

Dharmette: Introduction to Mindfulness (1 of 5) Breathing

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So hello everyone and welcome. And as we begin, as I begin the first teachings I'll do for this month of December, I'm very aware that the journey that we've taken during this year on these morning teachings. There's been a long series most of the year going through first *samādhi* and then insight and then some of the deeper experience of insight to qualities of liberation leading to liberation. And so those of you who maybe participated with the whole year maybe have appreciation of this long journey.

And one of the ways that I understand this practice and the people who do the practice is that there are two types of Buddhist practitioners, two types of meditators. They're beginners, and there are experienced beginners. And we're always beginners. We're always starting again in a certain kind of way. And it's often good actually to intentionally go back to the most fundamental basics of the practice, as if we're a beginner, rather than assuming that we're always supposed to be at some, always some deep stage, some concentrated stage.

It's actually maybe not even useful to always be in some kind of meditative depth, because where we learn the most, where we become freer, is starting over and finding our freedom, finding our wisdom, finding our... developing our capacities from almost from scratch at times, beginning again and again, and finding ease, finding a certain kind of simplicity, finding maybe even a kind of humility of being an experienced beginner. And so for this next week, this week I want to offer you the most basic meditation instructions that I like to give at IMC. In a sense, it's the common denominator. It's the common reference point for our community for how to practice mindfulness. And there's many ways to vary it. There's many ways to change over time with different emphasis at different times.

But this is the default of being a beginner, the reference point. What I'd like everyone to understand well is to understand how to be mindful of breathing, of the body, of emotions

and thinking, and then how these four areas can be brought together, practiced together, so that the way that we practice mindfulness actually includes everything. There's nothing that's left out. That mindfulness is to be... learn how to have a kind of a mindful, meditative, contemplative awareness of the whole of our life, all aspects. Nothing is left out. Everything warrants attention, wants care, and the care of mindfulness.

And part of the freedom that this practice brings is when everything is included. We have no sense that something that's happening should not be happening. I mean, if something's happening in the world and it would be best it didn't happen, maybe it shouldn't happen from the point of view of wisdom. Maybe you're late for an important appointment and you have a flat tire, that shouldn't happen. But the mindfulness practice doesn't have any idea like that.

Mindfulness itself is ready to include the challenge of that. This too is what I want to be mindful of. This too is what I open and sense and know, where I find my freedom as I try to take care of the issue. So the way we begin here is with breathing. That doesn't work for everyone. Some people, breathing is a challenge for all kinds of reasons.

And so then we instruct people maybe to do something else as the default, as the beginning point for the practice. For some people it's what I'm going to talk about tomorrow, mindfulness of the body. For some people it's mindfulness of listening, which we'll talk about more during the week, of sounds. But for many people, breathing makes a good foundation. And one of the reasons for this is that when we sit still in meditation or lie down in meditation or stand still, the breathing is generally the biggest movement that goes on.

And it's a rhythmic movement, breathing in and out, comes and goes. And for many people, it can be the most relaxing and most absorbing for attention to be with something that gently moves in a cycle, coming and going, rising and falling. And so to be with a cycle of breathing, the wheel of breathing in and breathing out. And as I often say, it's kind of like being at the beach and maybe for... you can for a long time, just very relaxingly, just watch the waves wash up on the shore and wash down. And there's something about the mind that that kind of pattern and rhythmic pattern is very settling for the eyes, for the body.

You can do it for a long time. Watching a fire in a fireplace, watching the river flowing, river flow. And so it's that kind of way. Also, breathing is at the nexus of kind of the whole life. Just about everything has some connection to breathing because breathing is what keeps us alive. Moment by moment, the breathing and the oxygen that we breathe in gets used in the body in so many different ways that the breathing and how we breathe is connected to the emotions and connected to activities we do with our body, to the thinking in our mind.

And so there's a reciprocal relationship that the more we're tense, the more the breathing tenses. The more we're activated, the more we activate breathing in some way. Or the more we're afraid, the more we hold our breath. But in the other way, other sense, if we can learn how to keep our breaths relaxed and easeful and soft and quiet, that that tends to soften fear, soften our preoccupations, our activations, tends to calm the overactive mind. And so there's a way in which breathing is right there at the middle, midpoint, or the nexus, crossroads of so much of our life that, if we stay with the breathing, we'll learn a lot about ourselves.

We'll feel and sense and care for much of who we are. And so, the idea here is we're not tracking the breath, but rather we're tracking or attending to the sensations that come alive as we breathe, that become active as we're breathing. So it's a sensory awareness exercise. And some people will emphasize more the sensory side of it, feeling the sensations. Some people will emphasize more the cognitive side of it, of knowing, a clear, relaxed knowing of breathing in and breathing out. Some people do both.

Both are probably going on all the time anyway. And there's where different people, some people find it most relaxing and settling to be with the sensations. Some people most with being with the knowing, kind of clearly knowing, like the cognitive mind is there knowing the breath so that the thinking mind is not taking us away. If there's a lot of thought, then to either gently let go of it and let go back into the breathing. And have a little bit of a commitment to the breath, but no more commitment than a commitment of your hand as you're stroking a cat. It's that relaxed, that soft, that easy.

And just with this inhale, with this exhale, some people have the image that the breathing is stroking you, breathing in and out, the movements of the breathing. But there's a commitment, there's a dedication. This is what I'm doing now. And some people find it helpful to relax their thinking mind, to soften the mind. But when we do mindfulness of breathing, you don't want to be working too much. You want to do some basic things to get settled in, to be focused, and be content with the way you're breathing.

At some point, don't try to fix it or change it, even if it's a little bit uncomfortable, even if you're controlling it. At some point, what's important is not how you breathe, but that you're attending to it. You're getting to know it. You're sensing it. You're feeling it. You're developing more clarity of just being present for this, just this.

And there's a simplification of the mind. The mind becomes simpler. Right? It's not so sophisticated, not analyzing things, trying to make engineering the practice, not trying to solve the world's problems, but just staying here very, very simple. And the benefits of a simple attention is that it kind of over time opens a door to three dimensions or to a full dimension,

deeper experience of life and wisdom and even love. But first it seems excessively simple, mindfulness of breathing.

Like how could this be, even boring for some people? But learning to trust yourself to the breathing over and over again and letting the thinking mind become quieter so you become more sensitive to the depths of your experience. So breathing, breathing is at the foundation. And so, since we'll move on tomorrow, I would encourage you, if you have time, even for 10 minutes, maybe longer, meditate again today with mindfulness of breathing. And through the day, find some choice points through the day where you could just kind of check in with your breath, be with it for a little while.

Maybe it's as simple as waiting for a red light to turn green or standing in a line or just waiting for something to happen. Or getting into your car and just before you immediately rush off, sit there and do a three-breath journey. Just close your eyes and count each breath for three breaths. And then see what those three breaths do to you and then drive off. So make breathing a topic, a theme for today, and you'll be ready then for tomorrow. So thank you very much, and I'm happy to be back, and may it be a day where you give lots of breathing room to yourself. Thank you.