

2018-07-01 Mindful Breathing

Tue, 9/1 1:25PM • 41:11

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

breathing, feel, breath, mind, experience, people, observing, stay, buddha, thinking, meditate, point, settled, breathe, meditation, subtleness, mindset, soften, body, tenderness

SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

There's a saying, in the vipassana world. The saying is, if it's not simple, it's not vipassana. If it's not simple, it's not mindfulness practice. And some people will engage in lots of reading of Buddhism and learn about this and that and learn about many different things about techniques and meditation. And as you can see more and more complicated, the more you learn. But that little saying is a good thing to keep in mind that if it's not simple, it's not Vipassana. So what is the simplest thing, one of the simple things is meditating on breathing, mindfulness of breathing. And I thought today that would go back to basics, but basics, the basics of being attentive. tip to breath, then focusing on the breath is not, you know, kindergarten Buddhism. It isn't that it's the, you know, the, you know, you want to get over that quickly to get into the more advanced things. And one of the ways to think about it is that many of the problems that we have in our lives that we trying to grapple with some ways we grapple, keep us in their grip, or grappled or struggle, struggle with them within a particular mindset, within a particular way of thinking, that is not the way out. It's kind of like self. It's kind of like we're stuck in a labyrinth of these kinds of things. So certain things, it was hard to think our way out of the problems. If that's not what the solution is going to come, we're thinking. In fact, if we keep thinking And thinking and thinking, we keep ourselves kind of stuck in like a, an a spider's web to kind of just be, you know, can't, you know, doesn't really not the way out or somewhat related to this is that, you know, emotionally if we feel sometimes we can feel certain kinds of stuckness, depressed, sad, maybe angry variety of things. And if we try to think our way out of it, then sometimes the thinking itself takes on some of the characteristics of how we're feeling. So that we think in angry ways, we think in depressed ways. And so it kind of keeps us in that, you know, in in that it's kind of mutually supportive. And as the thinking is maybe contracted or tight or agitating. It feels uncomfortable. And so then we think More. Because we have this problem, not realizing the very way we think, is going to make it worse and worse and tighter and tighter. So sometimes what we want to do is to step out of the paradigm out of the frame of reference out of the mindset that we're in, and engage in our life in, you know, outside of the normal patterns. And breathing is one of those ways mindfulness of breathing. And, and to kind of make it a place this discovery of how powerful it is to turn our attention into the breathing. It's actually a very powerful thing to do. It's not like a wimpy thing. And it's very, very helpful in so many different circumstances. And for not for no other reason, because it helps us to step out of a certain mindset that's not so useful to stay stay in and sometimes it gets A new perspective that then we can go back and look at our issues in our life or problems or situation and see it with fresh eyes or with a fresh mind. And maybe find a different way out of it, or a different solution or something that we could if we just stayed circling and circling and circling in the old frame of reference.

And so one of the, for some people, the mindset or that frame of reference way of thinking around mindfulness of breathing, can be very cerebral, be very much thinking about their lives thinking about breathing. And you can read books on mindfulness of breathing and you have all these ideas in it. And

