

Mindfulness of Breathing (73) Practice with Confidence

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My friends, we come to the end of this series of talks on mindfulness of breathing, which rely on the classic teachings on this practice given by the Buddha a long time ago. The heart of these teachings is the sixteen steps of mindfulness of breathing. But the Buddha's instructions go beyond the sixteen steps to describe the process by which mindfulness of breathing leads to full awakening. A Zen teacher with whom I practiced with in Japan said that all of Buddhism can be revealed through mindfulness of breathing.

In the best records we have of the meditation practice that the Buddha himself did, he explained that he practiced mindfulness of breathing. As a fully awakened being, he would sometimes go off into the forest on retreat for two to four weeks at a time. Before he went or after he came back, he would explain that he was practicing mindfulness of breathing. So, it is not only a practice to bring us to awakening or enlightenment. It is also a practice to do after enlightenment.

Enlightenment is certainly important, but maybe that is not really the point. The point is to continue practicing. Before awakening, practice. After awakening, practice. Have confidence. There are some schools of Buddhism where they say that enlightenment or awakening – whatever it might be in that school – is a confirmation of the practice. Now we really know, “*This* is what the practice is. The practice is good. It works.” There is clear confidence in the practice itself.

Certainly, Buddhist practice can be more than mindfulness of breathing. But have confidence in the practice you do. That is one of the signs of maturing and developing this meditation practice – rather than measuring success by states of meditation, concentration, calm, or insight – whatever it might be. I do not want to dismiss the value of those states, but it is more important to have unshakable confidence that this practice is worth doing. Really trust it.

One of the great gifts that mindfulness practice has given me is that I have real trust in just being mindful – in the practice of mindfulness – in showing up and being aware of what is happening now. There are certainly plenty of times when I run into difficult situations where I do not quite know how to find my way and understand what is happening. But even in those situations, I trust in being mindful.

There is a sense of direction, purpose, grounding – an orientation – and a sense of safety. I do not get swept up in the drama of the moment or the concerns and anxieties of the situation because I have a deep trust that things will work out when there is strong mindfulness. Just come back to it and practice.

Now that does not mean *only* being mindful, but sooner or later mindfulness reveals the way forward. I do not seem to go wrong by pausing, stopping to look and be present, and seeing what is really going on here – seeing what is happening in me and happening outside. I do not go wrong by coming back and just breathing.

Some of you have done yoga in which the common observation or instruction from the teacher is: “You know, you are holding your breath. Do not hold your breath.” Somehow, straining to do a posture, some people will hold their breath. Yoga teachers like you to keep a relaxed, loose breath, which is really good advice for all of life.

One of the possibilities of practicing mindfulness of breathing is that it becomes second nature to be aware of your breathing – of how you are breathing, and where the breathing may be constricted or held. Coming back to

a relaxed, fluid, easeful breath makes a huge difference because it reorients or resets the psychology – the emotionality – of the mind itself.

When the breathing is relaxed, it is harder to cling, grasp, or contract around things. It is a little bit of protection. I think of it as a lubricant of the mind and heart. It keeps the mind fluid, moving, and not rusted.

There is a wonderful rhythm of breathing in and out. This rhythm is protection against getting caught up and fixated on our preoccupations, concerns, or fears. If we are not fixated, we often get a more realistic understanding – a bigger, better view of what is going on – than if we get caught up in the midst of our preoccupations.

So I think mindfulness of breathing is always useful. Some people do not find it to be their favorite or most effective practice, and there are other wonderful practices to do. But for these weeks that we have been doing mindfulness of breathing, I want to emphasize that it is a wonderful practice for many, many people. As we sink into it, develop it, and grow in it, eventually one of the primary qualities is real confidence in practice. We just do it day in and day out.

In my reading of the classic instruction of the sixteen steps, I believe that most of the steps have the expression: “I will breathe in; I will train. Training, I will breathe out.” Amid everything – whatever is going on in the sixteen steps – “I train to breathe in. I train to breathe out.”

There is intentionality, dedication, and – I’d like to say – love of just breathing in the middle of our experience, no matter what. Nothing is worth getting so caught up in that we cannot just stay floating on the river of breathing – or stay with the lubrication, ease, and relaxation that mindfulness of breathing can provide. It makes life so much easier.

In Buddhist terminology, it helps us to have a life that is freer, more liberated, easeful, open – available for wisdom, to see more clearly what is here. We have an amazing capacity for wisdom, insight, and seeing, which can come in the wake of a relaxed, open, settled experience with breathing – breathing in and breathing out.

This is our seventy-third session on mindfulness of breathing. We have done mindfulness of breathing since the beginning of the year. It has been quite a journey. I hope it has been meaningful and supportive for you. I hope it has opened up or pointed out some of the value and richness that can come with mindfulness of breathing.

Some of the sixteen steps or the topics of the steps are relevant for other forms of meditation practice as well. I hope it has given you new perspectives on yourself and maybe even pointed to dimensions of your inner life that you had not really thought about, focused on, or seen before.

Thank you for the opportunity to share this series about mindfulness of breathing for all these months. It is my primary practice for meditation and in daily life. I have been doing mindfulness of breathing for decades – since I was twenty years old. To this day, I still find it to be a fantastic, wonderful practice. It is not the only practice I do. Because mindfulness includes everything – part of the beauty of mindfulness is that it is all-inclusive. But when breathing is at the center of it all, it is a wonderful center.

Thank you. We will do a topic next week that will feel a bit like a follow-up to this whole series.