

Mindfulness of Breathing (1 of 7) Introduction to Breathing

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Greetings to all of you. Introducing the theme for this week, which will be mindfulness of breathing. I would like to cover some of the basics of mindfulness meditation over the next few weeks. “Basics” doesn’t necessarily mean introductory or only for people who are new. The basics of mindfulness of breathing are central and they’re important for people to practice for a long time. Sometimes going back to basics is a way of allowing the practice to grow and deepen even for experienced practitioners. This week we’ll spend seven days on different aspects of breathing and different ways of focusing on it, understanding it, and benefiting from it.

Breathing is one of the core practices of all of Buddhism. Some emphasis on breathing is probably the most common form of Buddhist meditation practice. Mindfulness of breathing goes back to the time of the Buddha. The only meditation practice the Buddha referred to that he practiced was *ānāpānasati*, mindfulness of breathing in and breathing out. He sometimes went off on retreat into the forest for a couple of weeks or a month at a time, and he would tell people that what he was practicing there was mindfulness of breathing. One of the most detailed instructions for meditation that survived from that time is a meditation practice called “*ānāpānasati*.” It describes sixteen stages or approaches to mindfulness of breathing.

Breathing sits at the nexus, the crossroads of all the different parts of our lives. Breathing has to do with our emotional lives. As our emotional life changes, so does our breathing. It has to do with how we respond and react to the world around us. When we react, our breathing responds accordingly. If we feel afraid and go into a fight-or-flight mode, the breathing adjusts itself. It changes in order to have the energy and the oxygen needed to do the fight or flight.

If we go into fight-or-flight mode just because we’re anxious in a situation, we can expend a tremendous amount of energy. But also if we recognize how the breathing has changed and gotten tight, maybe with more chest breathing, faster or more shallow breathing, we can relax. Then the fight-or-flight response can relax and disappear and we can be more present in a calm, useful way in situations where we don’t need to do fight-or-flight.

The breathing also interfaces with how we’re thinking and what we’re thinking about. It interfaces with our physiology and the changing nature of what goes on in our bodies. All these are two-way streets. As the world around us changes, our breathing changes. And as we change the breathing – as we relax and open the breathing, our relationship with the world can change. If we’re tense and we learn to relax through our breathing, the tension can relax as well.

You might see that the ways that we’re trapped and caught in very strong rumination and thinking also affect how we breathe. Sometimes we hold our breath if we’re really gripped by certain kinds of thoughts and ideas. But as we relax our body and our breathing, the mental grip around certain thoughts can begin to relax as well.

This crossroads is a fascinating place. Sitting at the crossroads of breathing is a vantage point from which to see many different aspects of our lives come into play. If we want to really study our lives from one vantage point and be able to see the widest range of who we are and what goes on in our relationship with the world, probably nothing is better than just sitting there with breathing and watching the breath. It’s a doorway to understanding so much.

Of course, it is not always easy to focus mindfulness on breathing. It can take a while to learn how to breathe. There is a wonderful story of Gurdjieff, a spiritual teacher at the beginning of the 20th century, who went to

places like Pakistan to study deep in the mountains with the Sufi Islamic mystics. When he showed up to see his teacher, Gurdjieff said, "I'm here to learn how to breathe," at which point the teacher apparently laughed quite a bit. Gurdjieff said that for the next years, the teacher taught him how to breathe."

Most of us know how to breathe, but learning how to have a really relaxed and open breath and feel at home in my breathing is something that I didn't discover until I was about 20. At that time I lived a rural life that was very peaceful and pleasant. For a while, I lived on a farm, with the physical work of farming and being outside a lot. I discovered feelings of breathing in a natural, relaxed, easy way that I couldn't remember ever having had before. That showed me what was possible. When I learned to meditate, that capacity for natural breathing came back. It probably came back more easily because of the experience I had on the farm.

The idea is to discover ease with the breath. In the Buddha's language, the word for "assurance" is the same word as the one for "to breathe easily." We can have an easy breath and breathe easily. We can discover how wonderful it is to rest in and be with an easy breath all through the day. I feel that one of the great benefits of my years of meditation practice is really being in touch with my breathing for much of the day. Part of my attention is almost automatically on what goes on with my breathing.

It is an early warning system for me. How my breathing is and how it changes is an indication of how my mood is changing, my mind, my intentions, what I want, what I'm trying to do, all kinds of things. It is not that I have to always have relaxed breathing. Sometimes when I'm doing physical work, the breathing goes all kinds of ways. Last week I went backpacking. Walking up some of those steep hills in the Sierras, I would not say my breathing was relaxed. But I really enjoyed the heavy breathing and the heavy work of climbing.

So don't feel like you always have to have a relaxed breath, but have the capacity to come back to that as the baseline. One of the things that I had to learn about breathing early on was how much I held my belly. I held my belly tight for much of the day. It was only in meditation that I started to realize that. I would try to keep the belly relaxed. I learned very quickly that I shouldn't make it the main project in meditation. I would relax it two or three times in the course of a meditation session. Sometimes it would just tighten up right away. But then over the months, I'd be able to keep periods of a relaxed belly more and more.

That relaxed belly became a fantastic reference point also. Now I can see a lot about what goes on when it tightens up, which I couldn't see when it was always tight. There was no variation and so there was no learning. Having the belly relaxed enough to see the variation allows for much greater learning about what goes on.

Some people will control their breathing. Some people find it hard to focus on the breath – they interfere with it or they breathe too hard when they're focusing on it. For some people, certain kinds of accidents or events happen to them earlier in life that make breathing difficult. So certainly it's possible not to use breathing as the primary focus for meditation. Some of you have maybe already found other things to do.

However, it is valuable to give yourself the chance to try to learn about it. It takes a while, just as it took a while for me to learn to relax the tension in my belly. It takes a while sometimes to learn how to be with the breathing in an effective, relaxed, soft way without controlling it, fixing it, or breathing harder because we're focusing on it. One way to learn that is simply to learn that we are doing that, and that's our tendency. Once we see that tendency, we can maybe find a way to adjust it to breathe in a more relaxed and open way. It takes a while, like learning to ride a bicycle.

I've learned two useful ways to work with that. When I was controlling my breathing, I would go to the back rib cage and focus on the subtle movements of breath in the back rib cage and the spine because that was a place that was removed from the front. The control was more in the front of the diaphragm and the chest. By focusing on the back I pulled myself out of the area of control and it was easier to relax the breathing. When I was more relaxed and present, like I was sneaking in through the back door, I would sneak into the front and be with the breathing in the front.

The other thing that I learned that's very effective is not to be concerned about controlled breathing or the difficulty of breathing. The idea is to be very content that what we're trying to do here fundamentally is just to be mindful of breathing, just to be aware of breathing as it is. If it is controlled breathing, then we become the world

experts on what it's like to have controlled breathing. That kind of attitude – that even controlled or uncomfortable breathing is worthy of attention and we can be relaxed about having it – supports things beginning to relax and soften on their own. So we don't have to be the one who fixes the breathing.

Breathing will be the focus this week. Each day I'll talk about some different aspect of mindfulness of breathing and how it interacts with all the different parts of our being and our relationship to the world. I hope this lays down a nice foundation for you and enhances your meditation practice and how you live your life as well. So I hope that you all stay safe. I hope those of you in California can stay out of the smoke as best you can, and that all of you are well protected from COVID-19, illnesses, and all kinds of challenges. I hope you take good care of yourself and that you'll take mindfulness of breathing as part of self-care. Thank you.