it can stay in this world of thinking and thoughts and ideas or breathing and, and almost like we're in the control tower looking down at the breath and analyzing it. manipulating Engineering yet trying to trying to get the breathing to cooperate, so that it would somehow have a good effect on us. And, and, you know, we have these different parts of our brain, they say, the nervous system. And the, you know, the conceptual thinking part is one part. And they say that kind of a deeper structure in the brain is an emotional structures of the brain. And to really get into the mindfulness of breathing, it helps if we have almost like an emotional relationship to it, almost as if we kind of are tuning in more of an emotional level, then on thinking thoughts. level of it, if at all. And so in that regard, and now I'd like to tell the story, because stories sometimes touch into this deeper part than just telling you, you know, it's a good idea to stay with your breath and It's a simple story, but it's a one of the foundational stories of Buddhism. Many of you probably heard it before. And it's a sweet story about the Buddha when he was a child, he starts off the story starts off as an adult. And as an adult, he's in this quest, somehow to find a solution to his existential problems to suffering that he's trying to solve. And he spends about six years of his life pursuing a solution and quest visiting many different teachers in India pis time and one of their core practices back in India, one of the one of the options for spiritual quest was asceticism. So to starve oneself, was one way and another way was to hold one's breath. And, and in particular story, he he's practicing these things, and he's describing Graphic language, how much pain he was experiencing starving himself almost to death and also how much pain he experienced by holding his breath. I don't know if people you know, I don't know if holding your breath this long will make your head feel like it's gonna explode is kind of like the description I think you might be faint first. But anyway, it's given in graphic detail that how much pain he had in holding his breath up against the edge of death or fainting or something. And at some point, he decided that he had done asceticism as thoroughly and fully as he could, and the only next thing to do was just to die and he didn't see there was any point to doing that. So he decided to stop his asceticism and he ate some food to nourish himself and then In a more relaxed state of mind, he was thinking What do I do? And he remembered a time when he was six years old. And it seems that as a six year old, it was the time of the spring plowing kind of guess, ritual plowing of the fields of first fields, first plowing of the year. And so a lot of people are out and people out in the fields and he was left alone in the shade of a rose apple tree and perhaps forgotten from having all the hustle and bustle and apparently he just sat there very contented, very happy and his people were in a nearby there was cool shade of a tree. It was maybe a very safe, maybe it's somewhat idyllic place to be. And in that safety and stillness and being left alone, and maybe he was even watching little bit what we going on out there, his mind his heart, his body settled in to a state of well being. Peaceful content, peace, you know, just kind of settled in holistic whole. And it was very different state than what he'd been experiencing through asceticism.

And, and he said, Maybe this is the way forward, maybe this good feeling that I have here being settled, feeling safe, feeling contented, feeling some kind of joy and happiness coursing through the body. Maybe this is the way forward. And so then he then pursued that approach. And he when he went to meditate, he tapped into that six year old sense of well being that he experienced. And he found in doing that, he could get concentrated and still and that big That entryway for him for the Buddha, towards his enlightenment towards his freedom. And so this idea that we would find something inside of us as a wellspring of well being, or a sense of safety or peace or something, and that that is kind of what's needed to really allow us to settle deeper, deeper, to enter into a different reference point, a different mindset than how we're normally living. So the breathing can be that way. And provided that we allow ourselves a chance to experience our breathing, not as a cerebral exercise, but kind of like you're a lover of your breathing, or your breathing is your lover from the inside out, or your your being caressed. Or you're caressing? That, there's a sweetness there in the breathing. And, and so what does it take to have that kind of sweet feeling in how you're breathing? It certainly takes being physically connected to the experience. There is no caressing without being kind of physical, the

intimate from the inside out because the experience our breathing is an experience of sensations in your body. I do a lot of mindfulness of breathing for more than 40 years. In March, my torso, I feel it my diaphragm I feel movements of my belly, the moments my rib cage, and it kind of feel it from the inside out. Sometimes it feels like a massage from the from the inside massaging me from the outside. Sometimes it feels like a caress. Sometimes it feels like something very beautiful and sweet and wonderful. Just to be with their breathing. But to say that is not very helpful for people who have no way of discovering have access to a sweet, beautiful, loving kind of sensations and feeling with a breath. And, and so that's not where it begins unless it's easy to have that where it begins usually, is a very simple willingness to begin focusing on breathing, the experience of breathing over and over again, and to mindfulness practice to really allow yourself to discover what the what it feels like you're breathing, what's the body's experience of breathing, and it's not uncommon for people and certainly for me, even after all these years are breathing. It is not uncommon after a day of being busy or something that I sit down to meditate and my breathing is uncomfortable. It's not dramatically uncomfortable anymore. But it is uncomfortable, partly because the way I've been living my life, I have been, you know, engaged in things and being busy. And taking care of things, I think appropriately enough. But there's a subtle way of not so subtle way of tension in the body and the breathing and the diaphragm and the shoulders and different places in the brain, that kind of gets activated and gets, you know, gets kind of has certain momentum because of the continuity of being that way. And so when I sit down to meditate, I have to be willing to be understand that part of the deal is to experience the momentum of how I've been living my life, the momentum of holding or givenness or busyness. And I've seen it even with being on the computer, that if I'm sitting on you know, on the computer doing some work, that if I do it long enough, it affects my experience or breathing, my breathing is not as relaxed. In full as it would be if I'd sat meditating for an hour or so.

