

Breathing (2 of 5) Clear Recognition of Breathing

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sensing, feeling, recognizing, cognitive functioning, observing, concentrated, noting, mental note

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I was introduced to meditation on breathing almost 50 years ago. If someone had told me when I was a teenager that I would still be practicing mindfulness of breathing 50 years later, I would not have welcomed that idea.

In these 50 years, I have spent a lot of time tuning into my breathing. These years of meditation have been a wonderful thing. It feels like it keeps deepening and opening. I have a great appreciation for meditation, for being present, and for attention. I appreciate doing it through this vehicle of breathing.

I spend a lot of time paying attention to my breath. Paying attention to my breathing is with me most of the time. When I am doing things – talking, reading, being at the computer – it is almost second nature to also be with my breath. It seems like my breathing accompanies me with everything. It doesn't interfere with my ability to do whatever I am doing. It supports and guides me.

Being with my breath helps me recognize quickly enough and sometimes even right away when I get tense, tight, or concerned. I notice when I am pushing and trying too hard. This all gets translated into how my breathing operates and when I lose an easeful, relaxed breath.

It is sometimes completely appropriate to have the breathing change. If I go for a run, hike up a hill, or have some fun playing with friends, my breathing changes. It feels qualitatively wonderful if the change is for a good purpose.

Sometimes when I am trying too hard, feeling tense, or trying to figure out my computer, I feel my whole chest tighten up. It affects my breathing. It feels held.

Being aware of the breath guides and supports me to have a more easeful, peaceful life as I go through the day. I love my breathing. The intimacy with it is almost like an intimacy with life. It keeps me intimate and connected in a wonderful way.

The theme for today is recognizing. Yesterday's theme was relaxing. Sometimes we can relax too much and kind of collapse.

One of the great purposes of meditation is for people to relax deeply. Meditation can be a place of releasing the holding of tension. This, however, is not the only purpose. Relaxation can be overemphasized so that we might slump, collapse, or get kind of dull.

Some of the sharpness of meditation comes from the recognition factor. This is the heart of how mindfulness is usually taught. There is a recognizing quality to it.

Different teachers will emphasize different aspects of mindfulness of recognition. Many people in the West tend to be thinkers. There can be a lot of thinking, getting lost in thoughts, or being up in the control tower. Because of this tendency, some teachers like to emphasize the language of feeling and sensing. Feel your breathing. Sense your breathing. Place the attention in the middle of the physicality of breathing. Simply sense and feel it.

Three major forms of recognition come into play with mindfulness practice. At different times, different forms will be more relevant. Knowing these three forms can be very helpful because sometimes we are trying one form

when another is more appropriate and easeful for the whole system. Sometimes one form of recognition will be more helpful in working through difficulties than another. Knowing these three forms of recognition can be very useful.

One form of recognition is this emphasis on feeling and sensing the direct physical experience of breathing. This is one of the means for getting concentrated. We find a place where the breathing can be felt in the body, where there is a sensation. We closely ride the sensation. We might imagine ourselves sitting in the middle of the sensation. We are carried by it, focused on it, or just closely attuned so the mind doesn't wander off too easily. The sensing becomes the grounding, stabilizing, and steadying force so the mind can get quiet, focused, stable, and concentrated.

Some people will feel the sensations of breathing at the nostrils. Their awareness can become very precise, acute, and sensitive. It is amazing how acute the sensations can get. It is very compelling and pleasant.

Sometimes the feeling is in the chest. There is a little movement or it might be the whole chest moving. We might get concentrated on a little round spot around the solar plexus or higher up somewhere in the midline. We are right there feeling it.

If the sensations of breathing are felt in the belly, the classic place is called the *hara*. This is about two inches below the navel, and maybe one inch into the body. The attention is right there feeling the sensations. We are feeling the movements – the sensation of movements, the flow back and forth. This can be very effective for getting us out of our heads.

Another aspect of the recognition factor might be more helpful for other people or at other times. This is the heart of the recognition factor. We *know* what the sensations are. We *know* the experience while it is happening. So we recognize it's an inhale when we're breathing in and we recognize it's an exhale when we're breathing out. The recognition is a bit cognitive.

We might use mental notes. The recognition could be with a single word. Or it's almost as if there is a mental note. This is like imaging we are saying a mental note – “inhaling,” “in,” “out.” Or it might be that there is a movement – an expansion. We recognize that as “expansion.” Expansion is happening; expansion is known. There is “release” as we exhale. We know the release.

There can be a whole slew of sensations that come into play. It may be too fast to name them all, but there is a silent recognition or acknowledgment of what these sensations are. So, after an inhale, you might in a sense remember – because we were present for it and recognized it well enough – that there was a subtle release as the inhale began. Then perhaps there was a gentle push in a part of the chest. And then an expansion, a spreading. And then at the top of the inhale, there was a tightness, perhaps like a resistance to breathing in. Then there might be a pause and a release as the exhale begins.

If the recognition is done with too much effort, like we are doing a checklist approach, it just makes the mind busy. It uses a coarser, more active part of the mind. The idea is to be very simple, natural, and easy.

A wonderful expression is “the cognitive functioning of emptiness.” The mind, left to its own, is very relaxed and present – it *will* know. Knowing just happens on its own. It is not so much a willful effort. Initially, there might be a bit of effort to know, but it is not so willful. It is just a way of helping us to stay present. It is a tether or an anchor to the present. It is a way to have a little more clarity about what is going on.

As meditation deepens, the clarity becomes stronger. There is less of a filter or cloudiness that happens when we are distracted or caught up in our thoughts and feelings. There is more and more ease in just recognizing.

Some people will go through this pattern of starting with feeling the breathing. Then as things settle down, get quiet, and concentrated, it feels natural to brighten things up – to sharpen the clarity of the mind by having a gentle, soft recognition. This is a cognitive knowing of what is happening here. It turns out that this cognitive knowing allows a deepening to occur in meditation. There is something very deepening about this cognitive knowing. It is just a very simple, natural cognitive functioning of emptiness.

Then at some point, that cognitive functioning might seem like it is too much. At some point, it shifts to just observing – a very simple observing of experience. This doesn't have the same kind of direct contact and

intimacy as feeling. It doesn't necessarily have the same kind of clarity as cognitive knowing, but observing can be very spacious.

Observing is meant to be one of the deeper places we come to. We settle back. We are not entangled, identified, or involved in trying to fix anything that is going on. We are just here, peacefully watching. It is almost like we get out of our own way when there is observation. There is observing but no observer.

Those are three of the main forms of mindfulness. At different times, different ones are useful. I talked about them as being a deepening process. Sometimes when the mind is very active, some people find it is better to just settle back and observe rather than feel. Sometimes the intimacy of feeling hooks us into being caught and more engaged.

Sometimes cognitive knowing can be so beautiful. It is like in the cognitive knowing freedom is found. It is almost like you say to yourself: "Oh, it is just an inhale. It is just a tight breath. It is just a controlled breath." There is the recognition, "Oh that is all it is. Let it be."

This is the recognition factor. We begin with some relaxation so we are not tense in doing all this. Then we practice recognition in three forms. You can experiment. There is feeling and sensing. There is cognitive knowing, and then there is just observing – simple observation.

For people who are beginners, I recommend practicing with just the feeling and sensing. Stay with the sensations the best you can. Then as it shifts, you will know these other forms as well.

So thank you. I look forward to continuing this topic of breathing tomorrow.