

Mindfulness of Breathing (32) Simplicity with Breathing

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It's wonderful that simplicity is one of the hallmarks – one of the characteristics – of meditation practice. Sometimes that is not quite seen because teachers like me might give all kinds of instructions. It might seem like there are a lot of instructions to keep in mind.

Munindra-ji, a teacher I knew when I was in India, was a teacher of many of the early Western practitioners of *vipassanā*. He had many wonderful sayings, one of which was:

If it's not simple, it's not vipassanā.

So the idea is to keep it simple.

How is this practice simple? It is simple because it relies on how we can be aware of something in the simplest possible way. What it means to be aware is different for each of us, and at different times. It's fascinating to see how what we call attention or awareness shifts and changes depending on how settled and focused we are, and on the kind of attention that is useful in any given moment.

The guideline is to always keep our practice simple. That means not striving for it to be different or trying to engineer your meditation to get it just right. It means not trying to avoid experience or to get away from something. It means not trying to overthink the experience, to think our way into something, or figure it out analytically like, "What is the right way?"

It's also not trying to do too much at once. The idea is to be content with just being. Now just being is not the endgame of meditation. It is a reference point for keeping it simple. Rather than a lot of doing, there's a lot of being. And in that being – in the simplicity – to allow whatever the native awareness is allows us to know that we're in the present moment – to be there, so it can surface, and show itself.

Because the mind drifts off and is caught up in thought, many people – although not necessarily everyone – find simplicity of breathing useful. Breathing is like an anchor line, a tether, or support for staying in the present moment. Breathing is always in the present moment. It has a rhythm. It is not a fixed experience. Breathing is a flowing, moving, changing experience.

There's something about our attention following a moving, changing phenomenon that makes it easier to be relaxed in the present moment. It's like we're sitting under a tree, relaxing in the shade on a warm day, and watching the river go by. We watch the ripples, the little wavelets, and the currents just flow. We're not studying it intensely. We're just allowing the experience to come to us – we see it clearly.

There's something about that movement where the mind doesn't fixate on anything. The mind just allows things to flow. It keeps the eyes soft, relaxed and moving along with the flow. That's partly why it can be relaxing for people to spend long periods of time watching a river go by, watching the waves on the beach come and go, or watching a fire burn, watching the changing patterns of the flames.

It is the movement of breathing – the coming and going of the inhale and the exhale – that can work for some people in a very nice way, keeping them in the present moment. For many of you – especially if you're beginning – you get more complicated than you need to be. Part of simplicity is to relax around making things complicated. Don't hold up simplicity as something to strive for or engineer. Rather, take yourself as you are.

In a certain way, meditation is a “come as you are” party. Come as you are. Sit down and allow yourself to be how you are. Settle into that allowing. The art of this is to not let yourself be as you are when your thoughts continue to gallop away. Rather, allow yourself to be as you are, and then really settle into the direct experience – the embodied, living experience of how you are.

We turn the attention inward to the body. What is the embodied experience of all this? What is the embodied experience of our mood – or our emotional, mental, or physical state? The simplicity of being has a lot to do with what our experience is here and now in the present moment. The body is always in the present moment. The breathing is also always in the present moment – coming here and settling into it. And then, as we settle into it, at some point we become attuned to or align ourselves with the experience of breathing. Be with that simply.

Sometimes we’re controlling the breath. The breath may feel tight and constricted or held in some way that’s not particularly comfortable. The experience of simplicity is to allow that to be. Breathe with that. Breathe through it. Make room for it to be uncomfortable or controlled. Making room – giving breathing room – is part of keeping things simple. By allowing for something inside that is not yourself, your engineering efforts, your mechanisms of trying to fix and change – something inside will begin to unfold, unwind, release, and find itself.

The principle of simplicity is to trust just being with experience. Trust your experience if you’re present for it, even if it’s not necessarily ideal or comfortable. Then something within will begin to open, unravel, and relax on its own. There is a very strong momentum in the body – in our whole being – toward the release of tension, holding, pushing, and pressure.

In fact, part of giving breathing room to ourselves and allowing things to be is this movement towards allowing for settling and releasing. Freeing can happen when we keep showing up and being present.

Maybe what I’ve said here is too complicated. If so, I apologize. But it’s all pointing to being simple. Breathing can help you with that simplicity. Just be with the breathing. Trust the breathing.

I like the expression “entrust yourself with breathing.” It may not look sophisticated or wonderfully spiritual – but keep it simple. In that simplicity of being with experience, being with the simplicity of it – feeling the embodied experience of breathing – something will begin to settle. Something will begin to open. Something will happen, which is the journey of meditation practice.

Thank you all very much for today. May you have a wonderful day. May the simplicity of meditation support you in giving the gift of simplicity to those people you encounter today. Thank you.