So the first thing that I do when I sit down to meditate many times is, is just allowing myself to experience breathing as it actually is. And without any worry or concern, that it's not sweet and beautiful, but rather, it's just what needs to be experienced and what needs to be touched and seen. It's kind of like you're with a friend who's troubled. And you don't tell your friend you know, I'll see you when you're happier. You know, you, you go for a walk with your friend and just, you know, might be uncomfortable because of the trouble they have. But that's part of the deal. You know, you're with your friend and your whole the troubled state that they're in and, and walk with him and sit with him and, and that's part of how it is. And so if you want to be friend yourself Be your own friend. One of the really powerful things to do is to learn to befriend your discomfort and how you feel. Now remember it is supposed to be simple. And so the idea is that just staying with the breath, just letting the attention kind of be connected to breathing over and over again and over again, the mind wanders off and we begin again keep coming back and then it helps if you have the idea that it's okay to breathe with whatever is happening. So rather than treating physical discomfort, emotional storms, mental agitation, distractions, as distractions, we can just kind of breathe through them breathe with them, just stay with a breath just be let it be kind of like the ballast of the boat or let it be the stabilizer Force through it all, or the thread of stability, the path through everything is with the breathing. And, and one of the things that does is that more you can stay with your breathing. The more you come back to it, the less fuel you're giving to the spinning mind to all the thoughts and ideas, the less you're feeding some of the mindsets, which are not very useful to stay in all the time. And so the judgments that commentary the reactivity that we have towards all kinds of things, including our meditation, including ourselves as meditators, and all these things, the more we can just matter of fact, come back and be with a breath, be with a breath, be with a breath, almost like you're maybe this is not a good thing to say, but I'll say it anyway and you forgive me or forget it. is almost like you're stupid. like yours, this is all you're going to do. Just stay with the breathing, stay with it being nothing more sophisticated. And, and just breathe and breathe and breathe. And in, tune into the breath, be present for the breath. See if there's some way of being of

dropping in, in a deeper way with experience or breathing. Remember, we don't want to just be a cerebral with a breath with the attention. We want the attention or the way of being embodied, to be almost like an emotional experience with it or a tenderness with it all. So what does it mean to meet or be with the breath in a tender way or to experience that tenderness of breathing that might be there? The so the Buddha then turned his attention on this rich I'd like simplicity that he experienced as well being, but it, you know, required having some feeling of safety and subtleness in it. And so that's kind of like the direction we're hoping to go and doing the practices to tap into something, it's almost childlike in what what it you know of what it can you know, how it is it is not sophisticated, complicated thing. It's not something you have to do a lot. You know, it's not like you have to do it or make it happen. But it's more like remaking conditions. for it to happen. We're kind of setting the container, so something could begin bubbling up. So the Buddha did a lot of breath meditation, from all we can tell from the ancient texts. And, and he, he provided a wonderful description of 16 steps of how you can go through meditating on the breathing. I'm not going to go through all this 16 steps, but I want to give you some of the principles behind it.

