

Breathing (5 of 5) Release is Peace

October 15, 2021

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

mindfulness, letting go

Gil Fronsdal

In this fifth talk on mindfulness of breathing, the topic is release.

There is a saying in Buddhist English, maybe because it rhymes, that “release is peace.” There is something about the proper or appropriate way of letting go that leads to peace. It leads to an availability, when our attention is hijacked by our preoccupations. To let go properly, we’re letting go of the things that preoccupy our attention, our awareness. So awareness becomes more available.

As awareness becomes more available, we are available to what is happening. Some of those things are our challenges. There is something very special about being available to see what is happening – perceive it, know it – as opposed to *not* being available, which implies or leads to feeling that the situation is a problem or we have to fix it, or feeling oppressed by it. Just available – “Oh, this is difficult.” It also helps us to be available for love, to care, to have goodwill, to be friendly.

This idea of letting go gives us all these wonderful gifts. The gift of being available to the world. It’s such a wonderful feeling to be present and available for what’s happening, rather than asserting ourselves onto the world and seeing the world through our wants, fears, and aversions. It also lends itself to perceiving this world as a gift that happens, rather than as a right or a should.

So how does this relate to mindfulness of breathing? As we settle down in meditation and settle into the breathing or some other primary focus that is appropriate for us – breathing works for many people – more and more of our attention is able to stay with the breathing. We let go of our preoccupations and thoughts if they’re easy enough to let go of. We let go and come back to the breathing.

We let go *into* the breathing. We let go and receive the experience of breathing, and we root ourselves in the breathing. The more that our attention is available for breathing, the more the sense of availability, the feeling of being available, comes. The less we are caught up in the world of thoughts, ideas, experiences, memories, and projections into the future that tend to be agitating, the attention becomes more available for the breathing.

As our attention becomes more available for the breathing, the reciprocal aspect is that we’re less caught up. There is also a natural letting go or letting things fall away – we’re no longer being involved with them. So sometimes we let go of thoughts, and sometimes we just hold the course with the breathing, staying with the breath, and less energy is then given to the preoccupations.

As more attention goes to the breathing, the more our awareness gets gathered – it gets available; it’s present. Awareness is not caught up in things that are not so healthy for us.

Now the opposite: the difficulties. The benefit of breathing in meditation isn’t just that we can do it, but the sense of availability also means we’re available to what makes it difficult to be with the breathing. There are powerful forces in us that keep us distracted, caught up in thoughts, swirling in our emotional life. They should be deeply respected. They should not be dismissed or feel like they’re unwanted.

Let go of what’s easy enough to let go of, and stay focused on the breath in a way that’s relatively easy to stay focused. Then be available to see more clearly what’s going on. One of the values of meditation on breathing is how the effort to be with the breath highlights what’s really happening for us.

Some people are so distracted by their distractions, they don’t know they’re distracted. But if we have this reference point of attempting to be with the breath – even if we are not able to do it much – just the effort to do it is beneficial if it shows us more clearly the preoccupations that keep us away from the breathing. We are available for that: “Oh, this too should be cared for and loved in a certain kind of way.”

In the next weeks, I'll talk about mindfulness of the body, mindfulness of emotions, and mindfulness of thinking. That is how we practice with the things that are revealed as we attempt to do mindfulness of breathing, but these other things then get highlighted.

Sometimes it's completely appropriate to *not* stay with the breath. To fight against everything else and stay with the breath is counterproductive. The art of learning to let go of breathing sometimes in order to attend to these other things is part of what I'll be teaching over the next few weeks.

For now, the topic is release with breathing. If you're able to really settle in and gather yourself on the breathing, there's a natural process of things being let go of. Our concerns of the day, our memories, and our resentments are kind of forgotten for the time being.

One of the values of meditation – simply coming back to the breath over and over again – is that it is a kind of cleansing and emptying of the preoccupations of the day, the momentum of the mind that goes on. There's kind of a release that happens.

Sometimes it is appropriate to support that release with a little bit of active effort at letting go. For me, the exhale is a wonderful place to let go of my thoughts. For other people, it might be the inhale.

It's amazing still to this day how thoughts sneak in quietly through the back door of the mind. Sometimes I don't really notice that I've started to think again. But every time I begin exhaling, it's a time to notice, "Am I thinking?" And if it's easy enough to let go of the thinking, to let go into the breathing, to let go into receiving the experience of the breath. If I can let go on the exhale, then I'm more available and present to receive the gift of the inhale – the arising, the appearing of the inhalation as it occurs. This rhythm of letting go with the exhale and receiving on the inhale is a wonderful way of supporting this process of release.

However, the way that I'm talking about letting go on the exhale puts a lot of agency on the meditator. It can seem that this is what a meditator is supposed to do. This view can keep us agitated and preoccupied. Instead, we want to try to do this with a very light touch, without expectation – without the need for anything really to happen, without using it to judge ourselves or to be in a hurry. It's as if we have all the time in the world.

Sometimes if there's too much selfing and efforting going on, it can be easier just to simply, very simplistically, stay with the breath the best you can. Hang in there. Gather yourself on the breathing. Don't worry so much about letting go. The letting go will happen by itself the more you get gathered around the experience of breathing.

Then, as we keep practicing, a time will come when it will feel obvious that the right thing to do is to let go. It's such a healthy thing to let go of what is unhealthy, what is not helpful, and what diminishes us or brings on more agitation. The quieter the mind becomes, the more peaceful we are. The more we can see: "Oh, here I am getting involved in that thought again. I've done that a thousand times. I don't need to do it again. I can let go."

And then we let go back into the breathing. Coming back, just breathing in and breathing out.

The deeper we go in meditation, the more that experience can be characterized as a release. This release may be very gradual over time or very clear, like a big shift that happens. Suddenly there's a quantum shift – BOOM – and now we're here in a fuller way or embodied in a fuller way.

Release is peace. Release helps us become available for our experience in our life and the people in our life. That availability makes us available to know suffering more intimately and clearly. This is not for us to suffer more, but to care more – to meet our suffering in a new way, maybe with love. There's something about our availability for the challenging aspects of our life – the suffering – that can give rise to real love, compassion, care, and goodwill.

Love supports letting go. Letting go is to be available – to be available to feel the fullness of this life, all the aspects more fully, and then perhaps to love some more. And so we go around and around.

I hope that you will trust mindfulness of breathing. Give yourself over to it. If you continue meditating through the weekend, really trust it and be intimate with it. See if some of what I'm talking about, you can feel or sense in the very simplicity of mindfulness of breathing.

On Monday, we'll talk about mindfulness of the body and have a week on that. Thank you all very much.