

Breath instruction

Ines Freedman

January 26, 2026

Keywords: mindfulness of breathing, bodhi, beginner's mind, walking meditation, mindfulness, concentration, retreat, breath labeling, counting breaths, continuity of mindfulness

The instruction this morning is on mindfulness of breathing. And on the first ever treat, it can be really helpful to stay very close to the breath, to begin to develop the concentration. And one of the ways that is helpful to think about is considering the mind as having a foreground and a background. So we can keep the breath in the foreground, and anything that shows up is fine. You know, just let it stay in the background. So I'm going to integrate the instructions into the meditation.

So let's begin by finding a comfortable, dignified posture that's both alert and relaxed. And take a moment finding your seat, adjusting it if you need to. Gently closing the eyes. So we begin by allowing ourselves to fully arrive in the room, in this body, and in the shared silence. The breath is not separate from the body. It's integral to the body.

Every breath brings oxygen to every single cell in the body. There isn't a single part of the body that isn't nourished by the breath, by the oxygen. This simple act of breathing, it's essential to keep us alive. This breath doesn't belong to us. The air we inhale comes from the trees, from the grasses, the forests, the oceans, from the living body of the planet. We breathe in oxygen.

We exhale carbon dioxide, which in turn nourishes the planet. It's a continuous exchange moment by moment, a continuous exchange between this body and the larger body of Earth, all life breathing together. The molecules we're breathing now have been recycled many times throughout history. They've moved through countless beings across centuries, across oceans and continents. So let's begin by taking a few deep intentional breaths, and with each exhale, allowing the body to relax a little bit more. And when you're ready, allow the breath to return to its natural rhythm, however it is, getting a general sense of how you feel right now.

It can be helpful to scan the body and relax what you can relax. If it's not possible to relax something that might be tense, we could soften around it. But maybe begin relaxing the area of the head, the face, the forehead, the mouth, and just briefly scanning the neck and relaxing anything that's needed. Maybe the upper back, the mid back, lower back into the pelvis, and then the front of the body, the upper chest, the diaphragm area, and the belly area, keeping a soft belly. Letting go of any tendency, any habitual tendency of contracting it, allowing your arms to relax, any way you're holding, that you're holding yourself up with your hands. Just let that go, allowing the hands to be relaxed.

And then the lower legs, the thighs, the legs, the feet, just getting a sense of your whole body, allowing it to be at ease. Now notice how you experience the breath in this body. Maybe you feel the movement of air coming in and out of the nostrils, maybe going down the throat, maybe the chest rising and falling, or the belly expanding and relaxing, or maybe you experience it in the rib area, the rib cage, expanding and contracting. Just notice where the sensations are easiest to feel, to connect with, and allow your attention to rest on the breath. It might be a small, precise area, maybe the touch of air at the nose, or for others it might be a broader area, like the rise and fall of the abdomen or the chest, or maybe the whole body. There's no single right place or right way.

Settle in whatever way is the most useful for you, staying close to the sensations of breathing, the felt sense of the breath, and staying with the full journey of each breath, noticing the beginning of the inhale, following it all the way to its natural peak. And maybe there's a little pause at the top, and then seeing the exhale begin to release, and following it until it completes itself, staying connected during the pause, and staying alert for the inhale beginning again. One breath at a time. If it's helpful to keep the attention on the breath, you can silently label it. Label each inhale and exhale like a mental whisper very gently, keeping the attention primarily on the physical sensation of breathing. You can label it maybe in, out, or rising and falling, or even a word like *bodhi*, awake.

Only if it's helpful. If your attention has drifted, notice it, and very gently escort it back to the breath. It's normal for it to do that. No need to judge it. An important part of training the mind is starting over again and again. Beginner's mind, bringing the attention back to the present, in an unhurried way, appreciating returning to mindfulness, to the intimacy of feeling the breath.

Just as you take a little time to settle into our meditation, it's helpful to do that as we gently come out, and one way that's helpful to do is when I ring the bell, is to take a couple of deep breaths before gently opening your eyes. So as we practice throughout the retreat, you know,

we notice quite readily that the breath doesn't stay the same. You know, sometimes it's really smooth, maybe pleasurable, and just easeful. And at other times it might feel forced or rough or a little uncomfortable. And the idea is that, of course, we relax as much as we can relax. But the idea is not that we're training the breath to be exactly a certain way, but we're training our awareness.

And so regardless if the breath is smooth or rough, the practice is the same, to gently pay attention, to gently connect with it, stay continuous if we can. It's bringing a kind attitude, not rejecting a rough breath. One of the things that is helpful for some people, just like we mentioned labeling earlier, we can use counting breaths. Sometimes people use counting at the beginning of a sit when the mind's a little bit restless. Sometimes they'll use it for like a couple of days at the beginning of a retreat and settle in. However, it's useful to you, if it's useful.

You know, some people, you know, just numbering anything takes their mind out of a state of ease. So if it's useful, one of the common ways of counting is to count 10 breaths and then start over. If you get distracted, start over at any point. Even if you just reach the breath number one or two and you're already distracted, that's all right. It's the coming back. That's the practice.

Begin again. And regardless whether you're counting or you're just, you know, paying attention, beginning again is the practice. Beginner's mind. Each breath is our first breath. So it doesn't matter whether we count it to one or we count it to ten. It's the attitude of really showing up for what's here, whenever mindfulness is alive.

So one of the things, you know, it's the first day of retreat. You know, sometimes not everyone, you know, but some of us have a tendency to be a little bit on the sleepy side or tired side on the first day. You know, don't know if anybody, you know, had a tendency to doze off during the sit. But you know, treat your body gently. If you need to rest at some point, go ahead and take a nap, maybe during a walking period. You know, don't do it for indulging yourself, but really do it out of taking care of yourself.

And then the other thing I want to encourage you to do is really stay, see if you can maintain a continuity of mindfulness in all the activities throughout the day. As we, you know, in a few minutes, Gil will give instruction on walking meditation. You know, one of the things I like to say is walking meditation for me starts when I'm still sitting down. You know, the process of standing up is something you can pay really close attention to. And, you know, we're not waiting until we get to our little path. You know, we're walking all the way to the little path, and that's walking meditation.

So keeping the attention continuous as much as we can. You know, when we practice on retreat, we build a momentum. You know, mindfulness and concentration begin to, hand in hand, they begin to build a momentum. And if we take a break, you know, a little bit of that momentum gets weakened. So if you can really stay connected when you go to the bathroom, when you get dressed, when you shower, when you're standing in line, when you're trying to decide how much food to take, really stay alive for those moments, all the moments of the day. That continuity just helps the practice build, build, as we continue this beautiful week of precious time.