

# Mindfulness of Breathing (5 of 7) Intimacy with Breathing

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Breathing is an amazing process. It might also sound amazing that I didn't really learn to breathe until I was 21. I was living on a small farm, doing farm work and being outdoors quite a bit every day. It was a fairly remote place so I didn't see a lot of people. There wasn't a lot of activity. There were no TVs and certainly no computers and internet. It was just a very settled and peaceful quiet life of hard work.

To my surprise, at some point, I noticed myself breathing in a way that had greater ease, peacefulness, relaxation, and naturalness than I could ever remember having in my life. Probably I breathed like this when I was small occasionally, but I didn't know enough to pay attention to it. I felt, "Oh this is what breathing can be." I felt that somehow I had learned to breathe in a healthy way.

The capacity for easeful, relaxed breath comes and goes. But I love to sit down to meditate and discover what my breathing is like here and now. The breath has so many different flavors and textures. It's similar to the way no two snowflakes are supposed to be the same, and no two days have exactly the same weather. I love how, at least in this environment, the colors of the vegetation change. The greenery is never the same. There's fresh spring green, and the settled green of the summer, and then things get drier and drier and maybe turn colors. So every day there's a change.

In the same way, every breath is different. Every day the breathing is different. Sitting down to be with breathing is a process of discovery: "Oh that's how it is today." Inevitably, what I find is that if I can just leave myself alone and allow the settling to happen, the breathing begins to relax, settle, and become freer and more at ease than it was when I first sat down if I've had a busy day.

One of the functions of mindfulness of breathing is to get out of our own way. This means being less busy, and less actively involved with projects, doing, fantasies, memories, discursive thoughts, and conversations in our head that are often closely connected to our emotions, desires, and drives.

The physical body gets activated and aroused in different ways. One way it gets aroused is with tension and holding patterns. So sitting down to meditate with the breath is a way of stepping away from discursive thinking, where the mind always needs to be actively doing and trying to figure something out or accomplish something – and letting things settle. Settling the mind allows the body to settle because the body is not being activated by the activated mind.

As I said before, one of the functions of mindfulness of breathing is to interrupt the continuity of the discursive mind. Sometimes the discursive mind is entertaining, wonderful, and valuable, and I don't want to diminish its important role. It does have an important role, but many of us would discover that a high percentage of the discursive mind and thinking is not particularly useful or helpful. Occasionally we might even recognize that what's going on in there is nonsense and not really useful.

So we can learn the ability to stop doing that – to interrupt that flow of discursive thought simply by taking a moment to land in the physical experience of breathing. It's as if we take our attention and move it from one place where the attention has been hijacked by discursive thought, and choosing to place it someplace that is a safer, more useful alternative.

The interruption of discursive thinking begins to lessen the pull of discursive thinking. We won't feel that each time we let go of our thoughts but if we do it repeatedly, slowly the pull of and fascination with discursive thought begins to lessen. It becomes easier to stay present.

As we begin to be able to stay more and more with the breathing in a relaxed, simple way, dedicated to and trusting the experience of breathing, at some point, we can learn that this is also a way of leaving ourselves alone. We're not trying to accomplish something or get somewhere with mindfulness of breathing. It's not another kind of accomplishment or goal.

We are just hanging out there as we would hang out at the riverbank in a relaxed way watching the river go by. All our cares and concerns begin to fall away. We're not trying to do anything on the riverbank. We're just there watching the river. Many things settle, get quiet, and disappear. This is what I call "leaving ourselves alone." Let the continuity of mindfulness of breathing develop like you're just watching the river go by, with that kind of peacefulness and lack of project-making. The project mind is not involved.

An important part of mindfulness of breathing is learning how to relax. Mindfulness of breathing is not tensing, resisting something, or asserting something. A lot of it is learning the art of relaxing *into* attention, relaxing *into* awareness, relaxing *into* mindfulness of breathing. We can talk about relaxing *into* awareness because awareness is a natural capacity of the mind that's always there when we are conscious and awake. We don't have to work at it.

Some of awareness is just a matter of letting go of what obscures it: discursive thoughts, a lot of concerns, projects, doing, and judgments. Just keep opening to the natural capacity of awareness.

One of the wonderful things about mindfulness of breathing is that it also begins teaching us. It's a mirror for understanding ourselves. It teaches us how involved we are in discursive thoughts or caught up in concerns, or that we are not relaxed. It shows us when we're trying too hard or not trying enough, as we come back into the regularity of breathing.

Many of you have heard the story I like to tell. Up in the Santa Cruz Mountains, we're close to where the fires are now. The story is that many years ago, I was sitting next to a stream of water. I couldn't tell whether the water was flowing. It seemed completely still. It was very shallow water. I put a little stick vertically into the water and then I could see that a little wave formed on the edge of the stick. It showed me that in fact, there was a current, but it was very slow. I needed the reference point of the stationary stick in the water to see that there was a current.

In the same way, mindfulness of breathing is like putting a little stick into the currents of our life and the currents of our mind. Then we can start to see more clearly how busy the mind is. We can see when the mind might be out of control. We can see how strong the pull is into our thinking and our concerns or our emotions. Those things aren't wrong, but we can see them more clearly because we have the reference point of breathing.

The fact that it might be hard to stay with the breathing is also a lesson. Breathing is a mirror for whatever is going on with the mind that makes it hard. In this way, I like to think that mindfulness of breathing works when it doesn't work. So you can't do it wrong. It works in one way if you can actually stay with it for some time, hang out with it, and have some continuity.

But when you can't have continuity with the breathing, you can use the breathing as a mirror to see better why you can't do it – not analyzing it but just noticing, "Oh the mind is very discursive, having all kinds of conversations. There are a lot of strong emotions swirling around that I keep getting involved in and picking up." Then you see, "Oh *that's* what's happening instead. I can see it more clearly now than I could before." Because you can't stay with the breathing but you can see more clearly what's happening for you, mindfulness of breathing has worked. It helps us to be mindful of how we are. So I like to think that in that way, mindfulness of breathing works even when it doesn't work.

Also, as we begin to relax into it, there is a movement towards freedom in mindfulness of breathing. The more we can stay with the breathing, the more the mind begins to let go and relax and soften. That movement of relaxing, letting go, and softening is a movement toward what in Buddhism is called liberation.

Sometimes this can be felt with the exhale – letting go and releasing with the exhale. In relaxing and trusting the exhale, at some point, we can get a little taste of the freedom of letting go. This can be felt in parts of the exhale – “Oh okay, letting go.” This is kind of like when people say, “Ahhh.” It's a very nice thing. They do that on the exhale. A kind of gentle, soft letting go can happen there.

I'll talk more about breathing, letting go, and freedom tomorrow morning. Thank you for being part of this. I hope that this supports you and gives you a greater appreciation for your breathing, even if breathing is difficult for you. Often we have challenges with breathing. I'm hoping that you might find a little kernel of what I'm saying useful and supportive. I look forward to seeing you all next time.