The first instructions is just spend time getting to know your breathing. Take time feeling and sensing it and, and, and accompanying it and allowing the breathing to accompany you discover what it's actually like to be breathing. What parts of the body are held or tight as you breathe? What parts of the body are loose and fluid as you breathe? Is the experience of breathing forced or is it relaxed? Is the experience of breathing shallow? Or is it deep? is experienced breathing, breathing fast or slow? How is the experience of breathing for you? And in this instruction the Buddha gives. There's no idea that it should be any particular way. Because remember, it's supposed to be simple. It's so simple that you don't have to judge it or feel like it's wrong to be one way or the other. Or We're asked to do is to stay with it, feel the breath. And if you make conclusions, this is how it is then you kind of stepped out of stepped away from the, the, the kind of the flow of the river of life that's there with the breathing. You want to stay in that flow of breathing, because it'll change and move and move down river eventually, unless you step back on the shore. So you want to just kind of stay and stay and get to know it and feel it. Inevitably. It'll change. And one of the reasons it changes is that if you can able to simply be aware, stepping out of the mindset of judging and thinking and engineering, simply be aware. Awareness is like giving breathing room to things including breathing room. you're breathing. And a lot of things begin to unravel, unfold, evolve, if they have space and room. And so they simply be present in a very simple way with breathing. The whole system that we're in is, if the conditions are right, we'll relax. And a lot of what we discomfort around breathing has to do with tension. So we're creating this mental condition that allows things to relax in its own time. And it will, unless you kind of go back to the old mindset and certain certain judgments are self fulfilling. So if you say that that doesn't work, and then you believe it, that it's true, then it's true. Yet Be careful. So the first task is just to get to know it, and get to know the body that's breathing. And then the Buddha said, after you've got to know the whole experience, Breathing in familiar with it and been with it for a while, at some point, but not too soon, but not too late. At some point, relax your body. Relax attentions are building up in your body. So don't make it too big of a project to relax. But don't never relax. If there's obvious tensions and holdings in the body that you can, that you discover as you're sitting there meditating, relax the body soften that you have a soft or erect body is kind of the standard. Then, at some point, breathing begins to relax and soften and a relaxed breathing tends to be pleasant when breathing breathe itself in a relaxed full way. If we've been on vacation long enough, then at some point, maybe the breathing begins kind of underrated. Settling We're not caught in the concerns of daily life. It feels much more relaxed. At that point, that's when the Buddha said, enjoy it. You're allowed to feel the pleasantness of that you're allowed to feel that well being that might be there somehow comes along with a subtle, easy, relaxed breathing. As the body gets softer, there are capacities in the body to feel variety of feelings, sensations, emotions, of well being, that are kind of built into or have a chance to flow. When things are very relaxed, and we're in

the present moment. We don't have to do remarkable. We don't have to win the California Lottery, or a date with the most beautiful person in the world, or all kinds of things you know, in the world in order to have this sublime wonderful feeling of Well being welling up from the inside.

It's kind of built into the whole psychophysical system to have this if we're soft, relaxed, settled, and present, and not, you know, swirling and caught in our thoughts. so remarkable that the whole human system is set up that had this natural sense of well being, if we can just kind of find our own rose apple tree to sit under, while everyone else is busy plowing. And so then he says, feel that and after you felt that for a while, then notice if there's any mental tension and not too soon and not too late, relax the mental tension. And it's because as the mind gets more sensitive, as we tuned To enter sensitivity in with the breathing and the body, we also become more sensitive to what's going on in the brain in the mind. And it's possible to feel contraction, tension, agitation, pressure in the mind of ours. And it's possible a certain right point to relax, to relax the mind, soften, quiet the mind, continue breathing, continue your breathing. And then as we settle down further and more than at some point, it just there's a lightness there's a goodness, there's a satisfaction that comes. That's again, just inherent, just being here and present, and tuning in and having the mind not so spinning and thoughts and cotton thoughts. Having the mind just kind of having a clarity of mind a subtleness of mind here. Appreciate that satisfaction. Then use that sense of satisfaction and goodness, not to think more and make plans for all kinds of other things. Tell everyone that they should meditate. But rather use it to help you get more concentrated. Let let your The, the energies of the body of the deeper mind, the deeper not just the, you know, thinking mind, but the deeper mind the emotional mind. Let it kind of gather around and really stay here in a focused, clear, centered way. Breathing, breathing in and breathing out, just stay with a breathing, just gentle, loving, be with the breath. Finally, at some point, as this kind of very much present moment experience of being with the breathing, ripens and it gets fuller and fuller, then if there's a feeling of kind of where it started entering in To the flow or the pulsing of life, the fluidity of our experience of life, and to really kind of enter into the fluidity of human experience, the pulsing the flexing of it all, in some deep non cerebral away is one of the things that begins to give a massage or soften or loosen up, or tenderize, the hardness of the minds attachments were the little the places where the mind is still stuck. The places of fear the places of wanting have expectations of disappointment, the places of being held holding on to certain kinds of conceits and ideas of who I am and what I should be. They begin to soften. They begin to soften in this flow in flux and pulsing of experience. That can happen when this very deep settled place.

