this wonderful intimacy and connectedness and kind of happiness and just being able to feel the breath and flow naturally and openly and with no resistance, no contraction. And I didn't know about this whatsoever. I never had thought about my breathing before this, I've never had thought that my breathing was not natural or not free, it just, but just in that lifestyle, lifestyle, something began to unwind and open in my breathing kind of started flowing. And it felt really wonderful. But why I mentioned it was it came together with a sense of a wide open vision of space around me. So it wasn't, it didn't make me kind of absorbed in the breath. It is something about freedom of breathing, came together with a freedom of vision, openness, of vision, openness, you know, wasn't preoccupied in my thoughts, caught up in vital fantasies, fears, plans, whatever, but through kind of openness and presence, okay. So back to real. Another verse that he wrote, quiet friend, who has come so far, feel how your breathing makes more space around you. I don't know what he means by quiet friend, but quiet friend who has come so far. I think he's speaking to himself. Because within us there's, there's much more, we're much more here than we think we are. And the kind of small little part of what we identify with, the ways we think about ourselves or preoccupations about ourselves, that we're most conscious about, is only a small part of who we are, and accompanying us all along, coming from afar, is something else here. That's quiet. So he calls it the quiet friend. That's how I like to interpret this quiet friend who has come so far, feel how you're breathing, makes more space around you. The second time where polka talks about the feeling of thinking but feeling sensing being here. So we are seldom curious about our breathing. Curious about this natural phenomena, which can teach us so much about ourselves so much about freedom from self. So one of the great spiritual practices is to attend to breathing. And I like the word attend to breathing, as opposed to being mindful of breathing or breathing. And then even worse, would be paying attention to breathing in and then we're back in the world of exchange, what you have to pay for. But to attend to the breathing, you attend to something you care for. Something you maybe love, attend to your breathing. So one of the great spiritual practices is to attend to, to your breathing, to let the

experience of breathing come into your attention. To discover how to breathe consciously and freely is to discover inner freedom. So there's a variety of benefits of attending to our breathing, spend time with focusing on breathing meditation, outside of breathing outside of meditation. One is that enter it interrupts the continuity of our thinking, and our preoccupation. So if you have a habit of checking into your breath, connecting to your breath, physical, immediate experience, it's a convenient place to wake up, step out of whatever caught up in, lost in. And if you develop a habit of like in meditation, coming back to your breath, coming back to your breath, letting go of your thoughts, cutting through your thoughts, interrupting your thoughts, connecting something bigger or different than your thoughts. Then that habit becomes second nature after a while, and you go through the world and you have this wonderful friend, this wonderful resource here breathing, which can support you and help you not to get lost in the world do your thinking. And I would suggest that it's worth considering. Or reflecting that perhaps a very high percentage of the problems we have in our lives have to do with the ways we think about the world how we think about ourselves, and to some degree, belong to the world of imagination.

