

Introduction to Mindfulness (4 of 25)

Familiarity with Breathing

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Welcome again to the Introduction to mindfulness meditation. This is the fourth of five talks centering on mindfulness of breathing.

Breathing is an unusual, maybe exceptional, part of our psychophysical existence. In a way, breathing sits at the nexus, at the crossroads of so many different parts of our lives. So much of our cognitive, emotional, and physical worlds come into play as we breathe. So much of what happens in the world around us and in our intentions and feelings about what's happening around us will affect our breathing. The breathing might speed up or get deeper or shallower.

When we're trying to physically exert ourselves we breathe differently than when we're very calm and relaxed, not doing much. When we're afraid we breathe differently than when we feel deeply reassured and safe. If we have fantasies that are frightening or filled with desire, we breathe differently than we do when we imagine ourselves in situations that are very comforting and easeful for us. So our thought world, our physical world, and what happens around us all affect our breathing. When we learn to pay attention to breathing, as we become more sensitive to it and take time to get to know it, we're sitting at the crossroads of much of what's happening in our lives.

We don't necessarily have to understand everything that's happening, but we can begin appreciating how the breathing shifts and changes, and how certain ways of breathing may be more tense or reactive. We can see that there are other ways of breathing that are calmer, more settled, and more soothing. Simply knowing that – experiencing the breathing and making time to feel it introduces a new element into the breath. It introduces a sense of space or time that gives room for breathing to relax and soften.

That is not going to happen if we do not notice the breath, but stay preoccupied with our irritations, frustrations, desires, fears, and spin out with our thoughts. Then there's no room for breathing to begin to relax by itself. But the breathing starts to shift and change if we sit down quietly and learn to relax the thinking mind and the body, and are no longer doing the things that agitate or contract the body and affect the breathing.

Getting to know the shifting, changing nature of breathing, getting a sense of an easeful breath, and being familiar with that are some of the reference points that are so valuable in mindfulness meditation. Easeful breathing is a reference point that helps us see better and more clearly when the breathing is not easeful. We can see when we're tensing up, when the breathing gets tighter, or contracted, or speeds up, or when the force of breathing moves from the relaxed belly breathing up to the chest.

A big part of the practice of mindfulness is developing a heightened sensitivity and familiarity with all the different ways that breathing happens, and all the different ways in which the mind/heart can be caught in thoughts and feelings. As we know breathing in mindfulness practice, we don't necessarily have to fix anything. We allow it and make room to know it. We trust the knowing, and the knowing makes space. The knowing creates a kind of atmosphere that allows the things that are tense to relax.

Any tension that we carry, any force, agitation, or strong energy we carry, is in a sense working against the pull of gravity. It's working against the natural way in which muscles want to relax if they're given a chance. But we keep them tense. We keep them tense through our activity, our thinking, our fears, our emotions, and our

desires. Just knowing, feeling, and making room for everything lets things return to equilibrium, homeostasis – a kind of peace.

So one of the ingredients of equilibrium in mindfulness meditation is giving time to what's happening. We feel the sensations of it, and we let there be a quiet knowing, a recognition, "Oh this is what it is." Both the feeling and the recognition are peaceful, calm, and settled.

When they hear the instructions "to know, to recognize what's happening," some people take that to mean work. They think they have to strain and lean into it and contract to try to do a better job. But the way of mindfulness is the opposite. There is a knowing, a recognition, but the recognition comes from a soft, relaxed place. It is a recognition that is kind of relaxing.

It's as if we're tense but we don't even know it, we're so caught up in our concerns. Then a friend comes over and gently puts their hand on our shoulder and says kindly, "It seems that you're tense today." Only then do you recognize that you're tense. But when someone recognizes that, something inside goes, "Ah," and relaxes. The opposite can happen as well, when someone recognizes, "You seem so happy today." There's something about being recognized that makes something lighten up. "Oh yeah, I am. I wasn't really taking it in, but I am. It's true." There can be a gentle recognition: "Ah, yes, I'm tense. That's the case." As opposed to, "Oh no, I'm tense. What a terrible meditator I am." This is a simple, simple recognition.

As we practice meditation with breathing, it's important to remember the first steps that I've talked about this week. We don't have to stay with the breath and hold on to it without wandering away. We just want to start seeing more clearly what's going on as we meditate. And we want to learn how to relax.

But at some point, as we get more settled, there is almost a natural tendency to be dedicated to staying with and surfing on the breath, lingering with the breath, hanging in there with it. We find we can be aware of more breaths over time. That does a few things. The first is that all the mental energy is no longer being channeled into thinking and preoccupation. Less energy is available for preoccupation because now the mental energy is going into staying with the breath.

The energy that normally goes into preoccupation, which creates more tension and agitation, is no longer creating it. This allows the mind/heart to settle and quiet down. We linger and stay with the breath, but without force, without holding on, and without the idea that we're failing if we can't do it. This is important because it indicates there is something we want to recognize about the mind wandering off or being agitated. There is no failure. It's all just something to know and recognize in a calm way.

At some point we can stay with the breathing, sensing and knowing it, knowing it and sensing it, staying close and intimate with the experience – floating on the breath, arising and passing, rising and settling with each inhale and exhale, and allowing that breath to inform us.

This is something that we can do throughout the day. I'd like to offer you one practice for daily life that can be invaluable. It is very simple to do. It doesn't take much time. The practice is the three-breath journey. Do this in whatever circumstance you're in. You don't have to close your eyes. People don't have to know you're doing this. Just give yourself over to really experience three breaths. Experience how you are and what's happening with you as you breathe. Just stay with those three breaths. Maybe count – "one, two, three," to really give yourself over to just those three breaths as much as you can. Familiarize yourself with the breathing.

You'll probably find that just taking that little three-breath break shifts something inside of you. You can do it throughout the day in small ways, at traffic lights, standing in line, or waiting for something to happen, before answering an email. It might even be a good time to do it when someone calls. Let it ring for a while and take your three breaths. Doing this will help highlight for you how you were, how you are, how breathing is different after three breaths, and that there can be a shift to a different way of being.

Mindfulness of breathing is not only something to do in meditation but something we do in daily life as well. For those of you for whom it seems really hard to stay and linger or surf on breathing because the forces of distraction are quite strong, it might be useful to not try to stay with breathing for a long time. Rather, just do a three-breath journey when you're meditating. And when that journey is over, when you're ready, do it again. Don't be more ambitious about staying with your breath than just that.

I hope in the process of all this you come to have a greater appreciation of the body breathing. Breathing is not just bringing oxygen into your system. It's connected to so much of who we are. That's why some religions see breathing as almost synonymous with life. We will have one more day on mindfulness of breathing, and then we'll go on to mindfulness of the body. Thank you.