Introduction to Mindfulness (5 of 5) Breathing with Ease

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Good morning. This is the fifth talk on mindfulness of breathing. I've spent pretty much my whole adult life — some 50 years now — practicing mindfulness of breathing. It has been a wonderful journey. I've never gotten bored with it. It seems like the practice is always being renewed.

I think that part of the reason for this is that breathing is intimately connected with so many different parts of our lives. How we breathe — with our body, our emotions, and our thoughts — is always changing. It's a process of deepening understanding, and finding ever greater freedom and ease.

The words that I like to associate with breathing are “breathing easily” — having an easy breath and being at ease in breathing. It's not always that way for me. But when ease is there, it seems so wonderful. It's like a homecoming. It's a settling.

For me, when the breathing is easy and relaxed, just breathing itself, the breathing has become free of all the attitudes and other psychological and physical activities that often influence the breathing or change it. Emotions change how we breathe. Attitudes, desires, and motivations also change how we breathe. What's happening around us changes how we breathe. The temperature changes how we breathe.

There are so many things that come into play that influence breathing. Some of those influences have to do with being the agent, the doer, the one who wants something, is trying to avoid something, has to succeed, or has expectations. Or being the one that I can measure with ideas of success or failure. It's important to learn to put those considerations aside and not live in them. Maybe they still operate in the background, but we can live with the breathing in the present moment as a kind of proof that we're alive and present.

At times I feel so grateful to be breathing. Why not see it as a gift? We're offered all this oxygen from the trees and the plants that produce it. And isn't it a gift that we have a way of shedding carbon dioxide so it doesn't build up and poison us?

We can sit here with appreciation and gratitude for being able to do this practice, even when it's challenging. Even when I'm challenged and caught up in trying to do something or measuring myself, I feel so fortunate to have the practice of mindfulness, which I'm confident is a path to freedom and ease of breathing.

The way that I've introduced the topic this week does not emphasize staying one-pointedly on the breath without wandering off. Rather, I offer you a wider context — I encourage you to be mindful of the ecology around thinking — the forces of distraction. We can learn how to fold distractions into breathing in a way that brings us into breathing more simply. Rather than tightening up to override the distracted mind, we can learn to relax the body and the mind.

The more distracted we are, the more tension we probably have in the mind, the body, or the heart. Some part of us is holding on or zeroing in on something and there is tightness or contraction. We can learn how these parts of us work and relax them without overriding how we are. We learn to appreciate that mindfulness is just recognizing how we are at any given moment. We can know that in a very simple way without judging, criticizing, or being for or against. At some point, we can center ourselves on breathing and stay with the breath over time.
“Over time” might mean three breaths. Just three breaths might be enough to interrupt the often nonstop mental stream of thinking, rumination, and preoccupations. When mental streams run wild, they are not so healthy for us. One of the helpful functions of mindfulness of breathing is to interrupt the flow and not allow it to build up.

Even coming back and feeling just one breath fully is an interruption of the distractibility that can operate in us. We can be content with that one breath. And we can be content with three breaths – the three-breath journey that I mentioned yesterday. It’s so useful.

As I go through my day, it is second nature for me to be in touch with my breathing often and see how it changes. When my breathing gets tight or shallow, it’s an early warning system for me that I’m getting tense and reactive to something. Because of this wonderful close relationship between breathing and our attitudes, emotions, and motivations, staying with the breathing is a way to come back and relax and not give in to the mind streams.

I want to offer you an image for how to practice one-pointedness on breathing. The first image is that of focusing on an upright finger that represents breathing. Having a one-pointed focus on breathing and staying present with it is a classic idea in meditation. But this way of practicing has often been unhelpful. I’ve often gotten tense when I focus this way. Concentrating this way in order to be one-pointed creates tension. When I was younger, I’ve even gotten headaches from doing this.

Rather, relax and soften the thinking mind and let it be open, with no tension in it at all. An image for a mind like this is my other hand, which is open and vertical. With the mind like a vertical open hand, bring the breathing (the upright finger) and the mind together right in the middle of the palm where the most sensitive part of the hand is. Then stay there.

One-pointedness is right where the finger and the palm touch. One-pointedness is not forced by narrowing and piercing with our awareness. It's made by touching and feeling in the most sensitive part of the hand.

Sometimes I start tightening up, but I’ve learned to pay attention to that and then to relax and to feel. As the one-pointedness at this sensitive place pulls my attention, I allow it and enter into that world, and everything else begins to fall away. The room falls away. The sounds around me fall away. Sometimes even the body seems to fall away. Thoughts fall away. Things get very simple by staying right in that little place – just there, being with it.

One thing you might try with mindfulness of breathing is an attitude of receiving on the inhale and allowing on the exhale. This is a way of keeping the mind very open. When you receive something in an open hand, you allow something to be free. With an open mind, the fist of the mind gets opened. With that openness, you almost don’t have to go to the breathing; instead, you can let the breathing find awareness. There’s no need to have the mind move to focus on the breathing. Breathing will come to you if you open and are receptive to it.

If you open the window on a day when there is a breeze, the breeze will find its way in through the window. If you open your awareness to welcome the breathing, the breathing will find you. The mind doesn't have to work so much to focus. It's more an allowing.

The mind will wander off. Be aware of that. It’s not a problem for mindfulness. It’s just one more thing to know. What's important for meditation is not how often you wander off, but how often you begin again on the breathing.

I say this in a very deliberate way: “Begin again on the breathing,” as opposed to bringing the mind back to the breathing. The idea of bringing it back can mean we tighten up. To begin again with the breathing, the mind doesn't have to do anything. It just opens and allows and makes that connection. Here. And then we stay with it.

Then if it's helpful, we use mental noting. I like to think of this as absolutely the most relaxed, simple, non-forceful, non-expecting mental note. It kind of opens the field. Each note is an invitation to feel this more fully. "In. Out."

I hope that, although it’s not easy to do, what I’ve taught this week about breathing has made you curious to experiment and look into it. Pay more attention to breathing in daily life. Pay more attention to breathing as you wake up in the morning, as you lie down to go to sleep, as you eat, and when you’re in conversation with people. Make breathing a theme. Be wiser, more knowledgeable, and more familiar with how your breathing works.
For some people, mindfulness of breathing doesn't work very well. So this week might not have worked well for those of you for whom that's the case. There's nothing wrong with that. There are other perfectly good ways of meditating without using the breath. I'll talk about some of those next week when I explore mindfulness of the body. That will include mindfulness of listening and mindfulness of the body itself. Both of them can be nice alternatives for people for whom the breathing doesn't work very well as an object.

Thank you very much. I hope some of you will have a breathing weekend, and you'll come to enjoy your breathing. Thank you.