And all along this whole process that Buddha describes, it's all happens follows in the wake of just this simplicity of staying with the breath. Just be with a breath, feel the breath, accompany the bat breath. Love the breathing, that the breathing love you feel it from the inside. So here's a poem, maybe it's a poem. It could be poem. It's titled breathing, that is. to breathe, is to live. To live is to breathe. To live is to love. To love is to breathe. Breathing That is 1000 kisses deep breathing that is Buddha, radiating peace breathing. That is Kuan Yin's warm touch, breathing, that welcomes 1000, new beginnings. Breathing that allows 1000 things to end. Breathing, where self disappears, thousands of times, breathing, that breathe together, with thousands upon thousands of other beings. to breathe is to live. To live is to breathe. To live is to love to love Is to breathe. So can you follow your breathing your breathing house and kisses deep inside of yourself? What would that mean? What is what does that evoke? What does that feel like? What might that be like? The whole experience that tenderness and softness, the sensuousness and loving quality of just being with the breath, feeling it and letting the mind become quiet in that intimacy, fullness, just breathing. And if you do that, then the usual mindsets that you live in the usual ways of thinking the usual ways of trying to solve issues will become quiet for a while. And as it becomes quiet then you might It's like putting on new clothes. Classes are taking off filter classes. And then it's you'll be able to come back from that experience and see yourself see the

world around you in very different eyes. Very different approach. And I'm not gonna exactly say what there's many options are what alternative way can be. But one of the beautiful options is this promises breathing that breathes together with thousands upon thousands of other beings. One of the ways is that intimacy and connection to ourselves through our breathing can also teach us an intimacy and connection to other beings. So another whole paradigm is love, compassion, caring, tenderness in relationship to other people. Not because we should it's not because it's an idea that we try to implement, but rather it just kind of what flows or comes from a new perspective, a new place of being that maybe is different from the usual mindsets that sometimes you're in.

So to breathe, to trust your breathing, to interest yourself to your breathing is a powerful thing. Last thing I'll say, I studied with a teacher and a Zen teacher in Japan, once upon a time. And he said, everything you need to know about Buddhism can be discovered in your breathing. And so maybe this talk today, you have a little sense of how valuable it is mindfulness of breathing and hopefully I didn't say too many complicated things. Keep it simple. So we have some minutes here. If anyone would like to ask any questions, make comments, offer testimonial around breathing.

Thank you very nice presentation. Um, so in listening to I've been following breathing for a lot many years. And I was taught to observe the breathing, which I think is consistent with what you described, but you also described feeling And those are actually two different things. Because if you observe your you can be non judgmental. But if you get a feel it is a different thing. So can you clarify that for me?