Even if there are real world things that were, you know, not imaginary, the way we relate to it has to do with this world virtual world of our thoughts and ideas. And so to have the idea to step out of that, and cut through it and wake up in a sense, is a very powerful thing. So breathing can help with that. But then with not just moment connecting to the breath, but with continuity of attention to breathing, we start to leave ourselves alone. And this idea of leaving ourselves alone, many people are hard on themselves. Many people are caught up in all kinds of preoccupations, desires, aversions, doubts, confusions, that we can get lost and spin out in for decades. And there's something very powerful about leaving ourselves alone, not be the engineer of our lives, not feel like we have to control everything, not feel we have to censor ourselves not to, we have to kind of repress ourselves, but but to kind of just leave ourselves alone. And one of the great places to learn that art is in meditation itself, where it's kind of safe, that's where maybe safest to leave ourselves alone. And so just staying with the breath, the art of learning the art of breathing, so that we're leaving ourselves alone, I mean, we are focusing on the breathing, but it's like turning the attention into something which is healthy and nourishing. Rather than having Attention, attention, go feed, the ways in which we don't leave ourselves along the way, we're trying to do things a lot and fix things. And so the require is not working at breathing, not making breathing, just in one more engineering job, you know, to, you know, work at breathing, working gets thing with my breathing. That sounds burdensome to me that language, but rather allowing the breathing, to come to attention, or being breathed. being present as the breathing breathes us. Rather than us breathing the breath, the breathing breathes us the continuity of that staying in that flow in that rhythm, not tensing or resisting or asserting, in the very act of being with a breathing, it's more of a relaxing into and allowing this flow to happen. And at first, it might not be relaxed and free the breathing. And might be, they might feel tight, or might be some resistance or limitations in how we breathe. But to be relaxed about that and just be with it and be with a massage of that. I think of it as another massage. Sometimes when I my front of my chest is a little bit contracted from how I live my life for the day, my shoulders all tight. And rather than being upset that Oh, no, yeah, shouldn't be this way, should be different. I think of it this is not I'll get I get to massage the thing very thing that's contracted or tight. And I massage it with the lungs that expand and contract. And I just kind of like I'm good misuse is kind of expanding and, you know, needing the muscle, I'm kind of, you know, kind of needing or expanding attracting is the lungs expand and contract, I move into the place of tightness and relax in. And that just do that for however long it makes sense. I think it's interesting that back to the etymology of words, that the word anxiety means choking in Greek, to choke. And so this again, you know, to be anxious is to limit our capacity to breathe. And if we feel and breathe into the limitation, there's something that can help start to release and let go of focusing on the breathing and leaving ourselves alone helps the mind to relax, to become quiet. Some of you know within computers, if you've spent a lot of time on the web and stuff, you get all these cash, things that happen, you know,

sometimes you have to empty your cache and your computer works better. Well, sometimes sitting and relaxing and quieting the mind. And meditation is a great way to end end to end. It's like you're emptying your mental cache. So that you can work your processor can work better.

And then staying with the breathing, focusing on breathing is a great way to develop understanding and a new perspective. We can understand a lot about ourselves by understanding how, how and when, and why we're contracted how and why the patterns of breathing are the way they are, or breathe or because breathing is so intimately connected to our emotional life or intentional life, our motivations, what's happening, the environment or reactions to things as we tune into our the patterns of breathing are familiar with them. And we tune in and become aware of the wide range of ways in which we breathe. Each of the little variations says something about what's happening in our response scenario. action is not wrong. But it's it's a mirror to see what's going on within ourselves. One of the interesting places where I've done this, and is giving these Dharma talks, I've been doing this for many years, many Dharma talks. And I feel very lucky to be able to sit in the meditation posture when I give these talks. And one of the things that I do as I talk is I try to track and be aware of my breathing. And I see that there are shifts in my breathing. Depending on my, my relationship, I have to all of you to the audience, my concerns, my emotions, and most commonly, I know that, I start to kind of lean forward a little bit, and I get to be held with my breathing, if I feel like I'm not getting something across, and I'm losing the audience, and I have to try to kind of make up for it. And so I've learned to recognize this, and it's sometimes it's very subtle, and then I, I said, sit back and relax. And then you know, and it's been a great, it's been very helpful for me to be in touch with my breathing, and giving these talks. So you know, I'm relatively relaxed doing them, for better or worse.

So then, new perspective, sometimes, as we breathe in becomes more easeful and relaxed, we also get a better sense of what it's like to have a relaxed and peaceful mind. And that it's possible then to live in life through the perspective of having a mind that's at ease. And that's a powerful perspective to have that it's possible. Yes, it's possible to have a mind, mind at ease, while we take care of everything that's going on. And there's a lot of important things that goes on in life. But we don't have to sacrifice our ease in taking care of all the important things. To come to that point, it takes a lot of learning. It takes a lot of debating with yourself a lot arguing with yourself, because the authority of getting stressed getting anxious, getting tense is pretty strong in the mind. So as we stay with a breathing, we learn easeful breath, learn to be more at ease, then the debate begins. If you're if you're, you know, to choose to do so if you cut, if you walk into your life with an ease, mind at ease, and you start noticing you're losing that ease. Check it out what's going on? Is it really necessary. And finally, you know, there's, it's, it's a long tradition in Buddhism, that you can go all the way to enlightenment to full freedom. Staying with your breathing, the breathing is a very powerful means to setting the mind free. Freedom from all the contractions of self, all the ways in which we get caught up in greed, hate and delusion. Finally, I want to say also that breathing in meditation, attending to your breathing as you meditate, might seem like a small little subset of your great big world that you're living. And it seems like it's, you know, why should you limit yourself and there's all these great things to think all these great things to be a part of and involved in. And these big concerns, and we have, there's a number of things in response to that. One is that it is a kind of limiting ourselves to enter into the world of breathing. But it's one of these things where you enter into it, it opens up to something much bigger over time. And so there's a kind of limitation and willingness to kind of kind of limit us just breathing, just being with a breath. And then trust that at some point, as we get into that world, it opens up to a much bigger world than you can ever imagine. And it's connected to our mind, to our hearts, to our emotions to the fullness of life, that becomes fuller than that whatever you thought was fuller before. So there's a kind of, but also, mindfulness of breathing is a laboratory for us to investigate aspects of our inner life aspects of our how our life works, that if we see it and breathing really well, because we keep coming back and

