

# Samādhi (11) Simplicity Through Counting Breaths

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Thinking, separation, loving kindness, goodwill, unification, gathering, inhale, exhale, quiet

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Welcome to this 11th talk on *samādhi*. The main point I'd like to make is that there is almost an equivalence with *samādhi* and simplicity. *Samādhi* is simplicity.

One of the things that we can do when we practice *samādhi* is to notice how we are not simple. That is important. It is important to see the complexity in which we live, and how we get pulled into thoughts, feelings, ideas, and plans. We can appreciate that this is what the mind does. It is not a crime.

There is a homecoming that can happen. There is a way in which too much thinking keeps us alienated, and separate from ourselves, unless we think we are our thinking. We are so much more than that. We are something deeper. The simpler we can be with our breathing, the more something marvelous can appear. Part of that marvelousness is that we can feel very settled, very sweet, and very simple, just to be alive here with the breathing. We experience a homecoming into this simplicity. It is like we are entering into a deep place of home so that we can turn ourselves inside out to allow some deep capacity for peace and settledness to animate how we live our life.

There are many ways in which people develop *samādhi*, but one of the ancient techniques is counting the breath. Of course, the breath isn't a suitable object for everybody, so there are other ways of developing *samādhi*. In our tradition, one of the common alternative suggestions is to develop *samādhi* by saying the phrases of loving kindness. We want to find a way of saying them that is settling and simplifying. We get absorbed in the activity of offering goodwill.

I will be focused on the breath, counting the breath. That will be the focus for this week. You can certainly stop counting if you don't want to, but if you've never done much counting, or even if you have, there is something to be learned about spending a week doing this that might be invaluable. Many people, including me, have thought they were getting settled and concentrated, but really were drifting off in thought – in a very pleasant way, perhaps.

It was only when I started to count that I saw, "Oh, I'm more involved in my thoughts." I didn't realize how strong the pull of thoughts was. I might only get to the count of one, or half a count. There were times when I have intended to count and never got around to it because the thinking mind was so strong. If we can get to 10, then that's pretty good. If we can't get to 10 and only get to 1 before we get pulled into thought, then we know thinking is really strong. If we get to 7, then maybe the thinking mind is not that strong. That is nice to know. We get to see what is going on with us.

Counting is also a way of including the thinking mind in the gathering, the unification, and the bringing together of all of who we are into the simplicity of this moment with the breathing. Rather than having a thinking mind be idle, an idle mind that thinks whatever it wants can get in trouble. Instead, we are giving the thinking mind something to do that is supportive of the effort being made. Sometimes the thinking mind is happy to have a task. It is happy to be included, and supportive of something that is so incredibly profound and useful as developing *samādhi*. It provides a purpose and a meaning for the thinking mind. Sometimes that is what it wants. If we don't give the mind a focus, it might go off and look for something else.

Instead, we offer the thinking mind a simple thing to do that might just involve one syllable – the count of one, two, three. I was taught to count to ten and then start over again. If I lost count, I would start again with one. The way I did it, or how I understood it, was to only count the exhale. I would fill the exhale with a count. I have since learned that it can be valuable to count both the inhale and the exhale.

Today, I am offering to keep it very simple. When counting, choose to count somewhere between one and three. Count both the inhale and exhale. I don't want to confuse you with too many options, but maybe land on one that seems intuitively right for you rather than struggling with it.

Some people find it helpful to give the same count for the inhale and the exhale – so 1, 1, 2, 2, 3, 3. Then start again at 1. Some people find it helpful to just count the inhale 1 and the exhale gets 2 and then the next inhale is 3. When I have done this up to 3 – counting both the inhale and the exhale as part of the count – I find it helpful to not count 4. So, breathe in one, breathe out, two, breathe in three, and then let the mind be quiet. Just ride the exhale in the quiet mind and start again.

This stops the counting from going to automatic pilot. It also allows for a quieter experience. We are referencing quiet and settledness for how we are going to count. I have sometimes counted harshly, hard, and staccato-like. The idea is to count gently and softly, with just enough effort for the mind to make that thought.

Sometimes, to make it really light for myself, I imagine I am counting. This idea of imagining I am counting allows it to become almost wispy or silent. There is almost no effort, no physical energy, no strain, or no push going into it. It just kind of floats up.

We don't want to make the count the primary thing we do. We want the primary thing to be a kind of resting, settling, or entering into the world of breathing. The count is like a pointer, or a reminder, “Oh, stay here. Stay here.” The focus is not a laser focus on breathing.

There are all these metaphors for this. One metaphor that I have liked for myself is someone coming from behind. It is someone I trust and care for, and they gently put their hand on my back. They are letting me know they are here with me. It is a reminder, “I'm here, I'm here to support you.” It is in that way that we approach the body breathing. The count is just gently here. I am here with you. I am supporting you.

In doing this, the surface mind with many agitated thoughts and concerns can hopefully understand it is okay and safe to become quiet. It is also okay if we don't quiet or actively get rid of that thinking mind. As the energy of attention goes into breathing, into counting, something begins to soften and relax in the body and the mind. This begins to decrease the tension or pressure that perpetuates agitated thinking. That pressure begins to quiet.

This was an introduction to the topic of counting your breathing. I will talk more about it this week. I would like to suggest for this week, if you are able to in your life, if you have the capacity and hopefully the interest, that you meditate a second time each day. You have meditated once here with us. Do it again. Maybe meditate for 20 minutes. This is to continue the momentum of this kind of practice.

I talk a lot in the guided meditations because I am trying to teach this. Ideally, you then would practice it on your own so you can do this in silence and develop a momentum behind it. If you can manage to sit another 20 minutes each day, I think that will support this amazing process of *samādhi* that we are going to go through slowly.

So, thank you very much. May your ability to be simple, present, and attentive enable you to enter the world with goodwill. May this practice support the spreading of goodwill wherever you go. Thank you.