Yeah, the question. Yeah. Thank you. Yes, it's great question. And the I think that it's appropriate to say that different people have different ways of experiencing different ways of monitoring being present. So there's not going one way and so for some people, the idea of observing really speaks to them deeply and well, and that's the observing tendencies really takes them far. It's so I don't want to, you know, take that away from me or suggest that somehow not quite wonderful in itself. Some people, when they observe though, hold themselves in a distance and hold themselves separate from the experience. in a way that's not so useful. And sometimes it keeps them in the control tower up in the head and the thinking place where they're watching things and, and there's a very subtle or not so subtle feeling of contraction around the self as the watcher self as the observer. And other approaches to feel it. So that let it be a sensual experience, partly and, and so that's where we the sense the nerves that sense, the sensing happens in the place where the sensations are. So the sensing of the experience of breath happens in those nerve ends, in a sense, more than up in the head, which is somehow thinking about it. So to feel what goes on the torso and the chest and the diaphragm, right, the places where people will be sometimes helps people get out of that being the observer or the little tightness or the separate They can be there. And so some people find it actually much, really nice to really, it's more like a sensory awareness exercise than it is an observing exercise. And, however, sometimes the people who do only sensing and feeling are so absorbed in that and so much enjoying it, that they don't really have a lot of clarity in their mind about what's going on, also. So the right balance between observing and feeling is part of the art of this. So if you're away has been to observe, maybe it's been perfect for you and you continue. Or you might see if you can do what you do how you do it, until you're somewhat settled, and present. And when you're present and settled, then use that cup, use that subtleness and begin tuning in to the felt sense the sensations and the details of the sensations from the inside the inside of the sensation And see how that shifts the experience or What did my teach you or opens for you? Thank you, that helps you seem to be suggesting a balance. Sorry, you seem to be suggesting a balance, everything balancing you know, if you if you come here often enough, you're often you've I think I have a strong tendency to not want to say ever. It's one way you know, it was this way sometimes this way the other times and you know, so, but I think that you know, finding your way in a different state like meditation goes through different phases you know, of getting more and more

concentrated or settled and at different points in that settling process. Different ways of being or appropriate different kinds of attention are useful. So there might be at certain points observing is more useful. And then other times feeling and sensing is more useful, and then later on and observing might come back as being most useful. So we have to kind of know how to kind of keep it simple but know how to adjust it. As we go along. Great, thank you.

Thank you so much. I heard a teaching at some point or that was around, choose a place to focus on where you feel the breath.

Other times when I'm sitting, I feel myself being like, Oh, I feel it here. I feel they're jumping around. Have you had any guidance on that?

If that makes sense, or it makes a lot of sense. It's a great question. Yeah, it's fairly common. To make the recommendation to choose some place. I like to call it the home place, the default place so you don't have to think where should I do now? What should I do and if you get lost in thought, you don't have to like what should you know where should I find it? Just know just it's so simple. Just go back here, come back here. And hopefully there's one place that tends to be the home feels like a right place. And just like that'd be the default. And having one place that you could really familiar with, it allows the kind of honing in or the sub Or the focusing of the mind in a nice way, sometimes, however, sometimes it's clear that's the experience of breathing a lot easier and more appropriate to elsewhere for the attention. And it's fine to shift the attention and you know if that's what's appropriate. So when I sit down to meditate, sometimes I'm very focused on the diaphragm area, the belly area, that's my default, that's my home place. And, but then I follow it, and sometimes it shifts and moves. And I kind of follow it as it moves around. But I'm not jumping around. I'm following. And, and sometimes I just get curious about something happening somewhere in the body around breathing. And so then I'll bring my attention to that place because I'm following the curiosity. And sometimes,

yeah, there's just all these it's all shifting and changing. But do they instruction to choose one place and stay on it tends to be useful and instructions, people who are relatively new to meditation, because of the importance of keeping so simple, so simple. And a lot of what we learn in the first years of meditation has to do with was really useful to have a single reference point. And, and then noticing all the ways in which the mind checks out, reacts, wanders off, and you start noticing all the tricks of the mind. And it's that's what you're kind of beginning of meditation, you're often learning. So you don't have to be so good at MIT breath meditation, just have to be good, good enough at it. So it shows you what your mind is doing. Okay, so I think we should stop but I'm happy if you want to come and ask me questions at the end. I'll stay up here for a while. And I hope that you can make your breathing your good friend and you You can be a really good friend for your breathing. The two of you will get along really well for a long time. Thank you