getting familiar with it. Then we learn to be able to recognize those same aspects in the rest of our life. But we go into the laboratory to or enter the gym that exercise to discover it, they kind of limit ourselves to discover, go into some depth to see with clarity how some the psychophysical patterns of our life work in this particular domain. But sometimes you can really study something if you limit yourself and really study one thing. Once you learn it, then you can see how it applies to everything else. So I want to mention one Buddhist list where this it's very important. It is one of the probably one of the Important lists and the teachings of the Buddha. And this is called the five aggregates, the five psychophysical ways in which we respond to the world.

And the first one is physical responses. And then the last four are mental responses to the world. And so the first is, we respond through sensations, the sensations that we feel, if it's if it's cold outside, our body registers, the coldness in our senses, if it's warm, and registered warmth, if the wind blows against our cheeks, we registered that as maybe tingling or softness or flow or something that we feel there. So it's all these this world of interests of sensations, which come into play in a way that the inner and outer world and meets the sense nerves, the nerves that we have. And so this is a very rich world, the world of sensors, and sensing. And a very important part of mindfulness is learning to discover the How to be connected to the particular details of our senses, or sensing as it occurs. And why it's a bit hard to do is in many of us live in abstractions. We live in ideas of things. And sometimes we're more focused in the ideas and concepts of things in the moment, than actually the direct moment to moment coming and going of sensations suppressed happening. And so when we're staying with our breathing, we start discovering the breath is in fact, not an abstract idea. But the breathing is actually made up of 10s of thousands of little sensations that arise and pass each in breath is to hold these sensations that come along in the chest and the belly, and the nostrils in the back of the throat, a whole bunch of things that arise a kaleidoscope, and we exhale, different kaleidoscope of different sensations come into play. And something very different begins happening in the mind, if we can rest in the sensations that come and go, then if we stay with the thoughts and ideas. So for example, if I think that my breathing is shallow, tight, bad, inappropriate for a meditation teacher, I could get pulled into that world without judgment and ideas, that abstraction, and that those ideas have nothing to do with this experience of breathing as it's occurring. Yes, it might be shallow, but then they're just shallow sensations. It might be fast, it's fast sensations. It's not bad, good or bad, it just sensations and to learn the difference between the judgments, ideas, obstructions, and the direct sensations is a very freeing, and to learn just if we can learn to stay with sensations. So we learn to be with the sensations in breathing. It's a it's a wonderful lesson, the raw data as we do that, that there are feelings that come along the feeling tones are compared to now which means we emphasize in Buddhism, that what these aggregates that it's the feelings of pleasure, have pleasantness and unpleasantness that comes into play as we feel the sensations. And there are some sensations of breathing which are pleasant, some which are unpleasant. And to be able to distinguish those and see them, it's very helpful. To be able to distinguish them and be very relaxed about it is very helpful. And to learn how to just be with the pleasant and unpleasant with equanimity is a powerful stepping stone to freedom. And so sometimes we learned the most of it. If we stay with the breathing, and it's unpleasant sensations. And we don't get worried about it. We don't get feel like we are resisted, we don't feel it has to be changed. But we just feel the unpleasantness and discover an equanimity with it. If we can feel the pleasantness of breathing, which is a direct, immediate experience, it's not an abstraction. That's a wonderful way for the mind to get concentrated. Because mine will get concentrated, much easier if it's tuning into something which is enjoyable. And so if it's unpleasant, we learned equanimity, if it's pleasant, we can also learn equanimity. But we can also learn how to how to get the mind concentrated, which was very pleasant.

