

Breathing (3 of 5) Respect for Breathing

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This week I'm teaching the five R's: relax, recognize, respect, restore, and release. Today I will talk about respect.

To meditate with mindfulness of breathing – to respect it, to offer respect to our experience. I like the word "respect" because, in Latin, it means to look again. To respect something is to give it a second look. To really see what it is in and of itself – to observe it, to see it.

Offering our respect has a similar effect as allowing something to be or accepting things to be there, but it has more body. Accepting or allowing things to be is sometimes quite profound. It's like we're absent in the picture, which has its advantages at times. To see with respect, to be present with respect, we are offering a kind of dignity and value. To come from a place of respect is to come from a place of inner strength and presence. It is quite beautiful to give the gift of respect to something.

So, with the breathing – to watch it, to see it, and respect it enough to allow the breathing to breathe itself. It's quite something when we can get out of the way of the breathing and be present for it – give it breathing room, in a sense, to do its own thing.

We learn so much from the breathing. We learn about the big and the subtle ways in which we are contracted, anxious, agitated, afraid, depressed, or sad. All those ways of being can affect our breathing.

As the breathing is allowed to be itself, it begins to move through all these feelings, emotions, and attitudes that affect breathing and kind of massages them. When we watch the breathing and leave it alone, that is an indirect way of respecting and leaving alone our inner psychology.

The massage of breathing is not just a mechanical, physical thing. It's intimately connected to our deeper psychological life. If we can allow the breathing some freedom to move and relax, to settle and open – just by watching it and giving it lots of time to do that – then it massages our psychology. It also helps those things come to equilibrium or unfold in the way that's appropriate for them. The gift of accompanying – of watching or seeing, respecting – is a profound thing.

Some years ago, I met a woman who had done research in human psychology, and in particular, the relationship between mothers and their young children. For two or three years, she visited the homes of mothers who were raising young children. At the start of the research, the children were babies. I don't know if the mothers were single, but they were always home alone.

The researcher wouldn't talk to the mothers. She watched as the mothers interacted with their children. She would take notes of what she observed. After three years, it was time to stop. Then the researcher spoke to the mothers and explained she was leaving. There was one mother who was deeply moved. She said that having the researcher come to her house and watch her be with her child was the highlight of her week.

Simply being watched and treated as someone important and valuable enough to pay attention to is a great gift. It's like food for people. And so it can be for ourselves.

I had a similar experience with my young child. I don't think he was speaking yet. I was sitting on the floor with him, and he was absorbed in playing with blocks. He was humming to himself, clearly happy and delighted. I was there just watching him.

After a while, I got a little bored. He didn't need me anymore. He was absorbed in his blocks. He hardly knew I was there, so I started to get up. As soon as I did that, he stopped humming. I realized what had happened. He clearly knew I was there. My accompanying and watching and seeing was a huge part of his happiness, his

safety, his feeling that everything was okay in the world. Even though I wasn't doing anything, I had an important role – just being present and watching.

We can do that same thing for ourselves through the medium of our breathing. Breathing is not just a mechanical thing. It's the intersection, the meeting place for many different parts of our emotional, psychological, intentional, social, personal, and physiological life that we have. To be able to settle in and feel the breathing, see it, respect it, get out of its way, and allow the breathing to slowly find its own way is a profound thing to do for our whole being.

If my breathing is constricted – I'm living an active life doing a lot of things – a little tension sometimes builds up in the upper part of my chest. When I sit down to meditate, I feel that constriction when I inhale, and I can't inhale all the way. What I've learned to do is not be bothered by it. I offer gentle, caring attention to just observe it. Every time I inhale, I make sure that I'm right there to feel and sense and observe the place of constriction as if there's no problem. It's allowed to be there, and I'm not trying to fix it. I patiently offer my attention to that place. At some point, something begins to release and let go.

Oftentimes the remarkable thing is I don't see it letting go and relaxing. It's either too slow or maybe it happens on the exhale and I didn't notice. This, for me, is allowing the breathing to breathe itself. I'm calling this respect – to watch the breathing, to be present for it, to observe it – without interfering, without judgment, without condemnation.

To do it with respect means that we do it as if it's important and valuable. When we practice just allowing things to be or accepting things as they are, they can come without any kind of inner feeling that this is important and valuable. I like to consider that when we learn to meditate, we're learning to value everything. Nothing is not valuable. Even the smallest little detail is valuable. One of the things I learned from my Zen practice was called "attention to detail." You respect every detail, no matter how small.

I'll end with a story that inspired me. In the 1970s, there was an informal gathering of Zen masters in the United States. I think there were roughly six of them at the gathering. They were mostly meeting among themselves. One evening, they had a panel, where the Zen students could see them and ask questions. It was a unique event.

They were sitting behind a table, and someone brought them tea. What stood out to me was that all but one of them didn't react to the fact that someone brought tea and put it in front of them. They just accepted it as normal. There was no hostility. It was simply a neutral thing. But I remember one of them took the time to turn to the person who brought tea and bowed to express their thanks. I was struck by that one Zen master who took the time for this person who was incidental, in a sense, to the meeting. That inspired me.

So attention to detail; everything is important. To respect the in-breath, the out-breath, and the pause. To respect the beginning of the inhale, the middle of it, and the end of it. To be present to observe the beginning of the exhale, the middle of it, and the end of it. All these details are important.

As we enter into this world of observing the breathing, it becomes less like looking up at the sky and watching the clouds go by and more like looking through the most relaxing microscope you could imagine, where you're zeroing in on only the details. Doing so with respect, with care, with allowing things to be as they are, the gift that everything can be as it is – this is one of the profound things to learn through meditation practice.