And then there's a labels we make on the breathing. Oh, that's a good breath. That's a bad breath. That's the perfect breath. You know, these are ideas are the labels we put on top. Even though they're

labeled breathe, breath, or breathing is a label. And sometimes, those these these perceptions, these labels fall away, and it's just not even an in breath. It's just expanding sensations in the chest. It's not even you don't even labeling it and outbreath the mind experiencing it as a falling sensations of the chest is going. So we started seeing how the mind when it connects to something operates with degrees different kinds of labels. Some labels, which keep us removed to some labels that keep us close in this word labels is usually translated as perceptions, there will be no, but it's really has to do with is a perceiving functioning of the mind every, we're not just passive recipients of something, we're actually involved a little bit in labeling it, recognizing what it is. And then there's a whole world of the codes called mental formations, the mental constructs ideas, and intentions, desires we have, and they come into play staying with the breathing, focusing the breathing, started noticing that you have desires, you want to have better breath, you want to get concentrated, you'd rather not be here today, you'd rather you know, do something else, you have a version from some sensations, you have hopes and aspirations with the breathing Oh, you know, if I do that, with if I do this enough, will I get enlightened by tomorrow is all these thoughts and all these these rich, rich ecological world of our inner life and thoughts and ideas, that as we stay more and more with a breathing, these becomes more alive, start seeing the nuances and what goes on, as we see more clearly, then we're less caught in it, we can let it go and like be, and we can just relax perhaps and just be with the simplicity of breathing. And then the last of the aggregates in these five aggregates is consciousness or awareness, that which is able to hold or be aware to recognize all the other four aggregates operating, that kind of knowing that allows us to see or feel it or experience it. So and, and to settle in to relax. And so noticing that there's, there's awareness that's here, it's an awareness you can't claim as your own. But it's not someone else's. It comes out of you somehow, but but it's not something you can appropriate because there's simplicity of awareness and knowing it's not something you can exactly use or manipulate in as an object, you can more what you can do is you can allow for it. And to feel that there's this kind of allowing place of consciousness of awareness within which life can occur and knowing can occur. of some people find it very freeing and wonderful. And as the concentration and breathing gets deeper and deeper, that sense of wider awareness, spacious awareness becomes more and more acute. And it's very satisfying. So discover, you know, these, you know, just not not so much by being actively exploiting thinking about this. But as we settle in into the practice of breathing, these five aggregates, these four different aspects of the experience, start to show themselves, rather than lumping it all together as one big solid experiences, breathing, breathing is made up of all these subsets all these different aspects, and to tease that apart and see them clearly. It's very freeing, very helpful, supports clear seeing. And once we learn about it in meditation, then we come out of meditation, start seeing the same thing operating in the rest of our life. There are sensations, there are feelings of pleasant and unpleasant. There are labels and concepts we put on things. There's a whole inner world of mental formations, constructs ideas, and there's this consciousness. This wonderful consciousness, which may be can be your quiet friend, has come a long way to be with you. And we come to we can come to see how this troublesome world that we live in that we experience, how it's made. And that's meant to be a provocative thought, evocative sentence, that as we enter into this deep world, of breathing, and we've become aware of all these different aggregates and how these even pieces work, we get to see how we make our own problems. How does that work really? Set true? What problems do we make what is a problem? Have you ever looked at a problem right in the eyes? Where does it live? Where does it get born?

What keeps it going? What's the role of these five aggregates? That's a role of mental constructs and thoughts.

So we breathe in and we breathe out. The inhalation appears. The inhalation disappears, the exhalation appears, the exhalation disappears. It's constant Coming and going, appearing and

disappearing. That's just like the rhythm of everything arising and passing, appearing and disappearing, and to arrive the rhythm of how our life arises and disappears and learning to be free and at ease with it is one of the possibilities with mindfulness of breathing. Here we are conspirators breathing together. Thank you